The world is a conglomeration of people with many different cultures, each with their own customs and beliefs. Certain practices that are accepted, even encouraged, in one culture are often frowned upon in another culture. Because of this, cultures often vary greatly in their ethical concepts of right and wrong. It is impossible to create a universal moral code without devaluing certain cultures and contradicting the morals that they have instilled in their people. Cultural relativism, the theory that what is morally right and wrong depends only on one’s culture, attempts to address the variance in ethical standards across cultures. However, this theory is not without its flaws. In “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism,” James Rachels examines the influential theory of cultural relativism and questions its validity.

Rachels’ situation seems to be that people are taking the wrong approach in their search for answers to moral questions. He specifically targets those who profess to believe in cultural relativism, but neglect to understand all of its implications and flaws. Although he does not state this explicitly, it is evident in his prose. His motivation for writing this essay is primarily to educate his audience, the people reading his work, about cultural relativism. It is important to him that people do not blindly subscribe to cultural relativism because it is an attractive theory. Rather, he wants people to question every component of the theory to ensure that it is sound and holds up to criticism. He is driven
by a desire to foster meaningful dialogue about cultural relativism and whether or not it is really as plausible as it appears.

Rachels main claim is that the theory of cultural relativism has serious shortcomings, although some of the premises it is based on are valid. In other words, it is “not [as] plausible as it appears to be.” (57) One of the main premises that cultural relativism stands on is the idea that “different cultures have different moral codes.” (54) Rachels proves that this is true by using several examples of cultural practices that differ substantially from our own, including marriage in Eskimo communities. Eskimos believe that husbands can have multiple wives, and that women are allowed to break the marriage arrangement at any time and find a new partner (55).

Rachels addresses this idea again later in his essay and makes the claim that our cultures are not nearly as different as they appear to be. He argues that we overestimate and dramaticize the variations among cultures. The reality is that all cultures have some core values in common that are necessary to sustain civilization. One of these values, according to Rachels, is to place high value on their children and infants. It is impossible for these individuals to care for themselves, and without them society would eventually die out. (63).

Another premise of cultural relativism, which follows from the first, is that we cannot objectively judge any one society’s moral code to be superior to the moral code of another society. Rachels refers to this as the “Cultural Differences Argument” (58). He claims that it is unreasonable to conclude that there is no ‘objective truth’ in morality simply because people in different societies disagree on what is moral. It is entirely possible that the parties in question are simply mistaken, however. The issue with the
Cultural Differences Argument is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. As Rachels points out, it is impossible to arrive at a “substantive conclusion” about a topic (morality, in this case) from the fact that people disagree about it (58).

Rachels’ analysis of the consequences of the acceptance of cultural relativism provides more support for his claim that the theory is flawed. He states that, first of all, we could no longer argue that our customs are morally superior to those of other cultures. We would have to accept that other societies are “different” (59) and that these differences do not make them inferior. Another consequence would be that we could look to the standards of our society to determine whether our actions are right or wrong. This is problematic because we may be under the impression that certain aspects of our society’s moral code are flawed but, according to cultural relativism, we cannot criticize them (59). The third and final consequence of accepting cultural relativism is that “moral progress” is questionable (60). In other words, social reform could take place only in a very limited capacity. The example Rachels gives is that women held a constricted role in Western society for most of history, and only recently were liberated from that position. However, cultural relativism would not allow us to consider this “progress” at all because we are unable to judge whether any new way of doing things is better than the old way of doing things (60).

Rachels essay is effective because he does not neglect to make some concessions. He acknowledges that the theory of cultural relativism teaches us two valuable lessons. The first is that cultural relativism makes us aware of the fact that all of our preferences are not “based on some absolute rational standard.” (64) It is easy to forget that many cultural practices are not widespread, rather they are exclusive to a certain society. This is
significant because we tend to think of matters objectively in terms of right or wrong, when they are in reality “nothing more than social conventions.” (65) The second lesson is that we must always remember to keep an open mind. Because of the way we are raised or the society in which we grow up, we learn to perceive certain actions as acceptable or unacceptable. Inevitably, we will encounter people who challenge our beliefs. It is difficult for us to reconcile their beliefs with ours, and to accept that their point of view is valid. Cultural relativism serves as a constant reminder that our culture is often reflected in our ethical beliefs (65).

Rachels argument is very convincing because he synthesizes many examples and uses them to support his claims. The Eskimo example, which was used multiple times, was especially compelling. Without examples, it is sometimes difficult to understand the relevance of the argument to oneself and the world as a whole. In this case, it was necessary to use Eskimos because their culture and the moral code that accompanies it is so foreign to us. Yet, this article was written in such a way that readers were not compelled to judge the Eskimos. Although Eskimos actively practice infanticide (55), readers are forced to consider Rachels' conclusion that their values are “really not all that different from our values.” (62) His clarity throughout was exceptional, and the examples played a big role in that.

As mentioned in the text, cultural relativism is a widely accepted theory. However, this should not in any way discredit the validity of Rachels argument. He provides a thorough analysis of the theory and its tenets in a well-organized essay. While acknowledging that the theory is “attractive” (66), he does not hesitate to expose what he believes to be its shortcomings. His straightforward approach to the topic forces readers
who are proponents of cultural relativism to question their beliefs, which is his goal in writing this piece. It is evident that Rachels is well educated on the topic of cultural relativism because of his application of cultural relativism to real and hypothetical situations. His ability to convey the value that cultural relativism may have also lends itself to credibility because he is able to see both sides of the issue instead of just his own. Rachels’ ethos serves to make his argument more convincing and legitimate because, as readers, we can trust him to be reliable.

James Rachels’ piece “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” is a compelling analysis of the widespread theory and, particularly, where it appears to be flawed. He refutes the idea that there is no “objective standard” for judging moral codes (56). Yet he does not offer an alternate theory for understanding universal ethics in a world where so many cultures are so different. Rachels wrote this piece with the intention of educating those who may not understand cultural relativism and all its implications, and he succeeded in this goal. Although his argument is not particularly complex, it is revealing and forces readers to look at things in a new way. The significance of this essay lies in the fact that Rachels was willing to question a well-established belief, in the hopes of making progress towards greater ethical understanding.
Works Cited