

Gugu Mkhulisi

Philosophy Paper

Professor Corliss Swain

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Who judges what “promotes or hinders the welfare of people? What is this judgement based on?

In James Rachels', "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," he sets the standard of judging cultures and cultural practices as an answer to the question, "does the practice promote or hinder the welfare of the people affected by it?" The challenge with this is that there is no standard set to determine the welfare of the people apart from using the dictionary definition. The dictionary definition of welfare is, "the health, happiness and fortunes of a person or group." The example that James Rachels uses to support his standard of judgement for cultural practices is that of a Togolese woman who seeks refuge in the US after fleeing from female circumcision. This example correlates with this definition because there are health repercussions of female circumcision. However, there are other cultural practices that are usually judged as bad but neither promote or hinder the welfare of people. These cultural practices are then spoken about from the "male gaze" and their significance to the people who practise them is often lost in translation. Overall, the question of welfare is culturally dependent because only those who have the adequate information should be allowed the privilege of judging which practices promote or hinder their welfare and this is elaborated on throughout this paper.

First and foremost, before we go out of our way to judge a culture, it is important to somehow gauge whether or not the information that we have is accurate. Coming

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from the Kingdom of Eswatini, I have had the privilege to attend (but not participate in) the Reed Dance Ceremony which receives criticism yet still attracts many tourists and journalists from all over the world. Media reports about the ceremony are that it is held for young maidens to dance for the King so that he chooses his wife at the end of the festivities. From watching the reed dance, the media's reports sound accurate so one cannot blame journalists for viewing the ceremony as this. However, an insider would not view things this way because to Swazis, this is a ceremony at which maidens celebrate their chastity. This is equally problematic because the young girls who are dancing for the King (who is over fifty years old) are meant to celebrate their chastity in a country where, by the age of eighteen, one in three girls have experienced sexual violence. Their chastity is involuntarily taken away from them. The King also does not pick a wife at the Reed Dance but rather introduces his new wife thus the misinformation of the world by the media. From a critical perspective, what the journalists say also cannot be accurate because the King's children dance with the other maidens so what father would have his own children dance for him in a way that a seductress would dance for their target? Additionally, the movement of these maidens resembles marching that an army would do thus they are called *libutfo* which translates to army. This is just one example of ways in which cultural practices can be taken out of context and the inaccurate information spread which gives many people inaccurate knowledge, on which they base their judgements of cultures. People come to their

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conclusions and judgements without asking those involved of their actual intentions of these practices but rather infer and create theories of what is happening. This can also be applied to societies in which female circumcision is practiced, James Rachels made an example of a woman who came to the US seeking asylum after fleeing excision in Togo. The reason for excision is that it prevents promiscuity in women but no research has been conducted to find out whether or not that is the actual reason why women are circumcised. Instead it is easy to believe this because Africa is viewed as a backward place at which people would think this way. Therefore, before passing out judgements it is important to check the information from which you are passing your judgement and avoid basing them off of stereotypes.

As much as Rachels, in his argument, suggested that cultural relativism is not for thinkers, it is important to note that there is no way one can understand all there is to a culture unless they belong to it. When one attempts to judge their own culture, there is the possibility of blinding themselves to aspects of the culture or simply ignoring things that are not in their realm of things. When you look inwards to introspect, there is a tendency to overlook certain things, especially weaknesses which is why many people struggle to answer the question, "what are your weaknesses?" at job interviews. Self criticism is a difficult task. There are also repercussions that come with criticizing your own culture, for example, in Swaziland, the citizens have to pay a fine of E20,000 (\$1,317.20) if they are found criticizing the monarch of the country. As of May 2018,

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63% of the total population of the country lived below the poverty line yet the King continues to live a lavish lifestyle and spends money on personal needs rather than satisfying the needs of the nation. As much as the people of Swaziland see that the country's expenditure is spent on unnecessary things, they are not in a position to speak out on the spending. If they can hardly afford to buy food then they simply cannot afford to pay a E20,000 fine. With all the above mentioned factors, one would assume that people who have all the facts and are somewhat safe from paying fines that come with criticizing leaders (emigrants) are at a better chance to voice their concerns but there is a challenge that comes with speaking from outside the society in which you belong. You simply do not fully belong to that society - there is a change in values that comes with migration and in the end you are viewed as a foreigner in your own home as much as you are a foreigner in your newfound home. As a consequence, you lose your position as an insider and what you have to say carries the same importance as anything an outsider would say; little to none.

Judging cultures from the outside reduces the chance of romanticizing them but there is a line that one must be careful not to cross - that of neocolonialism. After the history of the European and their American descendants' interference in various parts of the world, there is a general fear to interfere in issues of other cultures. Whether you belong to Europe and America or you are somehow influenced by these cultures in some way, your position as far as criticizing can easily be translated as bringing in your

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values and “enlightening” other cultures by imposing your views and opinions on these cultures. Similarly, there has been continuous criticism for the US sending in troops into other countries because as much as the US government is probably attempting to solve the issues that the countries have, they end up making them worse. When you consider the question posed by Rachels of promoting or hindering the progress of people, the US sending in troops has barely promoted any culture because violence only hinders development and yet, troops are continuously being sent into other cultures. Therefore, outsiders seem to not have a place in the judgement of other cultures because the judgements barely bring change or improvements - as is.

Considering the fact that there is no way to judge a culture that is based on the accurate understanding of the culture, that cannot be misinterpreted or be offensive to people, the only way to navigate such situations lies in the answer to a new question, “What will I do after making this judgement?” There is a human tendency to protest and criticize systems without taking any action and social media encourages this. There have been numerous protest movements that have trended and simmered because we find it too easy to share information just to look good. For example, the #metoo movement encouraged many women across the world to speak out on abuse that they had experiences and recently, South Africa had the #aminext movement which has also simmered down after a month. The point is that we find it easy to complain without taking action therefore in judging other cultures, we must be invested enough to make a

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change, no matter how small. So if you are willing to criticize a culture but are not willing to make a change or suggest an alternative then it is better for you to keep your opinions to yourself because your judgement, like the culture or practice, will not promote the wellbeing of those involved. If, however, your judgement comes with thoroughly thought through improvements or suggestions then the only thing you must be mindful of is the manner in which you deliver your criticism.

This paper has deciphered the question of who has the right to judge any culture in terms of what James Rachels proposed as the standard of judgement. Considering that people who belong to the culture have a better understanding of their own culture, one would assume that they have all facts that would lead to a sound judgement, yet more often than not, they romanticize their cultures. Outsiders have an objective view of what is happening in the culture and because they have no emotional ties to that culture, their judgements could easily be misinterpreted as imposing their values onto the culture that they criticize which is neocolonialism. Because seemingly, there is no right person to judge a culture, I have suggested a new standard of judgement which is the answer to the question, "What will I do after paying out my judgement?" In the same way that faith without action is dead, judgement without suggestions is pointless. This new standard is also only efficient when the judgements that have been made are sound and not misinformed because then the suggestions would prove futile.

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