Homework #1

Readings:

Sumner, “A Defense of Cultural Relativism”
Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”
Benedict, “A Defense of Moral Relativism”

1. Benedict says on page 215, that “No one civilization can possibly utilize in its mores the whole potential range of human behavior.” What does she mean by this, why does she say this and how does it fit into her overall argument?

2. Sumner talks a lot about the “folkways” and “mores”. What are they (They might be subtly different, but for the purposes of answering this question, assume they are the same thing)! What is the relationship between morality and the folkways? What is the relationship of the folkways to philosophy?

3. Sumner says that our mores “come down to us from the past. Each individual is born into them as he is born into the atmosphere, and he does not reflect on them or criticize them any more than a baby analyzes the atmosphere before he begins to breathe it” (222).

   a) Why does Sumner think it is important to argue that we don’t reflect on our mores or criticize them?

   b) Imagine someone objecting as follows: “But surely Sumner is wrong. We reflect on our beliefs all the time. Isn’t this what education does? I start off thinking that everything that my mother and father tells me is true and then I come to realize that the things that I believe may not be true. Isn’t this how it works?” Respond to this objection on behalf of Sumner.

4. One way to explain changes in morality is to say that we are progressing. Thus, we don’t burn witches anymore or have slaves because we have come to see some moral truths that our ancestors did not see.

   a) Why is this explanation unavailable to Sumner?

   b) What is Sumner’s explanation of moral change? (Hint: The answer lies in the following: “New elements are brought in only by new conquests of nature through science and art.” (p. 224) Explain how this sentence answers the question.

5) According to Rachels what is wrong with the following argument:
a. “different cultures have different moral codes”
b. Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. The best we can say is that something is true for one society and false for another. There is no way to adjudicate between these two societies.

6) Rachels on page 700 “2. We could decide whether actions are right or wrong just by consulting the standards of society…” introduces a very important attack on cultural relativism. If cultural relativism is correct how should you go about deciding what to do? Does this seem plausible to you?