ILLINOIS TECH | College of Computing

ITMM 485 / 585
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Legal and Ethical Issues in Information Technology

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Ch2: Ethical Concepts and Theories

P3: *Discussion Stoppers* as "Roadblocks" to Moral Discourse

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Upon completion of this Section the students should be able to:

➢ Articulate the four questions that can stop Discussions about morality and moral systems
➢ Define cultural relativism and moral relativism and establish links between them
➢ *Evaluate Moral Absolutism* (as an Alternative to Moral Relativism)

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Discussion Stoppers as "Roadblocks" to Moral Discourse

Discussion stoppers can be articulated in terms of the following four questions:

1. *People disagree about morality; so how can we reach agreement on moral issues?*
2. *Who am I/Who are we to judge others and to impose my/our values on others?*
3. *Isn't morality simply a private matter?*
4. *Isn't morality simply a matter that different cultures and groups should determine for themselves?*

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Discussion Stopper # 1: People Disagree on Solutions to Moral Issues

➢ People who hold this view fail to recognize:
i. Experts in other fields of study, such as science and math., also disagree on what the correct answers to certain questions are.
ii. There is common agreement about answers to some moral questions.
iii. People do not always distinguish between "disagreements about factual matters" and "disagreements on general principles" in disputes involving morality.

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Discussion Stopper # 2: Who am I to Judge Others?

➢ We need to distinguish between:
a) "persons making judgments" and "persons being judgmental," and
b) "judgments involving condemnations" vs. "judgments involving evaluations."
➢ Also, we are sometimes required to make judgments about others.

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Discussion Stopper # 3: Ethics is Simply a Private Matter

➤ Many people assume that morality is essentially personal in nature and that morality must therefore be simply a private matter.
➤ "Private morality" is essentially an oxymoron or contradictory notion.
➤ Morality is a *public* phenomenon (Gert).

Discussion Stopper # 4: Morality is Simply a Matter for Individual Cultures to Decide

➤ According to this view, a moral system is dependent on, or relative to, a particular culture or group.
➤ There are some very serious problems with this view, which is called *ethical relativism*.
➤ It is useful to distinguish between two positions involving relativism:
  ❖ *cultural relativism,*
  ❖ *moral relativism.*

Discussion Stopper #4 Continued - *Cultural Relativism*

➤ At the base of cultural relativism is the following assumption:

  (A) *Different cultures have different belief systems about what constitutes morally right and wrong behavior.*

➤ Note that (A) is essentially a *descriptive* thesis.

Cultural Relativism Continued

➤ Although Thesis (A) – the view that different groups have different conceptions about what is morally right and morally wrong behavior – is widely accepted, some social scientists believe that the reported differences between cultures have been greatly exaggerated.
➤ Other social scientists, as well as some philoso-phers and historians, suggest that all cultures may recognize some universal core moral values (see, for example, Herodotus and Chomsky).

Cultural Relativism (Continued)

➤ Even if cultural relativism (Thesis A) is true, we can ask if (A) logically implies the claim in (B):

  (B) *We should not morally evaluate the behavior of people in culture's other than our own* (because what is morally right or wrong can only be determined only by some culture or group, as there is no universal standard).

➤ Note that (B), unlike (A), is a *normative* thesis.
➤ Also note that moving from (A) to (B) is a move from *cultural* relativism to *moral* relativism.

Moral Relativism

➤ The Moral relativist's argument makes a questionable move from premise (A), which is a descriptive (or empirical) claim, to the conclusion (B), which is a normative claim:

Premise: Different cultures have different beliefs about what is right and wrong.

Conclusion: We should not morally evaluate the behavior of people in culture's other than our own.

Moral Relativism (Continued)

Many moral relativists mistakenly assume that

- if there is no universal moral standard, then in matters of morality, "anything goes."
- Does this follow (logically)? Is it coherent?
  - ❖ Can any culture to decide to do anything it wants, merely because the majority of the population agrees to doing it (e.g., genocide)?
- The moral relativist's view is essentially incoherent and inconsistent from a logical perspective.

Moral Relativism (Continued)

- Does it follow that people who reside outside a particular culture, X, can *never make any judgments* about the behavior of those who live within X?
- Consider that in many tribes in West Africa, a ritual of female circumcision is still practiced.
- While this practice has been a tradition for many generations, some females living in tribes that still perform this ritual on teenage girls have objected.
- Many people who live outside these cultures condemn this practice as it is carried out today.
- Are they wrong in condemning this practice?

Moral Relativism (Continued)

- Assume that the majority of residents in Culture X approve of female circumcision.
- Would it be inappropriate for those who lived outside of West Africa to claim that the treatment of young women in those tribes is morally wrong, simply because they are not members of Culture X?
- If we embrace that view, wouldn't it follow that a culture can devise *any* moral scheme it wishes as long as the majority approve it?

Moral Absolutism (as an Alternative to Moral Relativism)

- If we reject moral relativism, must we accept *moral absolutism*?
- Moral absolutism claims that there is only one uniquely correct answer to every moral problem and only one universal standard for all cultures.
- The moral absolutist's position is also controversial.
- One way to avoid the trap between moral relativism and moral absolutism is to embrace *moral objectivism*.
- Moral objectivism asserts that (for at least some moral issues) there can be more than one acceptable answer, so long as rational standards apply.

Moral Objectivism vs. Moral Absolutism (Continued)

- Recall that Gert notes that while there may not be only one uniquely correct answer to every moral problem, there are can be incorrect answers to many of these problems.
- So, moral objectivism can avoid the moral relativist's assumption that "anything goes" in matters of morality.

Table 2-2 Summary of Logical Flaws in the Discussion Stoppers

Stopper #1	Stopper #2	Stopper #3	Stopper #4
People disagree on solutions to moral issues.	*Who am I to judge others?*	*Ethics is simply a private matter.*	*Morality is simply a matter for individual cultures to decide.*
1. Fails to recognize that experts in many areas disagree on key issues in their fields.	1. Fails to distinguish between the act of judging and being a judgmental person.	1. Fails to recognize that morality is essentially a public system.	1. Fails to distinguish between descriptive and normative claims about morality.
2. Fails to recognize that there are many moral issues on which people agree.	2. Fails to distinguish between judging as condemning and judging as evaluating.	2. Fails to note that personally-based morality can cause major harm to others.	2. Assumes that people can never reach common agreement on some moral principles.
3. Fails to distinguish between disagreements about principles and disagreements about facts.	3. Fails to recognize that sometimes we are required to make judgments	3. Confuses moral choices with individual or personal preferences.	3. Assumes that a system is moral because a majority in a culture decides it is moral.

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