

# Ethics

## Introduction

Ethics is one of philosophy's main specialities. It is also the one that everyone has already had some familiarity. You already have ethical beliefs about the following claims:

1. Cheating on your partner is never permissible.
2. Stealing is never permissible.
3. It is never permissible to hit someone.
4. Lying is never permissible.
5. Killing another person is never permissible.
6. Abortion is never permissible.
7. The death penalty is permissible on some occasions.
8. Torture is permissible on some occasions.
9. Eating meat is never permissible.
10. I should donate to charity when I can.

You likely agreed with some of these claims, disagreed with others. You also likely have reasons for why you think some of these claims are true, others are false. The study of ethics is the study of these reasons. It is the discipline that tries to determine why certain actions are allowed, others are prohibited, and others are required. In particular, ethicists try to adjudicate between a number of theories about which reasons are relevant for the rightness and wrongness of our actions. In this brief handout, I will first outline some features of the reasons that ethicists seek. I will then discuss a challenge to the very possibility of ever finding reasons that have these features.

## Ethics and Reasons

First, it is important to properly understand the distinction between what are called *descriptive* and *normative* facts. Descriptive facts are facts about how the world is. Normative facts are facts about how the world should be. Compare the following two claims:

1. "I am eating sugar"
2. "I should not sugar."

1 is a descriptive fact. 2 is a normative fact. 2 describes something that is happening, I am currently eating sugar. It does not say whether it is good or bad to eat sugar. It just says that I'm doing it. 2, on the other hand, does not say that I am in fact eating sugar. It says that I should avoid doing so. 2 can be true even if I never eat sugar. 1 is true only if I am, in fact, eating sugar.

Morality is part of normativity. Moral judgements are about (i) how a person should act and (ii) what kind of character a person should have. Consider these two claims:

1. "Sonya is having an affair."
2. "Sonya should not have an affair."

1 is a descriptive claim. It tell us that Sonya is cheating on her parter, but it takes no stance on the morality of her action. 2, on the other hand, is a normative claim. It doesn't say that Sonya is having an affair. It says that she should not have one. Notice that Sonya might be a most felicitous person and 2 still true. 2 is telling us something about what she shouldn't do and not about about what she is doing. Moral judgements are always like claim 2. They are claims about what actions we should and should not perform.

In our everyday lives, we expect people to give reasons in support of their moral judgements and are quick to provide our own. So, someone might claim that Sonya should not have an affair *because* she promised to be faithful and having an affair would involve breaking that promise. Here the reason for 2 is *one shouldn't break a promise*. Another person might claim that Sonya should remain faithful *because* having an affair would hurt her partner. Here the reason for 2 is *one shouldn't hurt another*.

Ethics is the study of these reasons. It tries to determine which reasons are good ones and which ones are not. So, for instance, some ethicists deny that it is always wrong to break a promise. If, for instance, Sonya breaking her promise were the only way to save a life—admittedly a far flung possibility—some claim that it would be permissible for her to do so. Many ethicists deny that it is always wrong to hurt another. Vaccinations might be painful, but many claim we have an obligation to vaccinate our children even though doing so is painful. The point is, Ethics is not so much concerned with giving reasons for moral judgements as it is concerned with trying to determine which reasons are adequate, which are not.

If we are going to evaluate moral reasons, distinguish the good reasons from the bad ones, we need to identify the characteristics of a good moral reason. These characteristics include:

- They are not based on mere emotion, or bias. They are reasons that can be evaluated.
- They are universal. They apply to everyone regardless of sex, gender, race, or culture. If it is wrong to break a promise, then it is wrong for everyone, irregardless of who they are, to break a promise.
- They are general. If being F explains why some action, x, is immoral, then every other action that is F is also immoral. For instance, if it is wrong to cause another pain, then, irrespective of circumstances, every action which causes another person pain is immoral. This requirement is one of our most helpful. If you really think that it is wrong for Sonya to have an affair *merely* because of the pain it causes her partner, then you are committed to taking every pain causing action as immoral. If you were to then claim that the pain involved in vaccinations does not make vaccinations immoral, you would be involved in a contradiction and would need to revise one of your beliefs.
- They override legal considerations. If breaking a promise is immoral, then one should keep a promise *even if* it involves breaking a law, e.g., refusing to answer a question in court when compelled to by a judge. (If you think you should break a promise in this case, you don't believe that promise keeping is a real moral obligation.)

## Ethical Theories

Ethicists offer different theories about which reasons satisfy these requirements. These 3 theories offer general claims about the appropriate reasons for morality. There are three main theories (or groups of theories.) To introduce you to these theories first look at this diagram:

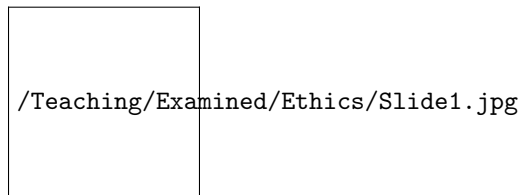


Figure 1: alt text

The actor represents each of us. It's the person whose actions will be evaluated. The arrow represents the various actions people perform, e.g., walking, punching, complementing, stealing, eating meat, taking drugs, and so on. The box represents the effects of our various actions. If punching someone causes them pain, then pain is an effect of punching. If eating meat were to cause indigestion, then indigestion is the effect of eating meat.

Our different moral theories explain why actions are moral or immoral (or neither) by referring to different parts of this diagram. Next week, we will discuss these theories in detail. I here outline them by way of introduction:

1. **Consequentialism** claims that the rightness and wrongness of an action depends solely on its consequences, on its effects. It says that to determine the morality of an action we are to ignore the actor side of the diagram. Their motives, intentions, and so on are irrelevant. We are also to ignore the arrow part of the diagram. It does not matter that the action is a promise breaking, or stealing, or murder, etc. All that matters, says the consequentialist, is the effects of the action.
2. **Deontology** claims that the rightness and wrongness of an action depends entirely on the intrinsic nature of the action. It says that we are to ignore both the actor in our diagram as well as the effects side of the diagram. Neither the motives or character of the actor is relevant in determining the morality of their actions. Neither is the effects of their actions. Some actions, the deontologist claims, are just inherently wrong, e.g., murder, they claim, is just inherently wrong.
3. **Virtue Ethics** claims that the rightness and wrongness of an action depends entirely on the character of the person performing that action, on the actor. Virtue ethics denies that the morality of our action has anything to do with the consequences or the intrinsic nature of the acts. It depends entirely on whether the action came from a person who is virtuous, i.e., it depends entirely on the actor side of the diagram.

## A Challenge to Ethics: Ethical Relativism

Before discussing these theories, we should address an objection that attacks not just all three, but any ethical theory. Some have argued that there are no universal moral truths, truths that hold for all people and all times. This view, **moral relativism**, cuts to the very core of ethics. It claims that we are mistaken when searching for appropriate reasons for ethical judgements. The relativist claims that there are no reasons that could serve the role we wish them to play.

The moral relativism we are concerned with says that what's true, ethically, varies by culture, e.g., causing pain might be immoral in one culture, but not in a different culture.

Moral relativism is easily misunderstood; it's far more radical than you might initially think. Distinguish these two claims:

1. Culture A believes that abortion is immoral. Culture B believes that abortion is morally permissible.

2. Abortion *is* morally permissible in Culture B, but not in Culture A.

Moral relativism is defending Claim 2, which is much stronger than Claim 1. We might compare Claim 2 to the claim that, say, what's tasty is relative to a person. Suppose we ask, for instance, whether cilantro is tasty. A relativist about taste will say that there are no facts about taste that apply to everyone; cilantro tastes horrible to one person, but not to another person. If taste is relative, a person can never be wrong as to whether cilantro is tasty. If they find it tasty, it is tasty, but to them. If someone claims it is horrible, you cannot claim they have made a mistake. It will be horrible, but to that person.

Similarly, the moral relativist claims that there are no *objective* moral standards, standards which apply to all moral judgements irrespective of where those judgements originated. Morality, they claim, is quite like taste. If a culture disapproves of an action, that action really is immoral, not to everyone, but just to members of the disapproving culture.

Cultural relativism has an important upshot: there are no genuine cross-cultural moral disagreements. If your culture disapproves of forcing the elderly to commit suicide, then such force is immoral *in your culture*. But if another culture approves of forcing the elderly to kill themselves, you must remain silent. You cannot say that the other culture has made a mistake, that your culture has the right policy, and the other has the wrong policy. Your culture's standards are not theirs, and there is no cross-cultural standard that applies to both cultures equally that would make one policy immoral, the other moral.

## The Argument for Cultural Relativism

It's useful to have a clear statement of cultural relativism before we proceed:

**Claim:** If a culture approves of an action, then that action is moral for them. If a culture disapproves of an action, then that action is immoral for them.

For convenience, let us say that this amounts to the claim that there are no objective moral truths, i.e., there are no general and universal moral truths (see above for definition)

The argument for Cultural Relativism is called the *Cultural Differences Argument*. There are different ways of formulating the argument. You can find one in ch.3.2 of the textbook. I include an alternative formulation here.

### Cultural Differences Argument

1. Different cultures have different moral beliefs.
2. If different cultures have different moral beliefs, then there are no objective moral truths.
3. Therefore, there are no objective moral truths.

Premise 1 has a wealth of evidence. The discipline of Anthropology catalogues and studies the plethora of different cultural differences across the globe. For some interesting examples, skim '[Anthropology and the Abnormal](#)', by Ruth Benedict. The study of history provides plenty of other examples. The Callatians, on the one hand, thought one should eat the bodies of the dead. The Ancient Greeks, on the other hand, thought the practice abhorrent.

Premise 2 is the crucial claim. Anthropologists report extreme variations in moral practices across the globe. There does not seem, they claim, to be any moral belief that is universally shared. This, of course, might come as a surprise. It would certainly have come as a surprise to those colonialists who tried to impose their cultural norms on the peoples whose lands they colonized, often in most horrific and violent ways.

### Objections to Relativism

Here I will discuss the main objection to moral relativism. Consult the textbook for further objections. While the Cultural Differences Argument is valid, many argue that the second premises is false, and so claim the argument is not sound.

Premise 2 contains an inference. It says that since moral beliefs vary, there are no objective moral truths. This inference can be presented as an argument:

- Premise: Moral beliefs vary from culture to culture.
- Conclusion: There are no objective moral facts.

Here is a concrete example:

- Premise: The Greeks believes that eating the dead was immoral. The Callatians believed that eating the dead was their duty.
- Conclusion: It is neither objectively moral or immoral to eat the dead.

This argument is not valid. The conclusion does not follow from the premise. The difficulty for the relativist is to supply some premise to make the argument valid. Few, if any, suggestions seem plausible. The following general claim would allow us generate a valid argument, but it is also clearly false:

- If cultures disagree about some claim P, then P is neither objectively true or objectively false

Appeal to this general principle would be a mistake. Notice the following instances of the principle are clearly absurd:

- Premise: The Classical Greeks believed that the Earth was a sphere, whereas the ancient Norse believed that the Earth was flat.

- Conclusion: Therefore, the claim that the Earth is a sphere is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong.

This is a poor argument. The premise is true, but the logic clearly flawed. The Greeks were right. The Norse were wrong. The sciences proceed by making and testing hypotheses, rejecting those that are wrong, accepting those that are right. Before a claim is proved, scientists regularly are in disagreement. But this disagreement only shows that they have yet to discover the truth. It does not mean that there is no truth to discover.

Here is another example:

- Premise: The majority of South Koreans believe that climate change is caused by human activity, whereas the vast majority of Tanzanians do not believe that climate change is caused by human activity.
- Conclusion: Therefore, the claim that climate change is caused by human activity is neither objectively true nor objectively false.

Again, this is a poor argument. There is a fact of the matter as to whether humans are causing the Earth to warm. Disagreement between cultures is no reason to doubt this.

Similarly, the fact cultures disagree on moral issues does not mean there are no objective moral facts. None of us may have discovered the truth yet. Or perhaps some culture has discovered the truth and others are mistaken. But the fact that we have not agreed on what the truth is does not mean that there is no truth to agree upon. This questionable inference is central to cultural relativism and should give one pause in accepting it.