

Week 2:

Introducing ethical theory:

Moral/ethical universalism/relativism

Moral (ethical) universalism holds that what is morally right or wrong is universal, objective and eternal

Moral (ethical) relativism holds that what is right or wrong is determined by local context, and is subjective: something is right or wrong relative to the beliefs of a culture or society (or individual)

Moral universalism (also called moral objectivism) is the meta-ethical position that some system of ethics, or a universal ethic, applies universally, that is, for "all similarly situated individuals", regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing feature.

The descriptive and the prescriptive

Both relativism and universalism can be descriptive or prescriptive

In the descriptive sense they say that beliefs about morality are universal (everyone shares the same moral beliefs), or that they are relative (different cultures, groups, and individuals differ in their moral beliefs)

In the prescriptive sense they claim either that there is universal moral truth – that there is one right or wrong moral judgement and that those who disagree are wrong (universalism), or that what is actually right or wrong depends on the beliefs of those involved

Let us first consider the prescriptive sense

PREScriptive

Prescriptive universalism

There is one correct moral answer to any moral question

The basis of Kantian ethics, the ideal in Kohlberg's CMD

But why then do different people and groups disagree (even – perhaps especially experts) (e.g. the ethical theories we've looked at)?

Prescriptive relativism

Different cultures and societies hold different ethical beliefs, many of which conflict with those of other societies

There is no reliable way to resolve these conflicts, to determine which of the conflicting beliefs is right and which is wrong

Thus, what is right or wrong depends upon the beliefs of the society in question

Critique of ethical relativism

Conflicting beliefs occur in other fields (e.g. scientific disciplines) but we do not conclude that there is no one correct belief

Precludes all judgement of other cultures, even positive judgement

Precludes judgement of one's own culture

Negates ideas of moral progress

Assumes cultures are homogenous

But what about...

- Gender/sexuality?
- Race/ethnicity?

- Religion/spirituality?

Prescriptivism creates a difficulty of progress as in 1800's slavery was seen as okay in society but in 1900's not seen as okay

Strengths of ethical relativism

A counter to moral/cultural arrogance, moral imperialism

Can encourage us to question the objectivity of our own views, and look for our own cultural conditioning

Sensitive to cultural differences

Emphasises the subjectivity of our views, rather than the objectivity assumed in ethically universalist theories

Emphasises the role of social, political and historical contextual factors involved in ethics, both in formulating our beliefs, and in determining what is appropriate for a given situation

Reasonable pluralism: a compromise

There appear to be conflicting but reasonable attitudes to various ethical issues, with no clear way of favouring one over the other

However, this does not mean any view is on equal footing with any other view

John Rawls proposes 'reasonable pluralism' – an 'overlapping consensus of reasonable and rational beliefs'

Reasonable – the attempt to persuade someone from their perspective, not yours

E.g. not "cause I said so"

Rational – the attempt to persuade using mutually accessible reasons and facts

E.g. not "cause God told me"

A universal culture that may differ in a specific family

DESCRIPTIVE

Descriptive universalism

Some moral values approach universally (the golden rule), and exceptions need not disprove a rule

Others argue that there are global norms 'hypernorms' but that they are specified differently depending on:

- Factual beliefs
- Traditions
- Material circumstance

Strong evidence for a universal 'moral mind'

Video on slide 10 says we are born with 5 channels of moral mind

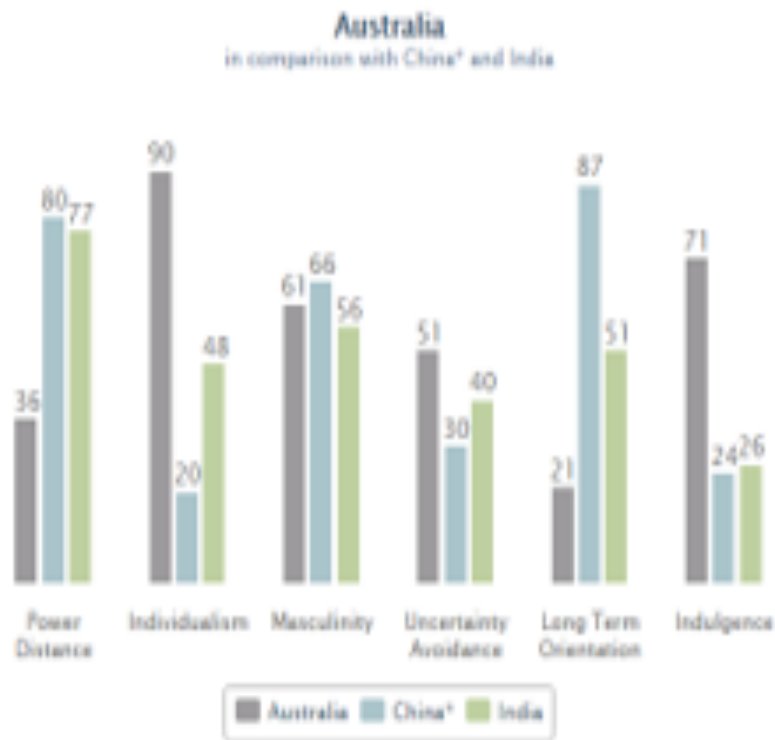
- 1) Care – size of group to care for
- 2) Fairness/justice
- 3) Loyalty to group
- 4) Obedience to authority
- 5) Purity or sanctity to which we treat our bodies

*Varies along political lines – so depends if you are more conservative (focus more on 3, 4, 5) or more liberal/progressive (tend to reject those more and focus on 1, 2)

Descriptive relativism: the effect of culture

Hofstede's Dimensions of culture

- High/low power distance → egalitarian vs hierarchical
- Individualism/collectivism → individual primary unit of society or group is primary unit of society to work towards a common good
- Masculinity/femininity
- High/low uncertainty avoidance
- Long/short term orientation
- High/low indulgence



Two approaches to ethics

Look at objectivism?

Once we reject relativism about ethics we can ask the following question:

What makes some actions ethically (morally) right and others ethically (morally) wrong?

We are going to discuss two of the most philosophically important approaches to answering the question

1. **Deontological** (or rule based) ethics

Actions are ethically/morally wrong in virtue of their intrinsic features/nature (not in virtue of the consequences they give rise to)

To act ethically/morally is to refrain from doing those things that are ethically/morally wrong

Most common in middle of 19th century as very religious

Today we think much more in terms of consequences

Very secular

Ethics of duty “deon” meaning duty in Greek

Not a particularly helpful name (all ethical theories discuss duties)

Refers to duties we have to do or not do certain things regardless of other considerations (most notably consequences)

E.g. Thou Shalt not Kill doesn't mean don't kill unless it would make a lot of people better off (implicitly), or don't kill unless you really feel like it, it means don't kill period. (though this detail seems to have been missed by many followers of the religions embracing the principle)

Deontological systems may be religious (e.g. the ten commandments) or secular

The most prominent secular deontologist is Immanuel Kant

Kant and Deontology:

If we say that we should be ethical in business because it accomplishes what we want, then we are saying it is prudent to be ethical. But that gives us only a hypothetical imperative. Thus, for Kant if we are being ethical because it is good business, we do not have the proper ethical concern (not that utilitarians deal with only hypothetical imperatives – if X produces Y, do not X, if not, don't do X)

Kant believes it is intrinsically wrong to lie

It follows, then, that if we are doing the right thing in business simply because it will improve business, we may not be doing anything wrong, but we are certainly not acting from an ethical motive. To act morally, we do something simply because it is the moral thing to do. It is our duty, a categorical imperative to do X

Categorical – in all situations, imperative – rule/command

Hence 'a rule that applies in all situations'

The categorical imperatives:

To decide what our duty is, Kant proposed the three following principles (paraphrased)

- Act so that you can will the maximum of your action to become a universal law often referred to as the universality rule
- Act so as never to treat another rational being merely as a means often referred to as the human dignity rule
- Act so that all rational being could condone your action often referred to as the publicity rule or the New York Times test

Can be collapsed into the Golden Rule "treat others as you yourself wish to be treated"

Across cultures and religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Unitarianism, Native Spirituality, Baha'i

2. **Consequentialist** (or consequence based) ethics

Ethics is determined by consequences

The importance of consequences: for example what makes murder wrong
→ someone dies, relatives and friends suffer, children have no parent i.e. consequences

But which consequences and for who?

Utilitarianism

A utilitarian uses the following procedure to justify or condemn an action
Take any action. Compute the benefits and harms of the consequences for everyone affected. If the action brings more total happiness than unhappiness for more people, it is justified

Utilitarianism is the morally correct action with the most good consequences and the least bad consequences where all of the consequences on all those affected by the action are taken into account
Thus, utilitarianism is the ethical theory that uses a cost-benefit approach
There are, however, some difficulties in using the utilitarian approach

A major problem with utilitarian theory is the distribution problem. The phrase the greatest good for the greatest number of people is ambiguous
Amartya Sen observed that though women in India receive less health care than men, they are happier with the level they get than are the men. A utilitarian would recommend redistributing still more of the women's health care resources to the men, to maximise overall happiness

This illustrates the problem of distributive justice: a problem of fairness, a problem of how the goods and the burdens of the world are to be distributed (also illustrates adaptive preferences)

So how do we measure the good? Pluralists believe that there are a number of intrinsic goods; eudaemonists believe that happiness (well-being) is the only intrinsic good; hedonists believe that happiness is the same as pleasure

Subjectivity vs objectivity?

Incommensurability – how well can different goods be weighted against each other? Eg. Economic development versus an undamaged environment; E.g. a promotion and more money versus a loving family life; E.g. Expenditure on better body armour vs more dead and injured soldiers

The problem of illicit means/dirty hands – suppose you could save 100 people by killing 3 innocent children

Should all preferences count equally? What about discriminatory ones?

Utilitarian calculations involve predictions

Problems of utilitarianism:

- Problems of other minds – how do you compare two peoples happiness or hurt; do people have differed pain thresholds
- Time taken to calculate
- Unlimited moral demands
- Allows horrendous acts

In a strict interpretation, the only acceptable action is the one that maximises happiness. If you spent \$10/week on coffee you could have made, rather than donating the \$30/month to World Vision for a starving child, you are responsible for their starvation – is this too demanding?

^However this is not a reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but to take these difficulties into account while applying this reasoning

The right and the good

For the consequentialist the good is defined independently of the ethically/morally right and the right is then defined as that which maximises that (non-moral) good

The deontologist rejects this

The deontologist does not accept the morally/ethically right action is the one that maximises some non-moral good

Maintaining ones own moral virtue takes precedence over all other considerations

Consider:

Recognises intent (vs. consequentialist theories)

Acts/omission distinction (vs. utilitarianism)

Recognises different levels of blameworthiness (what is obligatory) and praiseworthiness (what is supererogatory)

Duties may be positive or negative (duties to do/not do)

Perfect and imperfect (always or sometimes)

Problems:

Do consequences really not matter?

Is the act/omission distinction always so clear?

How do we know what all rational beings would condone? Would they agree?

Is this feasible as decision process?

Utilitarians want to know why a person should do his or her duty if it is not going to lead to happiness. Why be moral simply to be moral?

They surmise that Kant's deontological position embraces the belief that we ought to be moral because virtue will be rewarded. But if that is so, it reduces deontology to egoism or at least (indirect) utilitarianism

Underpins a stronger embrace of the multifiduciary stakeholder theory – no stakeholder should be treated as a means only

Underpins rights – both are drawn from the 2nd categorical imperative

Rights from the perspective of the patient, duties from the perspective of the agent

Where one person has a right, this confers duties on another person/s

Rule utilitarianism

This is a more sophisticated version of utilitarianism

Argues society should have rules that in the long run generate more good consequences and fewer bad consequences than the alternatives

The Rule Utilitarian would argue that our rules should be those that overall and in the long run generate the best consequences (the best balance of good over bad)

But these rules are determined by consequences and so the position would be a fundamentally consequentialist one

This position is the one more frequently cited in support of policies and changes to policies