

Approaches for Examining Moral Issues (American Case)

Tamar SHIOSHVILI*

Abstract

Moral judgments of other cultures are applicable when they are based on understanding and thoughtful analysis. Despite the doubt, that moral prescriptions (“ought” statements) are illogical, such prescriptions have been made throughout history, and are still made by reputable organizations; and even more, the basis of right desire supports important foundation in logic, and together with the principle of contradiction helps us to consider ethical analysis with assurance. In this article we’ll try to construct upon that ground.

The standard we will need for judging morality of actions is one-acceptable to men and women of different moral prospects; and reflects the precepts that most ethical systems have in common. Such a standard will free us from preinvented rendering, and raise our dialogue to a more objective level.

Keywords: consequences, cultural relativism, moral, obligations

Introduction

The example that is “really good for us” is respect for persons, which, as Errol E. Harris explains involves three requirements:

First, that each and every person should be regarded as worthy of sympathetic consideration, and should be so treated; secondly, no person should be regarded by another as a mere possession, or used as a mere instrument, or treated as a mere obstacle, to another’s satisfaction; and thirdly, that persons are not and ought never to be treated in any understanding as mere expendables (Harris, 1969, p. 113).

Respect for persons is an important assessment in most ethical systems. However, respect for persons is reflected differently in different cultures and is not always given priority over other values. In some cultures persons is not defined as “all member of our tribe” or “one who enjoys the rights of citizenship”. In the tribal language of some headhunters and cannibals, to be outside the tribe is thus, by definition, to be a nonperson. In the Roman Empire many of liberties now associated with personhood, were denied to non-citizens, presumably slaves; yet even in such cultures, where visualization of personhood is limited, respect for persons is nonetheless honored.

As stated by Errol Harris, respect for persons is not merely a theoretical construct but a practical standard for

the treatment of others in everyday situations. Over the centuries three basic criteria have been associated with that standard – obligations, moral ideals and consequences.

Obligations

Every human activity is carried out consciously, or subconsciously in a situation of relationship with others. And relationship usually imply obligations. It means, that, constraint on our behavior, demands to do something or avoid doing it. The most vivid example is a formal agreement. When a person enters into contract, obey the rules of agreement.

There are other kinds of obligations. Obligation of friendship, for instance, require the keeping of confidences. Obligations of citizenship in a democracy demand concern for the conduct of government and obligation of public to participate in election process. There are also business obligations. The employer is morally obliged to use objective hiring strategies, evaluate workers impartially, and pay them the wage that is congenial with the demands of their position and the quality of their work. The Employee, in turn, is morally obliged to do a job as effectively as he/she is able to. Both employer and employee have moral obligations. However, very often there is the case of “glass ceiling” in many U.S. corporations, where

* Prof. Dr. Dean, Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge

a qualified white, middle-aged woman who thinks of herself as “a person and a competent attorney” may realize the significance of gender and the “glass ceiling” for women, when she identifies younger, less experienced male colleagues in her law office passing her by for promotions. Here the obligation of the employer is violated.

At the community level, individual identities and needs meet group standards, expectations, obligations. Community might also be an organized group like Alcoholics Anonymous, religious group, or a political organization like the African-American civil rights organization, the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Community may be something much more abstract, as in “the womens’ community” where there is expected to be an identifiable group. In these examples there is presumption of shared values, goals, interests, culture, or language (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010, p. 95).

There are also professional obligations. Lawyers are bound to protect the interests of their clients, doctors to recuperate the health of their patients, teachers to give deep knowledge to students, members of parliament to meet the needs of their constituents...

It’s noteworthy, that there can be no obligation to do something morally wrong. E.g. if a person promises another to steal something, or give inappropriate assistance during exam, the promise is not obliging.

Moral Ideals

Ideals are aspects of excellence, goals that bring greater harmony on one’s self and between self and others. They are also specific concepts that assist us in expressing respect for persons in our moral inference. One group of moral ideals that can be tracked back to the time of ancient Greece and is still relevant to modern period involves: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude.

There are other ideals: loving kindness, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, repentance, reparation, gratitude, and beneficence.

Different cultures have different attitudes towards the same ideals. The way a culture renders its ideals and relates to another, affects its judgment of individual actions. The Eskimo accepts the ideal of respect for the aged, however some of the Eskimo’s ways respecting it is separating them up in an igloo to die when they are too old to contribute to the community and are deplete on its resources – so, the Eskimo’s ways of honoring old are quite different from ours.

The ideal of justice that we respect, may urge someone in another culture to do something we would never imagine of doing: for example, to cut out the tongue of one who has uttered a taboo word. These diversities in the ways of viewing and pursuing ideals cause dilemmas for those involved in cross-cultural studies and those whose occupations engage them in relationship with other cultures (diplomats, medical and religious propagandists). They present less trouble for us in considering our own culture.

The distinction between ideas and obligations is not always clear, surprisingly, the more we learn about ethics and try to behave morally, the more obscure the distinction becomes. Explanation is simple: highly ethical people are in-

clined to consider ideals as obligations. For them, fairness, compassion, forgiveness, and other moral ideals are more than ambitious notions of excellence – they are as well personal standards of conduct they feel themselves responsible for meeting in ordinary situations.

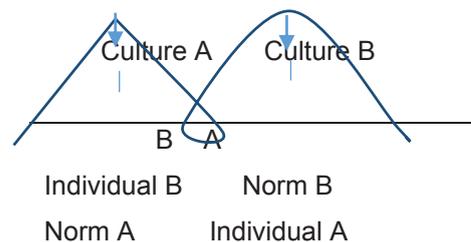
Consequences

Consequences are the advantages or disadvantages, harmful effects that result from an action and impact on people engaged, of course, the person performing the action. Some results are physical; others are emotional. Some take place immediately; others occur only after passing of time. Some are deliberately done by the person performing the act; others are unintended. Eventually, some consequences may be apparent, others may not be obvious and may be hidden by pretense. As consequences can be complicated and difficult to identify precisely, analysis often implies not only considering indisputable facts, but also studying possibilities and probabilities.

So, a moral action is one that reveals veneration for persons by respecting the relevant obligations and ideals by bringing about advantageous consequences.

Determining consequences depends on cultural undercurrents. Deep cultural undercurrents structure life in subtle but highly consistent ways that are not consciously formulated. Like the invisible jet streams in the skies that determine the course of a storm, these hidden currents shape our lives; yet their influence is only beginning to be identified (Adler, 2010, p. 112). The influence of culture is omnipresent. It’s noteworthy, however, that despite the substantial influence of the collective culture within a particular ethnic group, it is not all-determining. Individual differences exist within all cultures.

As Fig. 1 illustrates, analysis of cultural influences describes only the norm, or the average, for a particular group.



Cultural descriptions never describe accurately the behavior or any single member of the group. For example, we can say that Georgians inclined to be more group-oriented, while Americans tend to be more individualistic (ibid p. 117).

But you can find individual Georgians who are less group-oriented than individual Americans. Cultural descriptions strictly describe central tendencies or norms. Cultural descriptions reveal what the majority of people do, not what all people do. If a person is born in Norway, our best speculation – before knowing the individual – is that he/she will speak Norwegian. Therefore, cultural definitions give us the picture of a society before meeting the individual members within the society. Cultural definitions help us to get general idea about behavior, when we have no precise knowledge about the in-

dividual we have to meet.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural differences are considered as reflecting different learning environments. Various cultures are disclosed to different surrounding factors that have roles in shaping behavior: cultural options are supported and undesirable behavior punished or extinguished through a lack of support. In this pattern, cultural differences are understood as is any other behavior, through mode of support and punishment that follows the behaviors. For example, in certain Eastern cultures, women are more expectedly seen as obedient in their behavior.

Cultural relativism seems to delegate people to decide standards of right and wrong. According Subjectivists' individuals create their own moral standards; cultural relativists argue that moral standards and values stem from groups of people or cultures. Public opinion, and not private opinion, shape what is right and wrong. There are no objective universal moral standards for all people in all cultures. Morality, then, is perceived as nothing more than socially approved customs.

Cultural relativists consider that something appreciated as morally wrong in one culture may be morally fully acceptable in another culture. Headhunting, for example, prospered in certain cultures well in the twentieth century and was even accepted as heroic act (in some areas of the Balkans in Europe, among the Jivaro of South America, and in some areas of New Guinea. In some cultures, a young man could not marry until he had taken his first head. Although, a young man in the United States who tried to impress his girlfriend's family by exhibiting his collection of shriveled heads would be quickly detained and branded not only morally deviant in the extreme, but mentally ill as well.

Great diversity of marriage customs illustrate differences in cultural values. Polygamy is morally acceptable in some African and Asian cultures. In some Muslim countries, the number of wives is limited to four. In other cultures, the limitation is fixed according the husband's ability to support a large household. For example, King Mutessa of Uganda is said to have had seven thousand wives! (Boss, 2004, p. 100). In our culture, polygamy is illegal.

Cultural modifications in norms also exist within different historic time frames. Like laws and fashion, cultures change time by time. One hundred fifty-five years ago, slave ownership was morally satisfactory; now slavery is considered highly immoral. According cultural relativists, we need only ask what the norms and customs of our culture or society are at this point in history.

No nation can perform the role beyond the United States for so many years without evoking concerns and questions from people around the world. Even given the changing American role in an increasingly interdependent world, the past, present and future of America in the world will be a topic of concern to everyone in the world. One common question asked about the American society is: Isn't American society too free, too permissive? Doesn't this American dating practice lead to easy sex? Isn't this one reason why there are so many out-of-wedlock births among young ladies, particularly teenagers? Aren't Americans becoming an immoral society?

Before World War I dating did not occur in the U.S. A young woman did not go out alone with a young man. They went out with some kind of supervision. This pattern was shattered by a social revolution during World War I, when women began moving and working outside of the home. People moved to different cities. Women obtained social mobility which was quite a departure from the extended family and small community life in the United States. As the social custom of dating became accepted, words even changed in meaning. For instance, "homely" in the British English means home loving, cozy, home centered. "Homely" in American English means ugly.

I guess, the language change came about to describe young women who were attractive and unmarried but who were not getting dates and who were sitting at home all the time. The question would increasingly come up, "Why isn't she getting any attention or dates? She must not be very pretty; she must not be very datable; she must be ugly if she is in the home so much".

There has been a basic change in social patterns in the last fifty years in the United States. Probably, the increasing permissiveness, the relaxation of moral rules and norms in families, Communities and churches, and lessening of accountability and discipline in family groups, have created relaxation that would certainly be considered immoral by standards of the Victorian period or by the standards of even forty years ago. The question arises as to what is "immoral" in this new, pluralistic society, with its many different forms and different values? What may be permissive in one culture, may not be accepted in another.

There are number of discussions about this issues among psychologists, welfare counselors, moralists and religious leaders. They presume, that the permissive trend in the U.S. has gone too far and now they are trying to revert to correct trend. Many are paying more attention to family solidarity and setting standards. People realistically see problems of non-marital and teenage sex and pregnancy outside of marriage. This is a real problem in American society. Americans also realize the change in the situation and status of women in society, and women in the family, as they have gotten more social, economic, and political mobility. Often in the past parents determined the actions and set the values and the standards of young women until they were married, even until middle age. They arranged marriages for women.

Today, young women have become much more autonomous, just like young men. They take responsibility for their own behavior and actions. The dating situation now is one of mutual participation on the part of the young woman. Freedom on the women's part is just as important as the freedom of the young man. It used to be that dating was something only young people did. But now, with the number of single middle-aged and even into old age (often through divorce or death of a spouse), companionship with the opposite sex has taken on quite a different connotation that it had in other times.

According to cultural relativists morality is custom, so we have no reason for judging the moral practices of another culture or another time whether these practices be terrorism or slavery intolerance. They presume, that all moral values are nothing more than cultural customs. Slavery was morally correct in the U.S. a hundred and fifty years ago; anti-Semitism was a morally correct attitude for Germans sixty years ago. Cultures where headhunting was pursued believed that the soul matter was concentrated in the head. By preserving or eating the brain of the enemy, the soul matter of their own

group was increased, and the strength of the enemy was accordingly weakened. In the long run, headhunting was regarded as important to the survival of the culture (ibid, p. 101). Later these cultures have come to realize that this belief was mistaken. So, instead of condemning the headhunters for their past actions, their behavior can be excused for the reason that their actions were founded on misinformation or incorrect beliefs.

Cultural relativists assert that these practices were actually morally right for the members of that culture. They would see no need to excuse these behaviors because the headhunters did nothing erroneous in their view. And in the case of slavery, if anyone needed to be excused, it would be the abolitionists, who acted against cultural values (ibid, p. 102).

I cannot agree with cultural relativists on this issue. To me, tolerance of cultural diversity is of paramount importance, especially in the U.S. with a huge degree of cultural diversity, but moral ethics should also exist in any culture, especially if we have to do with violence, coercion and slaughter of human beings.

In this case moral sensitivity should grow out of a collective consciousness raising. Until we develop an understanding of the experience of violence, victimization, and pain that surround us, we will continue to thoughtlessly maintain it.

After one hundred and fifty years only, through actually experiencing – directly or indirectly – “this consciousness of pain” grown out from slavery, could Americans begin to foster a new attitude towards the social arrangements which contribute to suffering.

References

- Adler, N. J. (2010). *Domestic Multiculturalism: Cross-Cultural Management in Public Sector*. Culture, Communication and Conflict. U.S.A.
- Boss, J. A. (2004). *Ethics for Life*, NY.
- Harris, E. E. (1969). *Respect for Persons*. Daedalus.
- Kirk, G., Okazawa-Rey, M. (2010). *Women's Lives. Multicultural Perspectives*. California, U.S.A.