

Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism is an ethical principle that recognizes the uniqueness of each moral situation. Since each is different, no absolute universal moral truths should apply, contrary to what is propounded by the absolutists. To the relativists, each situation must be taken as a particular case rather than a general one. As John Dewey said, “an action is always specific, concrete, individualized, unique. And judgments as to acts to be performed must be similarly specific.” (Jones et. al. 1969, 453)

Several factors can contribute to the distinctiveness of moral situations. These could include the individual differences and biases of parties involved, and the diversity of contexts brought about by differences in culture and heritage, various religious affiliations, and different prevailing social norms, among others. Following this theory, it is possible for any of the mentioned factors to figure in our moral judgments and decisions. This means that how one construes good could vary from time to time, from culture to culture, from one religious group to another, and in consideration of many other possible contexts. In ethical relativist terms, an act can be considered as morally right by one and deemed otherwise by another, depending on which factor will be given due consideration in the moral evaluation.

Ethical relativism can further be classified into two forms: the *social form* and the *individual form*. In the social form, the rightness or wrongness of an act is relative to the perspective of a particular society. What the particular society will consider as morally good will be deemed as such. In the individual form, the morality of an act is determined by the individual’s personal taste. And thus, what is regarded as good by the individual will be labeled morally good. (Van Wyk 1990)

The absence of absolute moral codes in this theory could imply the validity of all moral standards (Van Wyk 1990). While some may find ethical relativism’s respect for the uniqueness of moral situations laudable, others may opine that too much space for these peculiarities could leave moral choices open to a million and one self-serving justifications as the theory rejects the idea that there can only be one standard of right and wrong that applies to all moral situations. This could ultimately render morality loosely defined.

Ethical Egoism

This ethical principle hinges on Psychological Egoism, which is a theory of motivation that identifies self-benefit as an individual’s sole motivation for her voluntary actions (Rosen, 1990). Because it is the individual’s natural inclination to secure her own benefit and nobody can stop her from doing so, whatever it is that would increase her own good ought to be pursued and considered morally good. This theory defines morally good as that which advances one’s own benefit, interest, and happiness. With this, one ought to focus on doing things that promote self-gratification and the attainment of

personal happiness. One must exclusively pursue what would be beneficial to oneself, consistent with the egoist view that the individual has no natural duty to others but only to oneself. This is a clear rejection of ethical altruism, which believes that one's primary duty is to promote the welfare of other people.

In ethical egoism, humans are depicted as overly self-centered. Contrary to the notion of the altruists, egoists see it as a duty to never allow oneself to be distracted, even to the slightest degree, by what would make other people happy if this spells danger to the realization of one's own happiness. (Broad 1930) It should not be a problem to sacrifice other people's happiness in favor of what would increase one's own happiness. This, however, is not the same as saying that an individual is not permitted to help or to do good to other people. Such is still possible in Ethical Egoism if doing so is the best way to pursue one's personal interests. This means that using Ethical Egoism as a lens, helping others is not considered morally good because other people benefitted from the act; rather, it is morally good because in so doing, people are able to secure what is most beneficial to them (Rachels 2003).

Aside from the marked lack of sensitivity to others, one criticism leveled against ethical egoism pertains to the potential divisive character of this theory. It advocates splitting people into two groups, namely "ourselves" and "all the rest," giving greater importance to the interests of the former (Rachels 2003). There are also critics who are quick to point out that Ethical Egoism presents no instructions or recommendations on how to reconcile or choose between clashing interests of moral agents (Rosen 1990).

John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism as an ethical principle is a consequentialist theory. As such, it gives utmost importance to "consequences" in its moral evaluation of actions. Actions that engender greater good consequences are considered morally good while actions that result in its opposite are rendered morally bad. Since this theory particularly identifies happiness as the individual's highest good, it is important to know if happiness is present or absent in the consequences of actions. Consequences are only classified as good if results lead to maximizing happiness and minimizing pain and sufferings. This is echoed in the following lines from John Stuart Mill's classic work "*Utilitarianism*." It says,

"actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and privation of pleasure" (Kessler 1992, 89).

Meanwhile, it is important to note that for Mill, it is not enough that an action produces maximum happiness for it to count as morally good. It is also necessary that

this happiness is experienced not just by the moral agent, as in the case of Ethical Egoism, but by more people. This notion is supported by the following lines:

“for that standard is not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether” (Wolff, ed. 1969, 412).

With this as the requisite characteristic of morally good actions, this theory also came to be known as “the greatest happiness principle.” Morally good actions are those that produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people (Kessler, 1992). However, it must be noted that one distinct feature of Mill’s version of Utilitarianism involves the explicit mention of the importance of the qualitative aspect of pleasure. Mill asserted that human beings could experience both bodily (lower) and mental (higher) pleasures. This is clearly reflected in Mill’s statement saying that “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (Wolff, ed. 1969, 410).

This utilitarian notion of morality also implies that actions have no inherent moral value. This means that an act cannot be labeled morally good simply on the basis of being a particular type of action (de Castro, et. al. 2003). For example, “lying about a school project” is not automatically labeled “bad” because it is an act of lying. Determination of the moral value of lying necessitates an examination of its consequences. If, for instance, lying was able to produce the desired results, which is the greatest happiness then it will be regarded as morally right. However, if in the end, lying resulted in more pain and suffering, then it indicates that our desired result was not achieved and hence, lying will be rendered morally bad.

Even as some agents would, on many occasions, find guidance in Utilitarianism when facing morally challenging situations, the theory is not exempt from criticisms. For one, there are critics who question whether happiness can actually be measured since this is the yardstick used by the theory in analyzing the morality of actions (Van Wyk 1990). Also, some critics are quick to point out how the minority is highly disadvantaged because of the theory’s emphasis on the majority (Kessler 1992). In addition, it dismisses the significance of the motive of the moral agent since the focus of its analysis is on the consequences of actions (Rosen 1990). Nonetheless, a great number of people still adhere to this theory.