

# A Question of Ethics

## Actions, Outcomes, or Social Mores—Which Is Most Important?

**D**o favorable outcomes such as a good reputation, success, and profitability imply an ethical decision-making process? Is it more important to simply focus on doing the right thing, regardless of the outcome? How do we find a moral basis for conducting our personal and professional lives?

In our search for answers, we will briefly examine utilitarianism and duty-based ethics—two premier theories for ethical decision-making. We will see that it is often necessary to balance them in order to find the best answer. First, though, let's look at another theory, ethical relativism, which is very prevalent and tends to muddy the waters.

### Relativism

During the past couple of centuries, anthropologists and sociologists have studied and catalogued moral habits across cultures. They have found divergent, sometimes widely divergent, moral practices in different cultures and even in the same culture at different times in history.

Why? No one really knows. However, some social scientists believe that there are no absolute, transcendent, and transcultural ethics at work in the world. In other words, they believe that there are no absolute or universal rights and wrongs. Rather, ethics are derived from the habitual and accepted conduct found in each culture.

According to one anthropologist, ethics can be seen as developing like language, and, as a result, are non-rational and have no meaning outside of a particular culture. In this view, language is seen as developing by chance. Just as there exists an infinite number of phonetic sounds and ways of putting those sounds together, so it is with ethical ideas and their construction. Accordingly, it would be meaningless to say that one language is better than another—likewise with ethics.



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On the personal level, absolute and objective morality is seen as non-existent. Ethics are strictly personal and are beyond the scope of criticism.

It is important to note that social scientists, and not ethicists, developed the theory of ethical relativism.

Although the ideas of ethical relativism are widely accepted in our own culture, it requires a great leap of faith to accept them. Some reasons follow:

- **Shared values.** There are certain universal moral values that apply in every culture. Some examples are: protection of persons from physical harm, significance of truth, and care for the young. Without these, it is obvious that any society would rapidly decline into confusion and chaos. For example, let's consider the unjustified taking of a human life. A dictator may sanction the mass murders of those he fears or distrusts. However, if you murder someone without the dictator's acquiescence, you would likely be treated harshly. Why? Because such murder is outside the purview of the dictator's interests, and is in opposition to larger social interests.
- **An error in logic.** It is a logical error to infer ethical relativism from mere diversity of values. The fact that values differ does not preclude the possibility that some values are wrong. The relativists need to show that there are no absolute values, which they have not been able to do.

- **The majority might be wrong.** Relativism infers that ethical norms are defined by popular opinion or as reflected in existing legal code. Either may sanction morally wrong practices.
- **Inconsistency.** Since relativism does not permit ethical criticism of other cultures, relativists are in no position to criticize foreign governments for human rights abuses or other unethical practices, yet many do. Likewise, relativists should not be able to criticize our own culture in earlier periods of history, such as our treatment of the American Indians or acceptance of slavery. Thus, the very idea of social progress should be alien to them. But it isn't, except to possibly a very few.

### Utilitarianism

The utilitarian theory finds moral justification in the outcome of actions. The moral validity of any action is based on the outcome that it produces. Which outcomes have positive moral value? According to **John Stuart Mill**, one of the architects of the utilitarian theory, right action is useful action in attaining the pervasive goal of general happiness—the most good for the largest number of people. Conversely, an action is wrong if it does not provide the most good for the largest number of people. Utilitarianism does not consider the nature of the action itself. Moreover, it does not consider any religious or other pre-established values.

