

Bioethics - Introduction to moral philosophy

In the next three classes we shall focus on:

1. 27 February - Introduction to ethics I: the challenge of cultural relativism; overcoming relativism is not enough (chapters 1, 2);
2. 1/3 March - History of ethics II: virtue theory, religious ethics and the social contract;
3. 6 March - History of ethics III: consequentialism and deontology.

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Reference to chapters of this book: Rachels, J. 2003. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 4th edition. McGraw Hill International Editions, New York (1st ed. 1986).



James W. Rachels

1941-2003

Bioethics - Introduction to moral philosophy

Today:

1. What is ethics;
2. The challenge of cultural relativism;
3. Analysing cultural relativist arguments: the existence of super-cultural moral standards;
4. Debunking cultural relativism: two general ethical principles;
5. Overcoming cultural relativism is not enough.

1.1 - What is ethics?

In the last class you were given a definition of bioethics:

“.... the systematic study of human conduct in the area of *the life sciences and health care*, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles.”

Reich, W.T. 1978. Encyclopedia of bioethics. New York : Free Press. p. xix

Some historical reasons were illustrated in order to understand the emergence of the discipline, among them the development of new technologies (antibiotics, medical ventilators, biotechnologies for gene editing etc.) and the growing concern for the environment and future generations. In brief, **the concern about the impact of the life sciences on the moral community and the environment.**

But what is ethics?

1.2 - What is ethics?

Ethics = the branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles (I will consider ethics and moral philosophy as the same thing, even though Kant 1785 considers moral philosophy as the rational part of ethics, class 6 March)

Ethics is a major part of philosophy (with metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics):

Metaphysics or ontology = what exists?

Epistemology = what is knowledge?

Aesthetics = what is beauty?

Ethics = what is good?

1.3 - What is ethics?

What makes a course of action good?

Is it the **consequences of a course of action** on the moral community? Is it the fact that I **act according to a maxim** that I wish were followed by every moral agent at all times?

Are moral standards objective?

Are moral standards subjective, culture-dependent, super-cultural or even objectively universal?

Who are the members of the moral community?

A subset of the human population, all humans, also humans of future generations, or also non-human animals, embryos and foetuses etc.?

1.4 - What is ethics?

These are all extremely complicated questions. So much so that we can ask whether “progress” can be made in ethics, in analogy to scientific progress.

It is clear that ethics has evolved and that some ethical judgements are culturally relative:

- An historical tour will show that philosophers have approached the central question “what is good?” in different ways (focus of next two classes).
- **Given that different cultures have different moral codes, the assumption that morality is objective becomes dubious** (focus of today’s class).

2.1 - The challenge of cultural relativism

Should abortion be allowed? Should euthanasia be legalised? Should modifications of the human genome be allowed?

Other examples:

1. Should puberty blockers be prescribed to children from age 12?
2. Should unvaccinated people pay more for health care?
3. Should gain-of-function experiments with viruses be allowed?
4. Should EU countries provide weapons to Ukraine?

Fact: there is substantial disagreement on any of these issues between people and cultural traditions. Does this mean that moral standards are subjective or culture-dependent?

2.2 - The challenge of cultural relativism

Infanticide (especially female) was common among many cultures. For instance, Inuit eskimos (Rachels 2003, p. 17 + pp. 24-5) practiced it by throwing babies into icy water. **Is this behaviour immoral? And why is it so?**

(You can invent your own example: is infibulation, or abortion up to 24 weeks, or eating animals, or private education etc. immoral?)

Cultural relativism: given that different cultures have different moral codes, is it possible to judge objectively whether they are correct or incorrect? Is there a vantage point from which to make such a judgement?

2.3 - The challenge of cultural relativism

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code better than another's.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is merely one among many.
5. There is no "universal truth" in ethics; that is, there are no moral truths that hold for all peoples at all times.
6. It is mere arrogance for us to try to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of tolerance toward the practices of other cultures.

2.4 - The challenge of cultural relativism

Cultural relativism: moral practices should be better thought of as cultural products. Therefore, from the vantage point of a particular culture, we should not assume that our cultural practices are based on absolute moral standards and impose them forcefully on other cultures. From this, cultural relativism extrapolates a universal generalisation: **any moral practice is equally admirable and none is better than the other; in brief, there are no super-cultural moral standards.**

Implications of cultural relativism:

1. We cannot say that the moral practices of some cultures are superior or inferior to others;
2. The only feasible way to evaluate the morality of an act is by referring to the moral standards of that specific culture;
3. The idea of moral progress becomes meaningless.

3.1 - Analysing cultural relativist arguments: do super-cultural moral standards exist?

1. Inuit practice infanticide (FACTUAL premise);
2. There are no super-cultural moral standards; this means that the only moral standard for judging the morality of an action is internal to the Inuit culture (what kind of premise is this?);
3. Infanticide is a way to control population growth in a regime of extremely limited resources while female infanticide is a way to control sex ratio balance in a regime where male premature death is common (FACTUAL premise);
4. **Measures to curb population growth and sex ratio control are good in a harsh environment like the Arctic for Inuits and, given premise 2, in general (MORAL premise).**

MORALLY JUSTIFIED JUMP ?



Hence, infanticide is good and moral (MORAL conclusion)

How are premises 2 and 4 justified? **More than a factual premise, premise 2 is an ontological assumption or postulation concerning the non existence of moral standards. How is it linked to premise 4?**

3.2 - Analysing cultural relativist arguments: do super-cultural moral standards exist?

Consider this analogy:

1. People x believe the earth is flat while people y believe the earth is roughly spherical;

2. **There are no super-cultural epistemological standards to adjudicate whether the earth is flat or spherical;** thus, the only epistemological standard for judging is internal to culture x or y;

3. Hence, people x should believe that the earth is flat while people y should believe that the earth is spherical.

What is wrong with this argument?

3.3 - Analysing cultural relativist arguments: do super-cultural moral standards exist?

Consider this analogy:

1. People x believe the earth is flat while people y believe the earth is roughly spherical;
2. There are no super-cultural epistemological standards to adjudicate whether the earth is flat or spherical; thus, the only epistemological standard for judging is internal to culture x or y;
3. Hence, people x should believe that the earth is flat while people y should believe that the earth is spherical.

What is wrong with this argument?

From the existence of cultural variation do not follow ontological implications concerning the existence of super-cultural epistemological standards: there are many objective ways to show that the earth is spherical (e.g., lunar eclipse observation).

3.4 - Analysing cultural relativist arguments: do super-cultural moral standards exist?

1. Inuit practice infanticide (FACTUAL premise);
2. There are no super-cultural moral standards; this means that the only moral standard for judging the morality of an action is internal to the Inuit culture (ONTOLOGICAL assumption);
3. Infanticide is a way to control population growth in a regime of extremely limited resources while female infanticide is a way to control sex ratio balance in a regime where male premature death is common (FACTUAL premise);
4. **Measures to curb population growth and sex ratio control are good in a harsh environment like the Arctic for Inuits and, given premise 2, in general (MORAL premise).**

MORALLY UNJUSTIFIED JUMP



Hence, infanticide is good and moral (MORAL conclusion)

Premise 2 justifies premise 4 only if it is indeed the case that there are no general ethical principles. But this cannot be demonstrated. As in science there are objective standards of evaluation, so it might be in ethics.

3.5 - Analysing cultural relativist arguments: do super-cultural moral standards exist?

The more general question is whether the acknowledgement that moral codes and customs have changed through history and that there exists abundant cultural variation concerning many human ethical practices indeed shows that **there is no common core in the variety of existing ethical cultural practices.**

Alternative: **there is much more in common between cultures than the cultural relativist assumes:** not every moral standard varies from culture to culture, but some are **trans-cultural** or even possibly **universal**.

Indeed, some norms are basic and necessary for society to exist, so that they can be considered “moral cultural universals” (Rachels 2003, p. 26).

Let me give you two examples of possible general ethical principles that approach this universalistic ideal.

4.1 - Debunking cultural relativism

A moral standard that approaches a moral cultural universal is the evaluation of courses of action in terms of their effects on the members of the moral community.

Measures to curb population growth and sex ratio control might be good in a harsh environment like the Arctic because the child's family and the entire population will benefit from this practice.

The logic of this justification is that, in circumstance x, course of action y is good because it has, everything considered, a net positive consequence for the moral community.

Therefore, a course of action is good if it generates consequences on the moral community that are, on the balance, better than alternative courses of action.

This is the essence of **consequentialism** (6 March class).

4.2 - Debunking cultural relativism

Utilitarianism (class 6 March) is a form of consequentialism:

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that **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 the privation of pleasure pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends ...” p. 10*

Mill, J.S. 1863 [2001]. Utilitarianism. Batoche Books, Kitchener.

* “... the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned.” p. 19

4.3 - Debunking cultural relativism

1. Inuit practice infanticide (FACTUAL premise);

2. Consequentialism provides super-cultural moral standards of evaluation (ONTOLOGICAL assumption);

3. Infanticide is a way to control population growth in a regime of extremely limited resources and female infanticide is a way to control sex ratio balance in a regime where male premature death is common (FACTUAL premise);

4. Measures to curb population growth and sex ratio control are good when they generate consequences that are, on the balance, beneficial for the moral community (MORAL premise).

MORALLY JUSTIFIED JUMP



Hence, infanticide is good and moral (MORAL)

Premise 4 can be interpreted from a consequentialist perspective (premise 2) that makes the conclusion justified.

4.4 - Debunking cultural relativism

Another universal moral standard is the evaluation of courses of action in terms of universal maxims of conduct.

Children are persons with independent interests and persons cannot be used as means or instruments for the benefit of others. Any evaluation in terms of consequences misses this crucial point. Children, like all persons, are “ends in themselves” (Kant 1785). Thus, killing children, as any other person, is always wrong.

In order to evaluate any possible course of action x, you should ask yourself whether you would be willing that x is chosen by everyone all the time. What would happen if everyone practiced infanticide all the time? Infanticide, from this perspective, is not morally permissible.

Therefore, a course of action is good if it is performed in accordance to maxims of conduct that can be rendered universal.

This is the essence of **Kantian ethics or deontology** (6 March class).

4.5 - Debunking cultural relativism

“... an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and therefore does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action ... Inexperienced in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for whatever might come to pass in it, I ask myself only: **can you also will that your maxim become a universal law?** If not, then it is to be repudiated...” pp. 13-16

Kant, I. 1785 [1997]. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Cambridge University Press

4.6 - Debunking cultural relativism

1. Inuit practice infanticide (FACTUAL premise);

2. Deontology provides super-cultural moral standards of evaluation (ONTOLOGICAL premise);

3. Infanticide is a way to control population growth in a regime of extremely limited resources and female infanticide is a way to control sex ratio balance in a regime where male premature death is common (FACTUAL premise);

4. Measures to curb population growth and sex ratio control are always bad because children are ends in themselves and because these practices cannot be universalised (MORAL premise).

MORALLY JUSTIFIED JUMP



Hence, infanticide is bad and immoral (MORAL conclusion)

Premise 4 can be interpreted from a deontological perspective (premise 2) that makes the conclusion justified.

5.1 - Overcoming cultural relativism is not enough

The existence of super-cultural moral standards like those endorsed by consequentialism and deontology shows that cultural relativism can be resisted and that moral progress is possible.

Rachels argues that there is a common core and a “**minimum conception**” **of morality** shared by all ethical theories (chapter 1). This is surely true.

Most moral theories have universalistic goals and thus elaborate general ethical principles. All moral theories agree that moral judgements must be supported by “good reasons” rather than by mere expressions of taste and culturally-relative customs. It might also be added that the conception of moral agent belonging to the moral community has been, throughout history, progressively widened, probably the clearest instance of moral progress.

5.2 - Overcoming cultural relativism is not enough

At the same time, the existence of the “minimum conception” of morality does not prevent systematic ethical disagreements.

One problem that should already be obvious is that super-cultural moral standards or general ethical principles often clash: as I’ve shown (slides in section 4), consequentialism might justify infanticide but deontology does not.

The clash between super-cultural moral standards is systematic.

Consider this question:

5.3 - Overcoming cultural relativism is not enough

POLICY: should Covid vaccination be compulsory for all adults?

Factual considerations: evidential basis in support of or against the policy

1. Are vaccines safe for all age-groups?
2. Are vaccines effective for all age-groups?
3. Do vaccines reduce transmission?
4. Does the infection affect all age-groups equally?
5. Is natural immunity stronger and more lasting than vaccine-induced immunity?
6. Is a majority of unvaccinated people hospitalised?
7. Do overwhelmed hospitals have to suspend routine screenings and planned surgeries?
8.

5.4 - Overcoming cultural relativism is not enough

POLICY: should Covid vaccination be compulsory for all adults?

Factual considerations: evidential basis in support of or against the policy

1. Are vaccines safe for all age-groups? **YES (apart from a few problems, e.g., blood clots in some groups of middle-aged women, myocarditis).**
2. Are vaccines effective for all age-groups? **UNCLEAR in the case of < 30s.**
3. Do vaccines sensibly reduce transmission? **A SLIGHT REDUCING EFFECT CAN BE OBSERVED.**
4. Does the infection affect all age-groups equally? **NO: it affects disproportionately >60s people.**

Can the policy be ethically justified given the above evidential bases? With what kind of ethical principles? What is its ethical rationale?

Next class

How are general ethical principles grounded or justified? Why should we assume them as general?

1. Aristotle: the rational idea of virtuosity - naturalistic, universalistic.
2. Religious ethics: the idea of Divine perfection and benevolence - supernaturalistic, universalistic.
3. Social contract: knowledge of human nature - naturalistic, somehow localist.
4. Kant: the rational requirement to make a maxim of conduct a universal law - rationalistic, universalistic.
5. Mill: a hedonistic theory of life - naturalistic, universalistic.

* Most of these works concern what an individual should or ought to do. But bioethics is also (if not mostly) about the justification of government's policy.

Primary resources:

1. Rachels, J. 2003. The Elements of Moral Philosophy. 4th edition. McGraw Hill International Editions, New York (1st ed. 1986). Chapters 1 and 2.
2. Rachels, J. 2004. Elementos de Filosofia Moral, Gradiva, Lisboa. Capítulos 1 e 2.

Secondary sources

1. Reich, W.T. 1978. Encyclopedia of bioethics. New York : Free Press.
2. Mill, J.S. 1863. Utilitarianism. Batoche Books, Kitchener [2001].
<https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/mill/utilitarianism.pdf>
3. Kant, I. 1785 (1997) Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Cambridge University Press.
<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/blog.nus.edu.sg/dist/c/1868/files/2012/12/Kant-Groundwork-ng0pby.pdf>

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