

MORAL VALUES

Moral values are one basis on which we make decisions—right or wrong? good or evil? Other bases are financial, convenient, aesthetic (an artist), arbitrary (flipping a coin), physical/health, rational (investigating a product before buying).

INDIVIDUAL MORALITY AND SOCIAL MORALITY

Individual morality

This provides the basis of decisions of and judgments by the individual: honesty, loyalty, good faith, being responsible

Social morality

Fairness is one basis of law, which helps to govern society and to control individual behavior. Social morality considers whether an action threatens society's well-being..

Conflict. Individual morality and social morality may conflict. Is the free downloading/sharing of music from the Internet a copyright violation? Is using text downloaded from the Internet without footnotes in student papers plagiarism? Should the government regulate non-harmful sexual acts by consenting adults in their own homes or adults reading pornography at home?

MORAL RELATIVISM VERSUS MORAL ABSOLUTISM

Individual relativism

Right and wrong depend on the social or moral commitments of the individual.

Situational relativism

Right and wrong vary depending on the particular situation.

Cultural relativism

Moral norms vary by culture; right and wrong depend on the moral norms of the society: female infanticide in China, suttee in India, slavery.

Moral absolutism

Absolute standards exist by which all rules, commitments and behavior can be judged. The fact that moral commitments vary in different societies does not mean that morality is relative, just as the fact that scientific beliefs may differ in various societies does not prove that scientific truth is relative.

MORAL PRINCIPLES APPLYING TO INDIVIDUALS

The rules that most of us think of as morality are based on principles. The major principles underlying Western morality are these:

The principle of utility or the principle of greatest happiness

Our happiness and the happiness of those affected by our choices must guide our choices and actions. Society creates and follows rules for maximizing the happiness of the greatest number of its citizens.

Objections to this principle

- Whose happiness is paramount? We borrow money and promise to repay it in a week. Can we break our promise to repay one person because we can spend the money to benefit more people?
- Which takes precedence—our happiness or others' happiness? Aren't we more likely to buy our

own family presents rather than give the same money to poor strangers?

- Which takes precedent—fairness or the greatest happiness? What about medical experiments on a small group with the goal of benefitting the whole society?

Fairness, the Golden Rule

Often this becomes in our decision making what you don't want to be done to you

Objection: Do others necessarily want what we want? Some people prefer to be told a lie rather than have to deal with an unpleasant or ugly truth, like a serious illness.

Respect for persons

We must respect the wishes of others. How the other person feels about being lied to is more important than how the potential liar feels about lying.

Immanuel Kant: "It is immoral to use other people *solely and merely* to achieve your own ends. We must recognize others as autonomous." We may use a mechanic to fix our cars because he is paid for his work.

Objection: This principle is that it does not apply to animals.

The human good

This principle emphasizes, not obligations, but character traits and activities which result in a good life.

Natural purpose: Everything in nature has a purpose, e.g., an acorn's purpose is to become an oak. The natural purpose of human beings is defined in various ways—to achieve happiness, say, or to fulfill social roles.

Social purpose: We make judgments based on the role someone plays: a good or bad basketball player, surgeon, son or daughter, spouse, parent, student, neighbor, co-worker, citizen, politician, soldier.

Virtue is achieving excellence in a social role.

The will of God

God as the creator of human beings is the ultimate source of morality.

MORAL PRINCIPLES APPLYING TO OR APPLIED BY SOCIETY

Social justice

There is general agreement on the need for social justice but wide divergence of opinion on what constitutes social justice.

Individual rights

In this country, citizens are guaranteed "inalienable rights" by the Bill of Rights—e.g., freedom of speech, of religion and of assembly. Many theories justifying individual rights have been offered.

The general welfare

Every level of government should promote the general welfare. What kind of government would do this, how the government would do this, and what specifically promotes the general welfare are debatable.

Pluralism and freedom

Unlike the preceding principles, which assume the necessity for governmental action, the principle of pluralism and the principle of freedom discourage governmental action and they tend to reinforce and support each other.

In a pluralistic society, a strong central government is replaced by many independent sources of power and action; no one institution has power over the others. Pluralism can be seen in the U.S. government with its three branches and system of checks and balances.

The principle of freedom allows individuals to pursue their own ends in their own ways, with little or no governmental restrictions.