

THE UNIVERSALITY OF OBJECTIVE MORALITY IN HUMAN CULTURE

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Abstract

This philosophical paper explores the concept of objective morality and its universality across human cultures. It argues that there are fundamental ethical principles that are universally accepted as objectively moral, such as the prohibition of murder, theft, and dishonesty. The paper investigates the historical and cultural context of moral beliefs and practices to demonstrate that these principles are not arbitrary or culturally relative. It also examines potential objections to the idea of objective morality and provides counterarguments. Ultimately, the paper concludes that there is strong evidence for the universality of objective morality in human culture, and that this understanding can have important implications for ethical discourse and decision-making.

Keywords: Universality, Morality, Subjectivity, Human Culture.

Introduction

The question of whether objective morality exists, and if so, whether it is universal across different cultures,¹ has been a central topic of philosophical inquiry for centuries. While some argue that morality is a purely subjective construct, others contend that there are objective moral principles that exist independently of human beliefs and cultural practices.² In recent years, there has been growing interest in exploring the universality of objective morality in human culture, and in examining whether there are fundamental moral principles that are shared across diverse societies and historical epochs.³ This philosophical exploration aims to shed light on the nature of morality, the origins of moral principles, and the role that culture plays in shaping and reinforcing moral norms. By investigating the universality of objective morality, philosophers seek to gain a deeper understanding of the human experience, and to uncover the common ethical ground that underlies our diverse cultural practices and beliefs.⁴

Brief Review

The question of whether objective morality exists and is universal across different cultures has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries. While some philosophers argue that moral principles are subjective and vary across cultures, others contend that objective morality exists and is universal. In this literature review, we will explore the views of philosophers and scholars on the universality of objective morality in human culture. Here, we shall, therefore explore some of these views on the Universality of Objective Morality: Immanuel Kant is one of the most prominent philosophers who believed in the existence of objective morality. According to Kant, moral principles are a priori, meaning that they exist independent of human experience.

According to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Immanuel Kant argued that moral principles are rational and universal, and apply to all human beings, regardless of culture or social status.⁵ For Kant, morality is based on the concept of the "categorical imperative," which states that we should always act in a way that we would want others to act towards us. This principle, according to Kant, is universal and applies to all human beings.⁶

John Rawls was another philosopher who believed in the universality of objective morality. According to the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Rawls believed that "justice is the fundamental value of society, and that it should be the basis for all social and political institutions"⁷ Rawls, moral principles are based on the idea of justice and fairness, and these principles apply to all human beings, regardless of culture or social status. Rawls argued that justice is the fundamental value of society, and that it should be the basis for all social and political institutions. He proposed the "veil of ignorance" as a way to determine what is just and fair. The veil of ignorance is a hypothetical state in which people do not know their social status, race, gender, or any other characteristics that might influence their judgement. In this state, people can only make decisions based on the principles of justice and fairness, which Rawls believed are universal.

The concept of cultural relativism is discussed by several philosophers, including Ruth Benedict and Clifford Geertz. According to the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, cultural relativism is the view that "moral principles are culturally specific and vary across different cultures".⁸ This view suggests that there is no objective standard for morality and that what is considered right or wrong depends on the culture in which one is situated. According to this view, there is no objective standard for morality, and what is considered right or wrong depends on the culture in which one is situated. For example, in some cultures, it is considered moral to practice female genital mutilation, while in other cultures, it is considered immoral. Proponents of cultural relativism argue that we should respect the diversity of moral beliefs and practices across cultures and not impose our own values on others.

Nussbaum is a philosopher who challenges the view of cultural relativism. According to Nussbaum, there are certain values that are necessary for human flourishing, such as compassion, respect for others, and a sense of justice.⁹ These values, according to Nussbaum, are universal and apply to all human beings, regardless of culture or social status. Nussbaum argues that while cultural differences do exist, they should not be used to justify practices that violate basic human rights or prevent individuals from flourishing. Nussbaum challenges cultural relativism by arguing that there are certain objective standards of morality that apply to all cultures.

MacIntyre is a philosopher who argues that moral principles are embedded in the traditions of a particular culture. According to MacIntyre, moral beliefs and practices are shaped by the history and culture of a society. He contends that there is no

universal standard for morality, and that what is considered right or wrong depends on the culture in which one is situated. However, MacIntyre also argues that it is possible to evaluate different moral traditions in terms of their coherence and internal consistency.¹⁰

The question of whether objective morality exists and is universal across different cultures remains a subject of philosophical debate. While some philosophers argue that moral principles are subjective and vary across cultures, others contend that objective morality exists and is universal. Immanuel Kant and John Rawls are two prominent philosophers who believed in the universality of objective morality, while cultural relativism challenges the notion of objective morality by suggesting that moral principles are culturally specific. Martha Nussbaum challenges cultural relativism by arguing that there are certain values that are necessary for human flourishing and are universal, and Alasdair MacIntyre argues that moral principles are embedded in the traditions of a particular culture. Overall, this literature review shows that there is no clear consensus on the universality of objective morality, and the debate continues among philosophers and scholars.

Subjectivity of Good and Evil

The question of whether there is a clear distinction between good and evil is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been debated for centuries. While some people believe that the line between good and evil is distinct and easily identifiable, others argue that it is subjective and open to interpretation. One example is the book "The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values" by Sam Harris, where he argues that moral values can be objectively determined through scientific inquiry.¹¹

The concept of good and evil is not just a matter of faith or fact, but a combination of both. While it is true that there are objective moral standards that are universally accepted, such as the value of human life and the importance of honesty, there are also cultural and societal norms that influence our perception of good and evil. The idea that the concept of good and evil is a combination of both faith and fact can be found in various religious and philosophical texts. One example is the Bhagavad-Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture, which explores the nature of good and evil and the importance of fulfilling one's duty in a moral and ethical way.¹² Similarly, the Bible, the foundational text of Christianity, outlines the concepts of sin and redemption and the importance of leading a virtuous life.¹³

In addition to religious and philosophical discussions, the question of good and evil is also a central theme in literature, art, and popular culture. For example, many fictional works explore the complexities of morality and ethical decision-making, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment"¹⁴ and William Golding's "Lord of the Flies."¹⁵ The idea that the line between good and evil is thin or non-existent is shaped by various factors such as our upbringing, education, cultural and religious

background, and societal values. These factors help shape our perspective and influence our understanding of what is right and wrong.

It is important to recognize that judgements about good and evil are subjective and influenced by a variety of factors. Therefore, it is essential to approach the question with an open mind and respect for differing perspectives. We should acknowledge that individuals may have different moral compasses, and we should strive to understand and respect these differences.

While the line between good and evil may be subjective and influenced by various factors, it is essential to recognize that there are objective moral standards that should guide our actions. We should seek to understand and respect different perspectives, while also striving to adhere to universal principles of right and wrong. Ultimately, the question of whether there is a clear distinction between good and evil is a topic that continues to be debated and explored from various perspectives, and it remains an important aspect of human inquiry and understanding.

Religion and Culture Shift

The practice of killing twins and marrying the wives of deceased brothers are examples of cultural practices that were once accepted and considered good by the people who engaged in them. However, the arrival of outside influences, in this case, Christianity, brought a new perspective that led to a change in the way these practices were viewed.¹⁶ More so, the impact of colonialism through the western education on African cultures and education cannot be overstated. Hence, one of the major impacts of colonialism on African cultures was the erosion of traditional beliefs and practices. Many aspects of African culture were viewed as inferior and were actively discouraged or even suppressed by the colonizers. This included traditional religious practices, language, and art forms. Many African cultures were forced to adopt European customs and traditions, leading to a loss of their unique identity and heritage.¹⁷

The concept of good and evil is often tied to cultural and religious beliefs. What is considered good or evil is often subjective and can vary depending on cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs. The killing of twins in the Igbo-African community was not considered evil at the time because it was seen as a necessary measure to prevent an abomination.¹⁸ However, the arrival of Mary Slessor, who challenged this practice,¹⁹ led to a change in perspective, and the practice was ultimately seen as dastardly and heinous. This change in perspective was driven by the introduction of new ideas and the persistence of those who challenged the practice.

Similarly, the practice of marrying the wives of deceased brothers was considered an act of kindness and love towards the deceased brother. However, with the introduction of Christianity, this practice was condemned and judged to be an act of fornication.

This demonstrates that what is considered good or evil can change over time and that it is often driven by cultural and religious beliefs and values.²⁰

Theology, the study of religious beliefs and practices, often examines the concept of good and evil within the context of specific religious traditions. Theology seeks to provide a systematic and logical understanding of religious beliefs and practices, including how they relate to the concepts of good and evil. Through theological inquiry, one can explore the complexity of the relationship between cultural practices, religious beliefs, and the concepts of good and evil.²¹ In all, the concept of good and evil is not fixed but rather is shaped by cultural and religious beliefs and values. What is considered good or evil can change over time, as evidenced by the cultural practices of the Igbo-African community that were once seen as good but later viewed as evil. Theology provides a framework for examining these concepts within the context of specific religious traditions.

Perception of Good & Evil

It is important to acknowledge that the perception of good and evil can be influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors. In the past, white men who engaged in the slave trade saw it as a legitimate business practice, while black slaves saw it as an act of pure evil due to the forced labour and mistreatment they endured. This demonstrates how different perspectives can lead to conflicting ideas about what is right or wrong. This idea is in line with the historical accounts of the transatlantic slave trade, such as the writings of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who described his experiences in his autobiography "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano".²² The above idea reflects the idea of cultural relativism, which argues that moral values and beliefs are shaped by cultural and social factors. This concept has been discussed by various scholars, including Ruth Benedict in her book "Patterns of Culture"²³ and Franz Boas in his work "The Mind of Primitive Man".²⁴

Similarly, in the Christian religion, there has been a shift in attitudes towards violence and revenge. While the Old Testament teachings focused on "an eye for an eye" as a means of justice, the coming of Christ brought a new understanding of forgiveness and non-violence. This demonstrates how even within a single belief system, there can be different interpretations of what is considered good or evil over time.

This, of course, reflects the evolution of Christian theology, which has been discussed by theologians and scholars, such as William Barclay in his book "The New Testament: A New Translation and Commentary"²⁵ and Walter Wink in his work "Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way".²⁶ It is, therefore crucial to approach issues with an open mind and a willingness to understand different perspectives before making judgements. By recognizing that our views on what is good or evil can evolve and change, we can become more empathetic and better equipped to address complex issues in a thoughtful and nuanced way. This reflects the importance of cultural competency and empathy.²⁷

The human brain exhibits a similar structure in both males and females, except in cases where there are abnormalities present at birth.²⁸ However, even though the

brain's structure is similar, individuals may have different thought processes. The brain is responsible for controlling how we perceive and think about things, and it determines whether something is good or evil.²⁹ The variation in thought processes may explain why individuals from different religions and races may perceive and judge good and evil differently.

For instance, different religious beliefs can influence one's perception of right and wrong.³⁰ A Muslim may believe that killing an infidel will bring him rewards in heaven, while a Christian may view killing as a serious sin that would result in eternal punishment. The brain's capacity for shaping individual beliefs allows for these distinct religious views on killing to exist. However, while some things are generally considered good or evil, individual judgements are shaped by our level of understanding. As the only creatures on Earth capable of thought, reasoning, and language, humans are said to be created in the image and likeness of God. While environmental factors can shape an individual's belief system, human rationality allows for a sense of right and wrong to exist independently of external influences.³¹ Mary Slessor's efforts to stop the practice of abandoning twins in Nigeria exemplify how human rationality can be used to challenge old practices that were not morally right.³²

However, freedom of thought can also lead to misconceptions and misinterpretations of good and evil. Therefore, individuals need to be guided towards making sound moral judgements. One's upbringing and environment play a significant role in shaping their perception of good and evil.³³ It is possible for an individual living in an Islamic community to be a Christian if their immediate environment consists primarily of Christians and vice versa. While freedom of thought cannot be taken away, it can be shaped and guided towards making sound moral judgements. The determination of good and evil can be challenging and cannot be entirely based on either faith or fact. While some actions can be judged as good or evil based on religious beliefs, there are also situations where faith alone cannot determine the morality of an action. For example, killing is generally considered immoral, but it may be viewed as justifiable in self-defence. Similarly, lying is generally considered a sin, but may be seen as acceptable if it is done to save one's life.³⁴

However, the concept of sincerity and treating others fairly should be extended to everyone, regardless of their relationship to you. It is important to note that the saying "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" can be viewed as promoting selfishness if it is interpreted as doing something only for personal gain. Therefore, it is essential to understand that treating others fairly is not just about doing something in the hopes of getting something in return, but rather it is about treating others as you would like to be treated.³⁵ Ultimately, good and evil cannot be entirely judged by either faith or fact, as both perspectives have areas of agreement and disagreement.³⁶ It is up to the individual to form their own beliefs about what is right and wrong, and their personal beliefs may not align with those of others. Therefore, we should strive to respect the beliefs of others, even if we do not necessarily agree with them.

Additionally, we should always be open to learning from others, as this can help us to broaden our understanding of what is right and wrong. By doing this, we can work towards a more tolerant and respectful society, where everyone's beliefs are acknowledged and respected.³⁷

Universally Recognized Sin

The act of stealing is generally considered a universally recognized wrongdoing by both religious and secular societies. It not only brings dishonour to the perpetrator but also to their family, friends, and community. This statement is supported by various religious texts and secular laws. For instance, the Bible's Ten Commandments include "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15), and the Quran states, "And do not consume one another's wealth unjustly or send it [in bribery] to the rulers in order that [they might aid] you [to] consume a portion of the wealth of the people in sin, while you know [it is unlawful]" (2:188). In addition, stealing is considered a crime in virtually all legal systems worldwide. However, it is possible that certain situations may arise where an individual may feel compelled to commit theft for what they consider to be a justifiable reason. In such cases, the question arises as to whether the act of theft can still be considered a sin.

The following story illustrates this point: A person is known in their community as a charitable individual who frequently assists the poor. However, their community is unaware of the source of their wealth, and they do not question it because they appreciate the person's charitable contributions. Unfortunately, the person is caught by the police for being involved in armed robbery and kidnapping. The community does not want the person to be arrested, so they recommend holding a local trial. During the trial, the police present evidence of the person's criminal activities, while the community members testify to the person's charitable work. The judge, who knows the person to be charitable, finds them guilty because they recognize that charity cannot be derived from illegal activity.

The above story highlights the importance of understanding that while charitable acts are commendable, their legitimacy is undermined if their source is unlawful. This idea is supported by various ethical principles, such as the principle of non-maleficence, which states that one should not cause harm, and the principle of beneficence, which requires one to promote good. If the source of a person's wealth is illegal, it is likely that harm was caused to others, and the person's charitable actions may be seen as a way to ease their guilt rather than to genuinely help others. The story also underscores the notion that selfishness is a sin that leads to other sins, and that stealing of any kind is immoral, regardless of the motives behind it. Even though the person in the story did some good through their charitable actions, their criminal behaviour cannot be excused. Ultimately, both faith and reason concur that stealing is a morally unacceptable act. This statement is supported by many philosophical and religious traditions, such as Kantian ethics, which emphasizes the importance of respecting others' autonomy and property, and Christianity, which teaches that stealing is a sin.

Additionally, many secular ethical frameworks, such as utilitarianism and de-ontology, also view stealing as morally unacceptable.

The Role of Theology in Moral Clarity

From a theological standpoint, there is a clear distinction between good and evil, and this knowledge provides guidance on how to live a virtuous life and overcome evil.³⁸ This statement is consistent with the theological concept of dualism, which posits that good and evil are two separate and distinct forces in the universe. This idea is found in various religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. For example, in the Bible, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24, New International Version). Theological teachings have helped us recognize and reject immoral practices such as the slave trade and the misuse of social systems, like the *osu* system in the Igbo community, which were originally intended to punish criminals but were instead used to oppress vulnerable individuals.³⁹

Theology promotes moral behaviour by helping us to understand and distinguish between right and wrong. While some may argue that there is a thin line between good and evil, this viewpoint is not supported by factual, philosophical, or theological evidence. Rather, as Nelson explains, "the theological understanding of good and evil is distinct and provides a solid foundation for moral reasoning and ethical decision-making".⁴⁰ By studying theology, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of morality and act in accordance with virtuous principles.

Objective Morality in Culture

While morality is undoubtedly influenced by culture and religious beliefs, there is still an objective morality that exists across all cultures. This means that despite differences in cultural practices and beliefs, there is a common thread of morality that underlies all human societies. Immanuel Kant, who argued that there are certain moral principles that are universally valid and binding on all rational beings. In his book "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," Kant states that the moral law is "given by pure reason alone, independently of all empirical influences". He also argues that the moral law is not dependent on any particular cultural or religious tradition, but rather is based on the rational nature of human beings.⁴¹ It is important to understand that culture and religion do play a significant role in shaping our moral values. Our upbringing, education, and socialization all contribute to our understanding of what is right and wrong. For example, in some cultures, the act of eating beef is considered immoral, while in others it is not. Similarly, certain religious beliefs may prohibit certain behaviours or actions, which are considered immoral by those who follow that religion.

However, just because cultural and religious beliefs may differ, it does not mean that morality itself is subjective. There are certain moral principles, such as the prohibition against murder, theft, and lying, that are universally recognized across all cultures. These principles are not dependent on any specific cultural or religious belief and are therefore objective.⁴² Furthermore, while culture and religion may shape our moral values, they do not create them. Rather, they are based on our innate sense of right and wrong, which is inherent in all humans. This means that there is a common moral foundation that exists across all cultures and religions.⁴³ In addition, the idea of a common moral foundation that underlies all human societies is supported by anthropological research. For example, anthropologist Donald Brown has identified a set of "human universals," which are cultural traits that are found in all societies around the world.⁴⁴ Among these universals are moral concepts such as the prohibition against murder and incest, the use of deception and lying, and the idea of reciprocity and fairness.

Therefore, the differences in culture are not due to a fundamental difference in moral values, but rather on how these values are expressed and implemented in different societies. This is why it is said that the difference in culture is not on the ontological basis (i.e., the fundamental nature of morality), but on the sociological basis (i.e., how morality is expressed and practiced within different societies). So, while culture and religion undoubtedly influence our moral values, there is still an objective morality that exists across all cultures. This objective morality is based on our innate sense of right and wrong and is not dependent on any specific cultural or religious belief. Therefore, it is important to recognize that despite our differences, there is a common culture of humanity that unites us all.

Conclusion

After exploring the concept of objective morality and its universality in human culture, it is clear that there are compelling arguments on both sides of the debate. Some philosophers and scholars argue that objective morality is inherent in human nature and can be discovered through reason or divine revelation, while others argue that morality is relative to culture and society, and there is no universal standard for ethical behaviour. However, upon closer examination of the evidence, it appears that objective morality is indeed universal in human culture. While cultural practices and beliefs may differ, there are certain moral principles that are shared across all societies, such as the prohibition against murder, theft, and lying. Furthermore, the existence of moral dilemmas and the moral intuitions that people have also suggests that there is an objective moral standard that transcends culture and society. One possible explanation for the universality of objective morality is that it is rooted in our common human nature. Humans possess a sense of empathy and a desire for justice, which can form the basis for moral principles that are shared across cultures. Additionally, many religions and philosophical systems have recognized the existence of objective morality and have developed ethical codes based on these principles.

While there may be some cultural variation in how these moral principles are expressed, the fact that they are present in all human societies suggests that they are not simply arbitrary or socially constructed. Instead, they reflect a deeper truth about the nature of reality and the human experience. In conclusion, the evidence supports the idea that there is a universal and objective standard for morality that transcends culture and society. While this may not provide a complete or definitive account of morality, it is a crucial starting point for ethical reflection and action. By recognizing the universality of objective morality, we can work towards a more just and compassionate world that is grounded in respect for human dignity and the common good.

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