ETHICAL THEORIES OF RELATIVISM AND ABSOLUTISM

In this course we shall consider ethics from two main views, this are

i. Absolutism view and
ii. Relativism view

Absolutism

Moral Absolutism is the ethical belief that there are absolute standards against which moral questions can be judged, and that certain actions are right or wrong, regardless of the context of the act. Thus, actions are inherently moral or immoral, regardless of the beliefs and goals of the individual, society or culture that engages in the actions. It holds that morals are inherent in the laws of the universe, the nature of humanity, the will of God or some other fundamental source.

Moral Absolutism has been favoured historically largely because it makes the creation of laws and the upholding of the judicial system much simpler, and manifested itself in outdated concepts such as the Divine Right of Kings. Plato was a philosopher who argued in favour of moral absolutism and in ‘good’ that always holds its value. Absolutism might be associated with religious morality, but an individual can have an absolutist view of morality without being religious. For example, an individual might believe that slavery, war, child abuse and the death penalty are all morally wrong and cannot be justified under any circumstances. Many religions have morally absolutist positions, and regard their system of morality as having been set by a deity, and therefore absolute, perfect and unchangeable. Many Christians regard Christian theology as teaching a hierarchy of moral absolutes known as graded absolutism, wherein the case of a conflict between two absolutes, the duty to obey the higher one (God) exempts one from the duty to the lower ones (fellow humans or, still lower, property). Divine Command Theory is an absolutist meta-ethical theory that an act is obligatory if (and only if) it is commanded by God (William of Ockham argued that if God had commanded murder, then murder would indeed have been morally obligatory).

Sometimes, Moral Absolutism can mean the more extreme position that actions are moral or immoral even regardless of the circumstances in which they occur (e.g. lying is always be immoral, even if done to promote some other good, such as to save a life). In this form, it can be contrasted with Consequentialism (in which a morally right action is one that produces a good consequence or outcome, regardless of the intentions).
The ethical theory of absolutism, or moral absolutism, is that there are absolute moral standards against which the morality of actions can be judged. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are recognised by objective standards that apply universally, to everyone.

Other terms related to ethical absolutism include:

*Ethical universalism* which describes the situation whereby all of mankind accept and live by the same basic ethical standards regardless of culture, race or religion.

*Ethical objectivism* which describes the view that what is right or wrong doesn’t depend on what anyone thinks is right or wrong but rather the pure facts irrespective of scenario.

**Relativism**

The ethical theory of relativism rejects the absolutist view. It states that there is no objective or absolute moral truth, and there are no universal standards of moral behaviour. There are two aspects to relativism:

*Descriptive ethical relativism.* This is the view that different cultures and societies have different ethical systems and cultures. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are concepts that relate to the particular culture. (There is no universal rule about right and wrong.)

*Normative ethical relativism.* The beliefs or moral values within each culture are right within that culture. It is impossible to judge the values of another culture externally or objectively. Moral values of a culture can only be judged from within the culture.

*Religious relativism* is an example of normative ethical relativism and maintains that one religion can be true for one person or culture but not for another. No single religion, therefore, is universally or exclusively true.

*Historical relativism* is another example of normative ethical relativism and provides context for ethical views to vary over periods of time. For example the elimination of suspected witches or the widespread adoption of slavery in the past may not be acceptable in today’s society. Similarly Management, governance and ethics trends may move in the opposite direction – for example the liberalisation of clothing fashions or the changing role of women in society.

Relativism accepts that ethical behaviour cannot be judged objectively. What is right and what is wrong can also vary according to circumstances.
J L Mackie is a fairly recent moral philosopher who supported the relativist view. He argued that ethical values and moral judgements are a human invention, which is imposed on society by ‘institutions’.

**Example: Absolutism vs. relativism**

Suppose that a manager is given confidential information by an employee which he promises to keep confidential and not to disclose to anyone else. In your opinion, would there be any circumstances in which the manager might break his promise and disclose the confidential information to someone else, without the permission of the employee? You might have your own view about which of these different approaches to making moral judgements is correct, absolutism or relativism.

1. The manager might take the view that having given a promise, he must keep it. A promise is given with the intention of keeping it, and there are no circumstances in which the manager would disclose the information to anyone else, without the prior permission of the employee. **This would be an absolutist view of ethics.**

2. The manager might take the view that, having given his promise, there could be situations in which the information could be given to someone else, without permission from the employee. **This would be unethical behaviour.**

3. The manager might give a promise not to disclose the confidential information to anyone else, but in giving his promise he might tell the employee that there are certain circumstances in which he might feel obliged to give the information to someone else (and give an indication of what those circumstances might be, such as legal reasons). In this situation, the manager would be saying that the right thing to do could depend on the circumstances and situation. **This would be a relativist view of ethics.**

It is therefore possible to take a moral position based on either an absolutist or a relativist view of morality. It is also possible to act unethically, from both an absolutist and a relativist point of view.
KOHLBERG’S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The six stages of moral reasoning and development

Lawrence Kohlberg is the most noted author in the area of moral development psychology, an American philosopher who developed a theory of moral behaviour, it was first published 1958. The theory described the stages of moral development through which individuals pass as they mature in their moral judgements. He explained the reasoning that makes individual make their decisions when faced with a moral dilemma. He argued that individuals go through stages in their moral development. He identified six development stages that an individual might go through, although most individuals do not go through all six in their life. According to him, a stage of moral development represents a structure of thought that is concerned with how judgment are made and why the judgement was made.

The six stages are progressive.

a. Individuals start at Stage 1 and work upwards through higher stages as their life progresses.

b. Each higher stage of moral reasoning is better at dealing with moral dilemmas than earlier stages.

c. It is extremely rare for an individual, having reached one stage, to fall back to a lower stage of moral reasoning.

d. However, individuals do not act at all times at the highest stage of moral development that they have reached.

e. Individuals cannot ‘jump’ stages, or miss any stage of development. For example, an individual cannot go from Stage 3 to Stage 5 without first going through Stage 4.

Kohlberg argued that the moral response of an individual to any moral dilemma or decision can be identified with one of the six stages.

He divided the six stages of moral development into three levels, as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of morality</th>
<th>Stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Conventional</td>
<td>1 Obedience and punishment</td>
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<td>2 Self-interest: individualism and exchange</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>3 Inter-personal accord and conformity: good boy, nice girl attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Maintaining social order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-conventional</td>
<td>5 Social contract</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 Universal ethical principles</td>
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Pre-conventional level of morality

A pre-conventional level of moral reasoning is common in children, although it can also be found in adults. Kohlberg called this level of reasoning pre-conventional because individuals at Stages 1 and 2 do not yet see themselves as members of society, and their moral reasoning is based entirely on ‘self’.

Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation

At Stage 1, individuals judge right and wrong on the basis of the direct consequences for them of the actions they take.

i. An action is bad if the individual knows that he (or she) will be punished for it. The worse the punishment, the greater the moral wrong.

ii. An action is good if the individual knows that he will receive some benefit. The individual believes that there are powerful authorities who are able to give rewards and punishments for behaviour.

Stage 2: Individualism and exchange

At Stage 2, the individual (often a child) recognises that there is no single view of what is right and what is wrong. Different individuals have different points of view. Each individual is also free to pursue his or her own personal interests, and will therefore want to do what is in his or her own best interest. When faced with a moral dilemma, the individual’s decision is based on: ‘What’s in it for me?’ The individual might show an interest in other people, but only to the extent that other people might help to further his own interests. A typical view in dealing with other people is; ‘You help me and I will help you’. (‘You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.’) Concern for others has nothing to do with loyalty to the other person, respect or wanting to help them. It is based entirely on concern for oneself.

Conventional level of morality

The conventional level of moral reasoning is typical of adolescents and adults. When individuals think in a conventional way, they judge the morality of actions by comparing the actions with the conventional views and expectations of society.

Stage 3: Good interpersonal relationships

Individuals now enter society and see morality as more than making deals for personal benefit. They believe that they should live up to the expectations of family, friends and the community. They are aware of the approval or disapproval that they receive from other people, and try to live
up to their expectations. They enjoy respect and gratitude, and their moral outlook is based on how this will be obtained. They want to be a ‘good boy’ or a ‘nice girl’. Good behaviour means having good motives and feelings of love, trust and concern for others. The actions of another person are often judged by the reasoning: ‘He means well….’

Stage 4: Maintaining social order

The moral reasoning at Stage 3 is based largely on interpersonal relationships and feelings, with family members and close friends, where it is possible to get to know the feelings and opinions of the other person very well, and try to help them. At Stage 4, the individual is concerned with society as a whole, and the need to maintain social order. The focus is on respect for social conventions, authority and obeying the law, because these are important for maintaining society.

Post-conventional level of morality

The post-conventional level of morality is also called the ‘principled’ level. The individual now realises that he is a person with his own views, and not just a member of society. The individual does not accept that social conventions are necessarily correct. However, this is a higher level of moral development than the pre-conventional level, because the individual takes a principled view, not a purely selfish view of right and wrong.

Stage 5: Social contract orientation

At Stage 5, individuals think about society differently from the conventional way. They take the view that a good society is one in which there is a ‘social contract’ in which everyone works towards the common benefit of society. They recognise that people are different and have the right to their own views and opinions. However, all rational-minded people should agree about two things:

1. All people should have certain basic rights that society will protect, such as life and freedom.
2. There should be some form of democratic procedure for changing laws that are unfair and for improving society.

At Stage 5 people talk about ‘morality’ and ‘rights’ from their own individual perspective, recognising that other people might disagree (subject to the two points above). In contrast, individuals at Stage 4 might talk about ‘morality’ and ‘rights’ because they belong to a social group (such as a religious group) that supports these concepts. Stage 4 individuals believe in ‘rights’
because they are conforming to their group, not because they have reached their moral viewpoint individually.

**Stage 6: Universal ethical principles**

Kohlberg suggested that individuals very rarely reach Stage 6 of moral development. At this stage, moral reasoning is based on abstract ‘universal’ ethical principles. The individual queries the validity of laws, and considers that laws are only valid if they are based on justice. Individuals have an obligation to disobey unjust laws. An individual makes moral decisions because they are right, not because they are a means to an end, or because the action is legal or expected. There are universal principles of justice requiring that all people should be treated impartially, in an equal manner and with dignity. For example, it is morally wrong to vote for a law that helps some people but hurts others.

**The Heinz dilemma**

Kohlberg used a number of fictional case studies involving a moral dilemma, to establish the stage of moral development and reasoning that an individual had reached. One of these case studies is called “the Heinz dilemma”, the case provide a good illustration of Kohlberg’s analysis.

In this example, you should note that individuals at the same stage of moral development can reach differing views of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Kohlberg was interested in the moral reasoning that individuals use to justify their opinions, rather than the actual decision that they reach through their reasoning.

**The case study: The Heinz dilemma**

In this case, Heinz’s wife is suffering from cancer and close to death. There is one drug that doctors think might save her. This is a drug that a scientist in the same town has recently discovered. The drug is expensive to produce, but the price charged for the drug by the scientist is ten times its production cost. The scientist paid $200 to make the drug and was charging $2,000 for a small dose. Heinz wanted to buy the drug for his wife, but had very little money. He went to everyone he knew to obtain the money to buy the drug, but could raise only $1,000. He told the scientist about his wife’s medical condition and that he could raise only $1,000. He asked the scientist to let him buy the drug at that price, or let him pay the rest of the money later. The scientist refused, saying that he had discovered the drug and intended to make money from producing it. Heinz, in
desperation, broke into the scientist’s premises to steal the drug for his wife. The questions asked by Kohlberg were:

1. Should Heinz have broken into the scientist’s premises to steal the drug?
2. Why, or why not?

**Analysis of the case study** For Kohlberg, it was not important what an individual would do in the situation faced by Heinz, but how he or she reached an opinion. The moral reasoning was more important than the decision or action that results from it.

Examples of some of the arguments that might be used by individuals at each stage of moral development are set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of moral development</th>
<th>Possible reasoning</th>
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</table>
| **1. Obedience and punishment** | Heinz should not steal the drug because if he does he will be put in prison. This would be very bad.  
  
  *Or*  
  Heinz should steal the drug. It only cost $200 and he offered to pay a lot more. He was only stealing the drug, nothing else. |
| **2. Self-interest** | Heinz should not steal the drug, because if he does he will go to prison. Prison is a terrible place and he will suffer a lot if he goes there, more than if his wife dies.  
  
  *Or*  
  Heinz should steal the drug, because if he does he will be very happy, even if he has to spend some time in jail. |
| **3. Interpersonal accord** | Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is bad and Heinz is not a criminal.  
  
  *Or*  
  You can’t blame him. He did everything he could first without breaking the law.  
  
  *Or*  
  You can’t blame him. He did everything he could first without breaking the law. |
Heinz should steal the drug. He is a good husband and his wife will expect him to do it.

4. Maintaining social order

Heinz should not steal the drug because stealing is against the law.

Or

Heinz should steal the drug, but he should also face up to the consequences and take the punishment for the crime. You can see why he did it, but breaking the law has its consequences. You can’t let criminals go around doing whatever they want.

5. Social contract

Heinz should not steal the drug because the scientist has a right to fair compensation. Even though his wife is near death, Heinz is not justified in stealing.

Or

Heinz should steal the drug, regardless of the law, because everyone has a right to life.

6. Universal ethical principles

Heinz should not steal the drug. If he does, this means that someone else will not be able to buy it and that person might need it just as much as Heinz’s wife. Their lives are just as important.

Or

Heinz should steal the drug, because saving a human life is much more important than respect for someone’s property rights.

Criticisms of Kohlberg’s ideas

Some of the criticisms of Kohlberg’s ideas are interesting, and have relevance to concepts of business ethics (especially for global companies) and professional ethics (especially for professional bodies with global membership).

a. Some critics have argued against the view that post-conventional morality exists or is at a higher level of moral development. At Stages 5 and 6, individuals put their own principles above society and the law, which is a dangerous moral stance to take.
b. Other critics have argued that Kohlberg’s views have a cultural bias, because his ideas are based on Western philosophy. His views might not apply to non-Western philosophies and cultures.

c. Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg’s views had a gender bias, and were based on a male view of the world. Kohlberg argued that moral thinking is based on reasoning linked to a sense of justice – rules, rights and abstract principles. Gilligan argued that for women, morality and ethical views are not based on these concepts of justice, but on concern for interpersonal relationships and the ethics of care and compassion.