

## **Business Ethics – Sixth lecture Q & A**

**Kyoka:**

*My question is quite abstract, but how we should apply those theories to current business.*

*I mean people often prioritize their short-term benefit rather than bigger risk of long-term. For example, in trolley problem it is so difficult to kill person in front of you, even if he knows it saves lives of five people. This is also applied to Ford's case.*

*On the other hand, philosophers usually do not see the event with their own eyes. They usually analyze historical event after so they do not expose their life and money, that's why they can see justice in a longer view. So there must be huge gap between theory and practice.*

*My question is (and also this is permanent in solved problem) how we can prevent risk and disaster such as corporate fraud by using ethics theories. And do you think studying ethics defeat actions which pursue short-term benefit sacrificing long-term or other people's justice?*

The majority of ethical theories go against business as usual, at least at corporation level.

The first "use" of ethical theories, then, is to remind us that business can be unethical, and the bigger the business, the more unethical it is likely to be.

As we shall see during the remaining lectures, corporations utilize ethical thinking, including ethical theories, for their business purposes. If this is sincere, all is fine. The world has become a better place. This is the second "use".

It is, however, seldom sincere. Ethical considerations are employed as spin and hiding (part of) the truth. This is the third "use".

We are not, in this course, trying to find out how businesses can become saintly. Our aim, as stated in the Course objectives and content, is this: "Participants will learn to distinguish between business ethics, the business of ethics, and the ethics of business; to assume a critical attitude towards promises of moral improvement in businesses and economies; and to see business activities and economic decisions in their wider social and political contexts."

I hope I answered your question.

**Saara:**

*If Immanuel Kant lived now, would he take Covid vaccine?*

Very probably yes. Not taking it would mean putting the lives and health of self and others at risk, and this would go against the humanity principle. Taking it has no immediate, obvious, and severe health risks that would counter the judgment.

**Joonas:**

*Who is responsible for the rules in rule utilitarianism?*

The most developed formulation of rule utilitarianism (by R. M. Hare) makes the theory two-tiered. – According to it, we should normally just go on living by the rules of thumb for action that we have: observe the laws, be nice to people, don't hurt other animals. But there will be cases in which these do not self-evidently apply. Should I observe racist laws? Should I be nice to a violent aggressor who tries to take my life? Couldn't I hurt a couple of mice just a little bit to develop a cure for cancer? – For these cases, we need some kind of an impartial observer who can produce non-biased, knowledge-based answers to the questions (= calculate the consequences of all rule alternatives in terms of universal preference satisfaction). In Hare's account, this purely theoretical entity was called the Archangel. I list six similar figures in the concluding section of this fresh-out-of-the-press article

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and give a reference for further information. – Did that answer your question?

**Kamilla:**

*How would you convince someone to critically review their traditional values and reconsidering them in the light of empiricism?*

This is a tricky question. The answer depends on the kind of empirical evidence we mean.

Let's start with an imaginary view that may need revising: "The Great Spaghetti Monster in the Sky orders us to hate and despise all who are from below latitude 60."

I can think of three kinds of empirical objections to the view.

(i) "We have observed the sky carefully and conclude that the Monster does not exist." – This type of evidence has rarely changed people's minds in normative matters. (The Monster is invisible, can only be seen by believers, etc.) – A nonstarter.

(ii) "We know, and scientific evidence supports this, that people below latitude 60 (e.g., Estonians) are quite similar to people above latitude 60 (e.g., most Finns), and the distinction and the rule seem arbitrary." – This type of evidence has had some success, but it has to be believed by people, and Monster worshippers may choose to believe that people below latitude 60 are evil. – Close but no cigar.

(iii) The third route is a piecemeal approach in which we try to locate something called the "reflective equilibrium" between our general beliefs (say, overall values and norms like the Monster rule) and our more particular intuitions about more specific cases. – Examples of the latter would be: "Many of my friends have moved to Estonia and I cannot believe that they have become evil." "My friend's partner is from Estonia but not, I think, evil." "I have family in Hanko and they are definitely not evil." – In all these cases we have what in psychology is called a cognitive dissonance – we nurture contradictory beliefs. This makes us uneasy, and the situation has to be solved, either by refining or rejecting the general rule or

by changing our minds about our friends, acquaintances, and family members. – Still vulnerable to propaganda but may work.

Did I answer your question?

**Sabina:**

*How is it possible that moral legalism is not affected by oscillation? Shouldn't there be a form of temporary solution if a law is not legally valid at a time?*

These are two different things, right? – Oscillation is not a concern for the strict moral legalists simply because it is moral to do what is legal. Period. “Oh, this year I can ride a bike without a back light.” “Oh, this year I cannot.” Easy conformism and (in more serious matters) intellectual and ethical laziness. – The transitional period before a law becomes binding is a gray area. A literal interpretation protects loophole seekers like Lee Iacocca. A “spirit of the law” interpretation may become more popular if people draw attention to corporate wrongdoing – and care. – Unfortunately, as Dr Rintamäki will show you, people do not care, or do not care intensively or enduringly enough.

**Nils:**

*Under the thought of deontology, how can reason be separated from the knowledge one possesses? So given moral legalism and Kantian ethics, everything is bound to the individual freedom, as choices and actions are free and the sphere of freedom is based on intellect. What happens when a society does not have these capabilities yet? What if there education does not lay the foundation for a society that can be based on these freedoms and intellect? Does it first need to follow a given historical path (e.g., to achieve the end in history)?*

Reason, in the light of the Categorical Imperative, separates “bad” knowledge from “good”. Does the law violate humanity? If yes, ignore it. – Your second question was tricky to all Enlightenment philosophers. They assumed that reason had matured and become mainstream, but where and in what parts of the population? When they addressed the issue, they came up with half-racist ideas of “peoples in their nonage” (= all nations outside their own cultural sphere) and paternalistic attitudes toward non-educated or intellectually challenged individuals in their own countries (= they should be treated like children and guided). All in all, a Kantian-type intellectualism does have its difficulties with this.

**Lukas:**

*When hearing something about the Trolley problem I was thinking of the current considerations when designing autonomous vehicles and designing their decision algorithms. Crashing into a child and harming it or eluding it but harming the passengers of the car? We get to the point where these moral decisions need to be implemented on technical frameworks. My question therefore is, how the legislator should deal with that situation as this is question that need to be clarified before it can be technically implemented; and how can they justify valuing the life of some more than others?*

They will probably wriggle out of this by convenient technicalities. “The computer cannot know that it is a child.” “No one would buy cars if they protected others at the expense of

the owner. (And modern culture would, of course, collapse if people do not buy cars.)” Etc. – Another approach could be to say that it would then be the car’s fault – which would lead to the question, “Are we morally even allowed to build autonomous machines that can be lethal on their own?” – I address the latter question in another context in a recent article: <https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap2021326145> – there is a paywall for the whole article but if for any reason you are interested, I can send you a copy. Not that you should be, just in case.

**Conrad:**

- *Related to Act Utilitarianism, particularly the strict impartiality aspect:*
  - *I apologize if this question seems to straddle a seemingly political matter (abortion), that is not my intention.*
  - *This question is based on the popular theoretical situation in which a pregnant mother is placed in a life-threatening situation wherein only the mother or the child will survive, but not both. This situation, in the context of act utilitarianism, raises important questions that must necessarily be answered to come to a “sound” conclusion:*
    - **Maximization of good:** *Only one of the two persons may be saved, therefore the greatest achievable good would be that one person is saved with the least damage to the other being (e.g., the mother is not subjected to a brutal surgery to save the child, and the child is not subject to a brutal abortion to save the mother’s life). I believe these lead into defining “good”.*
    - **Defining “good”:** *Since morality, justice, and tradition are void under act utilitarianism, it seems incredibly difficult to weigh the good of saving the unborn child without making assumptions about its existence (e.g., desire, preference, and needs). In contrast, the living mother should be able to express her desires, preferences, and needs. How does this dynamic play out? Is the mother’s perspective on the matter more valuable than the assumed perspective of the child, or perhaps there is some sort of precedent? Does this situation need to consider the perspective of others, such as the father of the child/husband of the wife?*
    - **Strict impartiality:** *If everyone counts as one and one life is to be lost no matter the decision, are there any criteria that may influence the decision even in the slightest? For example, if the child/mother suffers from a severe degenerative condition that would subject them to extreme suffering and/or a shortened life span, can the life of the unafflicted be weighed as greater since it would allow for a longer life in which to create good (or perhaps evil)?*

Absolutely no problem with the political aspect. I started my career – back when the dinosaurs roamed – with the morality of abortion. A very insightful and thorough question, congratulations! I have two answers, one disappointing and the other one expanding the field a little.

The first answer is that no standard contemporary view on utilitarianism sees the embryo or the fetus as a person. Using the “psychological criterion” for personhood (= you have to be

aware of your existence over time to be a person in the proper sense), unborn human beings do not count, and your fine construction crumbles at its foundations. In a different context (I am trying to find open access material), I explicate the principle here: <https://jme.bmj.com/content/24/2/81>. Applied consistently, it solves some problems in ethics and raises others. In case you are interested in this stuff, I can send you some of my articles on this. But only on request – I do not want to burden you.

The second answer is that your construction is a nice redo of something that is called “a life of value” argument. Its seminal formulation can be found here: <https://jme.bmj.com/content/28/3/198>. It is not a utilitarian stance, but it cleverly challenges that.

**Helena:**

*Do you think that if there wasn't a God or a heavenly figure who stated the moral rules of society from the very beginning, we would have different morals today?*

I am not sure that I understand what you are asking. Can you put it in other words, please? This is perhaps just me being slow, but anyway. OK?

*I meant, that the Bible or the word of God was the first encounter of ethics of humanity. Do you think humanity would have developed in a different way if we didn't had the bible as a measure to settle what is right or what is wrong?*

The Bible and other documented faith sources usually give a pretty everyday account of ethics and morality: do not harm others, be friendly to people, forge relationships and so on. So in that sense, it would not matter which faith or other source we encounter first. – More context-dependent cultural etiquette – “Thou shalt not eat sea animals with more than eight legs” – is, of course, another matter, but its grip on people is not that tight, at least not anymore.

**lina:**

*Could ethical theories be utilized in a change from capitalistic ever-growing and business-centered world towards a sustainable alternative world order (e.g., de-growth), and if yes, how?*

I answer this question partly in the framework of the Map of Justice that we have used during the final lecture. The long and short of it is that although any of the theories can, with convenient factual premises, be harnessed to support capitalism, socialism, and degrowth alike, the best candidates for anti-growth advocacy are care, shared responsibility, and the minimization of illbeing – in terms of ethical doctrines, virtue ethics, socialism (in the sense of solidarity among the precariat), and negative utilitarianism (not maximizing pleasure etc. but reducing suffering when possible).

**Susanna:**

*Kant seems to have the assumption that reason is the same for every person thus making morality universal. However this is not true since there is different levels of narcissism,*

*sociopathy etc. My question is actually that even if majority of people would assume these universal morality rules, why is it that humanity has built a systems through out the history that have turned to favor those who are willing to set those morality rules aside and act against them?*

Yes, people are different. The Enlightenment idea in these theories is (figuratively speaking) that there is a tiny, disembodied homunculus inside every one of us giving stern orders. (If the word “homunculus” does not ring a bell, check it out in the net.) Its morality is one of impartiality. In the concluding section of this

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I list six “impartial observers” and proceed to say critical things about them. They are not, however, solely responsible for humanity’s immoral follies. That, I suspect, is just irredeemable idiocy. Or competition for survival. Or power. Or something. What do I know?

*Then my second question is about Aristotle and Virtue ethics. As you said he was famously the teacher of Alexander the great. I was wondering did he find his teachings successful in Alexanders case, since Alexander after all killed one of his close friends and burned down a city while drunk, and had a violent impulsive temper. I was wondering how do you think Aristotle found the multiple wars donned by Alexander to sit within his virtue ethics?*

Funny that, I have never thought about this. An obvious question. How stupid of me. – Well, anyway, the answers seems to be that although Alexander became fond of Homer and carried his works given by Aristotle with him on his war campaigns, Aristotle was not satisfied with the practical results of his ethics teaching. One net source has it that he and his followers “condemned the conqueror as a cruel and capricious tyrant.” Another has it that they saw Alexander as the destroyer of Athenian democracy. – So, as far as learning outcomes are concerned, we cannot give Aristotle very high marks here. ;)

**Sofia:**

*Is it possible in practice to make the laws comply with the current moral standard of society? because it is always evolving and it is necessary to be up to date with the ideals of people, which on the other hand are always different (changing and contrary between one person and another)*

It would, I think, be nearly possible to keep laws up to date with society’s moral standards. There are, however, questions. A society does not always have a unified moral standard, as you point out. We could go for the “lowest common denominator” – say, the ground rules of liberal democracy – or we could legislate according to the majority’s (or the most vocal moral minority’s) will. – We should also consider the timing. Some say that law should be a progressive force and lead the way to better moral standards in society. Others reply that, on the contrary, law should be slow to change, so as to give people time to adjust to change. Both arguments have been used, for instance, in debating laws concerning same-sex relationships.