

# How different moral perspectives have influenced

Experience, Human Nature



The essence of morality is ‘concerned with the principles or rules of rights and wrong or conforming to standards based on those principles’ (Dictionary.com). However differing models for living morally, resulting from the diversity of experience, will conflict in how they determine what these principles are. Thus, these ethical frameworks will hold different conceptions of ethical practice and what services such as Youth and Community work should deliver.

This essay will attempt to show the importance of understanding how different moral perspectives have influenced the practice of Youth and Community work, before describing three contending ethical frameworks of deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics; assessing under what conditions, circumstances or criteria would each of these view these practices as a moral activity. Morality A moral principle is essentially one that distinguishes between right and wrong behaviour.

When someone holds a coherent and compatible set of moral principles it can be considered an ethical framework, which provides the foundation for how people understand or explain social reality. Thus, it is the basis from which they choose to conduct their lives and interact with others. Such a ‘code’ will be constructed from, and determined by all manner of life experiences, social environments and circumstances, and therefore will vary greatly. Some of the most common factors that contribute towards an ethical framework are personal or religious beliefs and cultural standards.

The nature of Youth and Community work entails working closely with in both individual and group settings, where diversity of these moral values is

inevitable. Different moral perspectives will necessarily emphasise different roles and purposes for these projects and organisations. As informal educators, there are no 'ready-made guidelines' on what constitutes good and bad practice; instead practitioners will have a set of 'core values' that they strive towards (Jefferies and Smith 2005).

However, it is important, to understand different conceptions of what moral practice entails in order to achieve social inclusion, develop practice and interpersonal skills. Deontology Blackburn argues these premises of a deontological approach to morality 'take us to thoughts about what is due, they take us to demands' (2001: 60). The framework asserts that social reality is objective and the capacity for human autonomy is limited by 'the recurring pattern of human behaviour [that] determines the nature of human action' (Parker, 2000: 125).

Thus, the perspective is concerned with notions of justice, rights and 'duty' or responsibility (Blackburn 2001: 88) to act in accordance with rules, as the rightness of an action is inherent and independent of the consequences it brings about. To illustrate, the killing of an innocent man would be wrong because he is innocent, not because of the pain and sense of loss that his loved ones will experience. This concept can be primarily accredited to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, a key figure in the development of early deontological thought.

As a rationalist, Kant argued that the moral value of human behaviour can be revealed 'a priori' or through pure intellectual reason. Thus, as these principles are theoretically available to all, regardless of personal

circumstance, they must have a universal applicability, which leads Kant to an essential condition for moral action, the categorical imperative: ' Act only on the maxim whereby thou can at the same time wish it to become a universal law. ' (Kant [1785] 2003: 6) Taylor (1975) contends that for this each individual would treat others as ends, rather than a means and that it must be ' self-imposed by the will of each person'.

However the ' interest' ethics of Machiavelli, Hobbs and Burke also accommodate power as an inevitable factor of human interaction and organisation. They argue that the nature of humanity is inherently weak and immoral, claiming that governing minority is required in order to maintain the social structure and order. Therefore a hierarchical system of control where policies of institutions cohere is the most appropriate method in assuring the smooth running of society and the moral development and self control of its citizens.

Agents accept the legitimacy of the elite as their moral authority 'ought to be greater than that of any or all the subjects' (Hobbes [1651] 1996: 128). In line with this perspective, deontologists would measure all human activity against its capacity for the common good of society, adopting a conservative position regarding community initiatives and actively oppose those Youth and Community organisations that aim to bring about radical change, as this would upset established social and legal structures causing social unrest and uncertainty (Sanderson et al 2006).

Professional workers would ideally be upstanding members of society, holding a higher level of ethical awareness than citizens as they are in a

position of power. Workers would be expected to adhere to an externally set code of practice as this was their duty owed to the service user, the profession and the employing organisation (Banks 2006: 125). These would be prescribed by institutions, meaning an intrinsic duty to instil the values of the state in the service users they worked with encouraging them to fall in line with the status quo.

Hence projects aiming to reduce young offence, drug addiction or teenage pregnancy would all be morally viable as they emphasise conformity rather than value deviation. Consequentialism Consequentialism is a system of ethics distinguishes right from wrong action purely on the basis of the effects it has: 'The moral value of any action always lies in its consequences, and it is by reference to these consequences that actions, and indeed such things as institutions, law and practices are to be justified if they can be justified at all' (Smart and Williams 1973: 79).

Social reality is maintained objective and scientifically explainable, however the individual is regarded as autonomous and independent and thus is able to make rational speculations as to whether an action will lead to good or ill. The approach adheres with the utilitarian principle of striving for the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' (Blackburn 2001: 86), where a moral action involves maximising the good outcomes for all those involved. Happiness' corresponds to different types of hedonism, where pleasure and pain are the cardinal measures of good and bad; as John Stewart Mill argues 'desiring a thing and finding it pleasant are one and the same thing' (Blackburn 2001: 88). Within the doctrine there are several contending

models; act utilitarianism involves assessing the consequences of every individual act, whereas rule utilitarianism involves setting laws that adhere with this principle.

Finally, preference utilitarianism In addition, the perspective adheres to Machiavelli's claim that humans are naturally wicked and selfish ([1518] 1969: 111–12). Thus a key notion in this is that as a population will be motivated by ambitions, desires and self-interest, so to maintain social order at least some of these must appear achievable. Advocates of this model therefore maintain that political liberty and economic freedom available through a democratic system and a competitive free market provide adequate level of civil and personal rights, resulting in pleasure, welfare and prosperity for all citizens.

Thus, the market interests of individuals would take priority over local community agendas as ultimately security and freedom and therefore happiness, are available through the cultivation of material wealth (Sanderson et al: 2006). Therefore, members holding this perspective would oppose community imperatives that hindered or constrained opportunities to make profit for self-interested groups of individuals.

For them, engaging with community would be encouraged but for the purpose of forming relationships that were mutually beneficial to the market interest of those individuals involved. Thus, moral Youth and Community work would provide services for the public good. As the framework is evaluates morality on the basis of consequences, the use of measurable

targets and outputs is justified in order to be able to assess if an agency is delivering effective practice. Virtue Ethics

It has been argued that these principle-based models place too much emphasis on specific actions (Banks 2006; 54). Both the previous theories focus on the concept of objective morality which is essentially concerned with setting a base line for ethics where individuals are simply required to meet this level to act morally. Conversely, Virtue based ethics accommodates takes a far more optimistic view of human nature than deontology or consequentialism, choosing to focus on the characteristics of the agent rather than behaviours.

Virtues can be described as idealised goals or aspirations for good conduct which give direction for ethical human behaviour and provide an alternative and superior motivation than simply instinct. Aristotle, the founder of virtue theory, argued that all experiences were equal in that every individual had the capacity to infer virtues from their subjective experience. In support, Tam (1998: 19) has explained that this universal potential for any individual to 'behave morally' means that that community values, goals and duties are not things to be defined by elite.

Banks has further argued that regulations are 'becoming increasingly irrelevant [as they are based on] ...professionals' definition of values without consultation with service users'. The perspective emphasises a theme of natural behaviour aiming to align social norms with virtuous principles, however Aristotle maintained the need for laws to effectively allow humans to move progressively towards these, where education and practice can

support the cultivating of virtue through the 'supreme human capacity' of reason (Blackburn 2001: 96).

As virtue ethics does not consider the consequences of an action, there is no specified standard for any individual to objectively achieve. Instead, the focus is on the 'social nature of the self' (Blackburn 2001: 97), where it is the community member's responsibility to find agreed meanings of subjective concepts of rightness through interaction and debate with others, developing a collective understanding of social reality.

Hence, moral relativity between groups is accommodated within virtue ethics, as negotiation of community agendas will inevitably vary.

Furthermore, the suggested selfish or self-interested nature of humanity proposed by the previous two doctrines can be surpassed due to this collective nature and process of developing one's morality, where happiness or flourishing is achieved through upholding these values.

With respects to Youth and Community work, this moral framework would focus on training and cultivating the appropriate virtues required for the job, maintaining that, while actions are more reliable and measurable, it is also of vital importance that professionals display certain traits in character. Thus, workers would be accountable not for specific outputs, rather if they did not act as a virtuous worker would. Banks (2006: 55) has suggested typical virtues of a worker would include courage, integrity, honesty and loyalty; however this is far from exhaustive.



Strong parallels can be drawn between the 'core values' of Youth and Community work and concept of professional virtues, thus, these would be regarded with particular importance. The model also justifies a professional community where these values would be debated and negotiated in order to maintain a consensus code of ethics. Finally the approach would support the progressive and continuous education and rehabilitation of 'deviant' community members, unless this is unachievable, in the case of psychopaths for example.

## **References**

<http://www.infed.org/foundations/w-inf7.htm>