

Applying Conventionalism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will look at the relationship between our everyday ethical views and conventionalism. We will also consider how conventionalism can be applied to certain ethical issues. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Agreement with Everyday Morality

To begin with, recall that conventionalism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that what is good is determined relative to a society, convention, or culture. On this account, no society or culture is better than another.

Sometimes our intuitive or everyday views about right and wrong match up with what the conventionalist says about morality.

➤ **EXAMPLE** A conventionalist in just about any culture will say that cannibalism is generally wrong. The impermissibility of cannibalism makes sense to most of us.

Another common ethical view is that health care of some kind is needed in any well-functioning society. A conventionalist will see that most cultures find health care beneficial and thus say it is morally desirable.

2. Disagreement with Everyday Morality

Much of what you find intuitively right or wrong is learned from the society you're brought up in. Thus, if you're a conventionalist, your intuitions are likely to match up with the ethical evaluations you make with this theory.

➤ **EXAMPLE** Consider the overlap of intuitions and conventions on the issue of workplace interaction between men and women.

WORKPLACE INTERACTION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

If you're an American, you're likely to be intuitively neutral about this.

Since it is the norm in America, a conventionalist will say it's permissible.



If you're Saudi Arabian, you're likely to be intuitively against this.

Since it's widely rejected in Saudi Arabia, a conventionalist will say it's impermissible.

It should be noted that a Saudi Arabian might find the impermissibility of men and women interacting in the workplace counterintuitive. In this case they will be in disagreement with the conventionalist in their own country, but in agreement with the conventionalist in America.

There are other ways that your moral intuitions might go against the conventionalist. For instance, your views might not fit with how your own society works.

➔ EXAMPLE Most American's intuitively think child labor is wrong. But since cheap clothing, for instance, is supplied to this country through the exploitation of child labor, a conventionalist will say that it is morally permissible.

3. Some Uncertain Cases

Sometimes it is not clear whether or not our everyday moral views fit with the conventionalist. This is sometimes due to the fact that there isn't a consensus on an issue in a particular society.

➔ EXAMPLE In Britain, as in many countries, there is a split between those who think eating meat is wrong, and those who think it isn't wrong. Therefore, conventionalism cannot come up with a clear answer on whether or not eating meat is impermissible in places such as Britain.

Another issue that divides a population is the use of recreational drugs.

➔ EXAMPLE People from many countries think that some recreational drugs are permissible, as long as people are adequately educated about them. Other people think that recreational drugs lead to other, more damaging, behaviors, and are therefore impermissible.

Here, there is a conflict between those who think drugs are bad for society and those who think they do not necessarily cause harm to society. For the conventionalist, then, it is undecided as to whether it is permissible or impermissible.

4. Topics in Applied Ethics

Philosophers working in ethics often try to apply ethical theories to specific situations. Let's consider how conventionalists might apply their ethics to the following issues (assuming they are American).

1. The moral permissibility of damaging the environment
2. The moral permissibility of abortion
3. The moral permissibility of contraception

Here are the positions that conventionalists takes on these issues.

Conventionalism and Applied Ethics	
Issue	Position
Environment	People disagree about whether or not non-human nature has a moral status. Therefore, a conventionalist would give an uncertain result.
Abortion	People are divided over this. Some think it is acceptable, others think it is unacceptable. A conventionalist would give an uncertain result.
Contraception	Most people think the use of contraception is acceptable. A conventionalist would therefore say it is permissible.

If you disagree with the judgments based on what is accepted or what contributes to the functioning of a society, then you may not think conventionalism is the best ethical theory.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by seeing how conventionalism can be in **agreement with everyday morality**, and then how it can be in **disagreement with everyday morality**. We saw that ethics based on society or culture sometimes fits with our common judgments, and sometimes does not.

Then we looked at **some uncertain cases** where conventionalism couldn't give clear evaluations because of a lack of consensus among people in a particular place. Finally, some **topics in applied ethics** were considered from the perspective of conventionalism.

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