

Commitments of Conventionalism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will focus on the types of evaluations a conventionalist will make. You will also have a go at using this ethical theory by evaluating a situation yourself. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Conventionalism

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.

Like any theory of ethics, this can help you evaluate actions. If you were to use this theory, then you would evaluate actions according to what is normally accepted in your culture or society.

In the next section we will look at the various ways a conventionalist can evaluate actions. But before doing so, let's remind ourselves of the terms that ethical theorists use to evaluate actions.

PERMISSIBLE

An action that is **not** wrong to perform

- OBLIGATORY
An action that must be performed (i.e. that is wrong not to perform)
- NEUTRAL
An action that is neither right nor wrong to perform
- SUPEREROGATORY
An action that morally exceeds what is obligatory

IMPERMISSIBLE An action that **is** wrong to perform

2. Permissibility and Impermissibility in Conventionalism

For a conventionalist, something is permissible if a culture or society does not forbid it. For instance, most people in the United States are allowed to own guns. A conventionalist will say that it is thus morally permissible to own guns if you live in America. There are standards specific to all different societies.

➞ EXAMPLE Divorce is almost wholly accepted in many places, such as the United States, France, Britain, and Spain. Since most people in these societies do not find divorce unacceptable, the conventionalist will say that it is morally permissible in those places.

What is impermissible for a conventionalist is anything that most people in a society consider to be unacceptable.

➞ EXAMPLE Most people in the United States think extramarital affairs are unacceptable. Thus, if you are an American conventionalist, you must think that extramarital affairs are morally impermissible.

If we turn to a different topic, say, the death penalty, it is considered unacceptable by the vast majority of Europe, but widely accepted in places such as the Middle East and the United States. Thus a conventionalist will say that the death penalty is morally impermissible in Europe, but permissible in certain parts of the United States and the Middle East.

3. Types of Permissibility in Conventionalism

Now we will look at various examples of neutral, obligatory, and supererogatory actions based on conventionalism. First of all, let's take the example of fertility.

➞ EXAMPLE Countries with a Christian culture, such as Nigeria, Brazil, and the United States, tend to think having children is your duty. A conventionalist will say that it is morally obligatory to have children in those communities that have these views.

By contrast, more secular countries, such as France or the Czech Republic, are neutral about having children. That is, it is neither right nor wrong.

Another issue that's related to religion is clothing. Consider the following examples.

HEAD-DRESS IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES

In Egypt it is the norm for women to wear headscarves.

Conventionalism would say that it is obligatory in Egypt.



In Jordan and Lebanon some do, and some don't, wear headscarves.

Conventionalism would say that it is neutral in these places.



DID YOU KNOW

Many predominantly Muslim countries, such as Syria or Tunisia, have actually banned the use of the hijab (a garment that covers the hair and chest) in public places, such as universities and government buildings.

Thus a conventionalist will say that this is actually impermissible in these places.

Now let's look at some supererogatory actions. In the United States it is common for grandparents and other older members of the family to move into care institutions. If you decide to do the care work yourself, in your own home, then many people would think you've gone above and beyond what is morally required of you.

In other countries, such as Mexico, this is actually the norm. In this case, the conventionalist will say that keeping your grandparents at home is obligatory.

Another example of a supererogatory action is giving everything you have to charity. Although charity is common in many countries, there is no society in which it is normal for its members to give everything to those in the world that need it most. Thus it is supererogatory to do so.

4. Application of Conventionalism

Now that you have seen how ethical evaluations can be based on conventions, you can think about using this in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about how you would evaluate each action if you were a conventionalist.



TRY IT

IMAGINE YOU'RE AN OLYMPIC ATHLETE

You train hard
and qualify for
the Olympic
games.



You want the gold,
but you take
performance
enhancing drugs
because you believe
you need them to
get an advantage
over your
competitors.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. The act of becoming an athlete would be neutral since it is neither right nor wrong by the standards of society.
2. The act of training hard to qualify for the Olympics is supererogatory since it goes beyond any duty you have.
3. The act of using performance enhancing drugs is seen as unacceptable for Olympic athletes, therefore it is impermissible from a conventionalist perspective.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of conventionalism** and the terms for evaluating actions. Then we saw some examples of **permissibility and impermissibility in conventionalism**, before looking in more detail at **the types of permissibility in conventionalism**, including examples of obligatory, neutral, and supererogatory actions. Finally, an **application of conventionalism** in a specific situation was considered, and the evaluation of the various actions given.

Source: Head dress image, public domain, <http://bit.ly/2b9p4BA>; Runners image, public domain, <http://bit.ly/2b9LRdK>