

Conventionalism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin to look at a family of relativist ethical theories called conventionalism, and see how it ties ethical evaluations to the societies in which they belong. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introduction to Conventionalism](#)
2. [Conventionalism in Practice](#)

1. Introduction to Conventionalism

To begin with, recall that all ethical theories are either objectivist or relativist. This means that all ethical theories must be committed to one of two things: either they say that there are some ethical evaluations that everyone must recognize as true, or they reject this and say there are no ethical evaluations that everyone must recognize as true.

Conventionalism belongs to the latter.

Now, there are lots of different ways you could say that goodness is relative to society or culture. For instance, you might think that you can determine what is good by looking at what is useful for society.

➔ **EXAMPLE** You might point to empirical research that says your society functions better when there is a more even distribution of wealth. You would offer this as what is good not because you think it's nice to help the underprivileged, but because it's best for your society overall.

By contrast, you might think that you don't need to look at what is useful to society to find out what is good, but simply look to what is just accepted by the people of a culture.

➔ **EXAMPLE** You might point to the fact that most people in your culture think it's fine for some people to have much more than they need, while others struggle to get by. You could then say that uneven distribution of wealth is good because it is largely accepted.

As you can see, conventionalism can produce quite different ethical positions. For this reason, conventionalism is a family of theories. All the members of this family say that the good is relative to a specific group, but they can do so in different ways.

TERM TO KNOW

Conventionalism

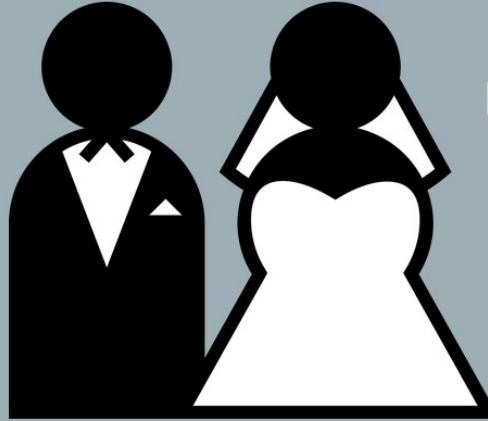
A relativist theory of ethics that maintains that what is good is determined relative to a society, convention, or culture.

2. Conventionalism in Practice

Since conventionalism rejects universal ethical truths, it holds that there are no standards that could be used to compare two different societies or cultures.

FOR EXAMPLE, CONSIDER CONVENTIONALIST EVALUATIONS OF MARRIAGE

In some cultures a marital union is arranged by, for example, the family of those who are to be married



In some cultures a marital union is chosen by those who are to be married

Since both practices are right within their own cultures, but not across cultures, this shows that conventionalism says that no society or culture is better than any other. They all have the same claim to morality, but only within their own culture. And this shows you that this ethical theory isn't objectivist.

Many ethical theories don't suppose there are universal ethical truths, but only conventionalism says that goodness is determined by society or culture. There are many more examples of this. For instance, it is unacceptable to address people in authority with their given or first names in various cultures, but this isn't the case in others. Also consider the following example.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF CULTURALLY RELATIVE STANDARDS: ALCOHOL USE

Some cultures accept social alcohol consumption



Some cultures reject social alcohol consumption

It should be noted that you can agree that different cultures have different values without committing yourself to conventionalism. You don't have to say that every culture's practices are right in order to respect the differences between cultures. You can simply suspend your judgment. Doing so can generate tolerance of difference and help communication and understanding between cultures.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with an **introduction to conventionalism**, showing that it is a form of relativism that can belong to many different ethical theories. Then we considered various examples of **conventionalism in practice**, in order to see more clearly how it associates goodness with societies and therefore can't be objectivist.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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