

Ethics of Leadership

Moral Conventionalism

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal", pp. 231–239.
- Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword", pp. 239–244.
- Ciulla, "Case: The Oil Rig", pp. 263–265.

Background

Moral relativism is the position denying that there are objective and universal moral values, norms, and principles that apply to all people everywhere. Instead, moral relativism affirms that whether or not it is morally right for a person to act in a certain way depends on (is relative to) either cultural or individual acceptance. There are thus two versions of moral relativism:

1. **Moral conventionalism**, which argues that morality is a matter of social/cultural acceptance because morality is solely determined by one's own society/culture, and
2. **Moral subjectivism**, which argues that morality is a matter of individual acceptance because morality is solely determined by one's own personal reactions or feelings.

In these readings, Ruth Benedict presents data from her anthropological research on Native American tribal customs from which she draws her conclusion that moral conventionalism is correct. Mary Midgley, meanwhile, rejects moral conventionalism, which she calls "moral isolationism", because it entails some unappealing consequences. Finally, Joanne Ciulla presents an imagined case study where the different moral practices of different cultures is relevant for the leaders of multinational organizations. (We will address moral subjectivism next class.)

Questions

1. What does Ruth Benedict mean by saying that "morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits" (p. 238)? How does she justify this claim?
2. Mary Midgley claims that "moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning" (p. 241). How does she justify this claim? Why does Midgley believe that this is sufficient reason for rejecting moral isolationism?
3. According to Benedict, why can't I, as an American, criticize the be-reavement traditions of the Kwakiutl or the *tsujigiri* of feudal Japanese Samurai? Why does Midgley believe it is neither intolerant nor disrespectful for me, as an American, to criticize these foreign practices? On Midgley's account, what is needed for such criticism to show that I took the Kwakiutl and Samurai quite seriously without prejudice? (To answer this last question, consider how Midgley describes a conversation between a critic of *tsujigiri* and a defender of it.)
4. How might Benedict and Midgley each advise the Stratton Oil CEO in Joanne Ciulla's case study about the living and social arrangements on the oil rig? That is, what would each thinker say about what moral standards the CEO should apply in judging the best arrangements for the employees? If you were the CEO, should you use your own country's moral standards or defer to those of the host nation?
5. Given that they reach different conclusions, Benedict and Midgley cannot both be right. While both share some of the same premises (e.g., that different cultures have different customs), where exactly in their respective arguments do they disagree? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?