

**LECTURERS AND NORMATIVE ETHICAL THEORIES:
A SURVEY OF UITM LECTURERS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to discuss several normative ethical theories, namely teleological (consequences) and deontological (duties) theories and to find out how these theories apply to the teaching staff in UiTM Kampus Jengka. The former theories state the right decision is the one that produces the greatest benefits to the greatest number of people. The latter theories determine right or wrong decision or action by looking at the intention of the particular act. A questionnaire contains five questions and six statements was used. The questionnaires were distributed to half of the total population; a hundred and forty lecturers were selected at random. Only one third of the respondents successfully completed and returned the questionnaires. Statistical Package for Social Science was used to analyse the responses. Simple descriptive tables were used in the data analysis. This survey found out that majority of respondents (71 %) gave the most accurate definition of ethics. About sixty-five percent of the total respondents follow deontological theories. This suggests that more lecturers put higher considerations to the good intention in making the right decision. This is supported by the other findings that show many respondents agree to obey moral values such as not to deceive people, not to lie and to keep promises at all times. Besides, many respondents agree that we should respect the right of others. Furthermore, almost all respondents think that the employer should not interfere into his/her employees' private life and everybody should be treated equally except if he/she deserves differently.

Keywords : ethics, theory

INTRODUCTION

We always hear or see people arguing when confronted with situations that have moral and ethical implications, be it about the latest national issue or any reported news. Different people look at the issue at hand differently in terms of which individuals or groups will be affected and how, or what solutions or courses of actions are available or appropriate for dealing with the situation. What are the reasons for these differences? Some people may agree that it may be due to the differences in the individual concepts of fairness and different opinions about the right action to take in particular situation. It is interesting if we can look at several ethical theories as a guide to explain such differences. There is no doubt that ethics have become very important nowadays, especially after major corporation collapses such Enron and WorldCom in the US and On-Tel in Australia.

Ethics are most importantly relevant in organizations and professions. All professions set up rules or code of conduct that define what is ethical behaviour for members of the profession. The accounting profession for example, has a Code of Professional Conduct that guides the behaviour of accounting professionals, and Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA) monitors the actions of its professional members to ensure that they are in compliance with the By-Laws. Past studies draw several methods or theories of ethical behaviour that can steer the analysis of ethical issues. For example, Mintz had suggested three methods or theories for analyzing ethical issues in accounting. These theories are (1) utilitarianism (2) a right-based approach, and (3) a justice-based approach.

What is ethic?

Ethic refers to a system or code of conduct based on moral duties and obligations that point out how an individual should behave (William, 2000). Sociologist Raymond Baumhart conducted a famous survey of business people in the early 1970s by asking them 'What does ethics mean to you?' The responses he obtained among others equate ethics with feelings, religious belief, laws and regulations and the standards of behaviour society accept. However, to think so may be misleading. Actions based on one's feeling may sometimes be intuitive or unsound, and can deviate from doing what is ethical. On the other hand, while religion can set high ethical standards and motivates good behaviour, ethics cannot be confined to religion or religious belief alone. Being ethical is not the same as following the laws. Laws, like feelings, can deviate from what is ethical. Changes in law in response to society's needs may not necessarily be on the ethical basis. Furthermore, being ethical is not the same as doing 'whatever society accepts'. Standard of behaviour in society can deviate from what is ethical. Homosexual may be socially accepted in western world as shown by the recent initiative by efforts to build separate schools for gays and lesbians in New York, but in most countries being gays or lesbians are considered immoral and

socially unaccepted and if they are employed, they are called unethical employees.

Alternatively, we can define ethics as a set of well-based standards of right and wrong that provide a framework of human behaviour (CPA(Australia) Study-Pack, 2003). It supports the pursuit of moral values and standards for the individual, his/her relationship with others and society and for particular segment of society such as professional organizations . They are usually expressed in terms of rights, obligations, responsibilities, freedom, benefits to society, justice, fairness and specific virtues like honesty and etc. However, ethical standards tend to change with circumstances. Thus, a continuous effort of studying our moral values, an awareness of changes in our surrounding, the ability to identify the right choice of actions and striving to monitor a continuous internalizing process of improvement are required to ensure the standards are reasonable and well-founded.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER

The aim of this paper is to discuss several normative theories of ethics and to find out which theory applies to the majority of academic staff of UiTM Pahang.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire is used to gather data. The questionnaire contains eleven questions. Three questions are for demographic data, i.e. faculty, gender and the number of teaching years with UiTM. The next question requires respondent to select his/her best definition of ethics. The remaining seven questions ask for specific answer that reflects which normative theory he/she follows. The questionnaires were distributed to one hundred and forty lecturers that represent half of the total population.

The respondents are lecturers of UiTM Kampus Jengka. The questionnaires were distributed through their pigeonholes. Only forty-six questionnaires (response rate of 33%) were returned of which forty-five questionnaires were suitable for the data analysis. One questionnaire was incomplete because the respondent did not state his/her faculty, and thus, it was rejected.

The Statistical Package For Social Science (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. To assist further analyses, the respondents were grouped into two groups, science and social science. The responses to each question were compared between the two groups.

THE NORMATIVE ETHICAL THEORIES

There are two theories, (1) Teleological (consequences) and (2) Deontological (Duties). Both are normative ethical theories. A normative theory proposes a course of action that is usually represented by a value judgment on what 'should' or 'ought' to happen or to be done. What is happening or being practised is a descriptive theory, for example each lecturer of UiTM is supposed to have 38.5 working hours per week. To determine whether this practice is appropriate or not is a normative theory. In this context, we may look at what should be the standard working hours for academicians as they are also involved with other work like research, writing for seminar/forum/books and consultation. Normative theories establish principles guiding individuals on how they should behave. They propose principles for distinguishing right from wrong by establishing a norm or standard of correct behaviour that should be followed at all times. How do these theories differ shall be discussed in the following sections.

Teleological Theories

Let us first look at what teleological theories are all about. These theories determine right or wrong, or good from bad based solely on the results or consequences of the decision or action. Generally, if the benefits of a proposed action outweigh the costs, the decision or action is considered morally correct. Conversely, if the harms outweigh the benefits, the decision or action is considered morally wrong. The Cost and Benefit Analysis is a good example of application of a teleological theory where the expected benefits of a particular course of action are weighed against its expected cost. The action is accepted if the expected benefits exceed expected costs. The benefits and costs here include both tangible and psychological outcomes. Several examples of intangible benefits are happiness, pleasure, health, life, satisfaction and knowledge. Likewise 'cost' or harm stands for pain, sickness, death, dissatisfaction, ignorance and sadness.

The next question now is from whose perspective should the consequences be evaluated? Is it the consequences to the decision maker or the consequences to those who are affected by the decision? This issue will be discussed by examining the three main teleological theories: ethical egoism, restricted egoism and utilitarianism.

Ethical Egoism

If a person evaluates the rightness of a proposed action by choosing a course of action that maximizes the net positive benefits to him/herself, he/she is an ethical egoist. For an egoist, moral rules of behaviour, obligations and consequences for other people are immaterial. All that matter is whether or not an action is in the self-interest of the individual or a group of people or an organization. For

example, working late and volunteering to work on weekends in the hope of being noticed by employer for job promotion is an act of self-interest.

Restricted Ethical Egoism

To encourage a healthy competition, the pursuit of self-interest should be more constrained by the law and conventions of fair play. If people ignore rules and regulations to maximize self-interest, these people will disadvantage others. Therefore, self-interest is not allowed to function unchecked by the law or the dictates of what is considered to be just competition. This will sanction corporate self-interest; it encourages competitions, leads to the maximization of utility and is in the interest of society as a whole.

Utilitarianism

According to Bentham (1748-1832) this theory, which determines good from bad, or right from wrong is an act or decision that produces the most benefit to the greatest number of people. Likewise, if harm is unavoidable, the right course of action is one that minimizes harm to the greatest number of people. If this theory is used as a guiding principle for resolving conflict, the ethical option is the one that produces the best overall consequences for everyone concerned. There are two important aspects considered, first, benefits must outweigh harms. Second, a majority of people must be better off.

DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES

Unlike teleological theories, a deontologist would assert that there are more important considerations than outcomes. In fact, it is the intention of the act itself that is more important than the results of an act. A deontologist is, therefore, bound by a duty to obey moral rules of right or wrong that are generally based on principles of justice and respecting individuals' rights. Moral rules are in general universal laws prescribed for everyone and ought to be followed by everyone. A moral rule is one that would be best for all if everyone abides by it regardless of the circumstances or consequences. For example, an accountant must always be truthful despite the harm it may bring to him or her and others, for doing otherwise would be unethical.

Kant (1724-1804) contributed a lot to the development of this theory. His ethical theory is based on the notion of good will. By 'will' he meant the reasons that a person had for his or her actions. According to Kant, persons of good will are motivated by a sense of duty to do the right thing. Thus, what is important to a deontologist is the intention to do the 'right thing', or the motivation to behave appropriately flowing from a sense of duty. The motive of the action is far more significant than the action itself or its consequences. Acting from self-interest or

emotion rather than a sense of duty is not an appropriate motive for a moral action. Although the benefits that result from an act may be the same irrespective of the motive, it is the desire to do the right thing from its own sake that makes it an act of moral worth, and that is what differentiates it from an act of self-interest. Therefore actions are right not because of their benefits but because of the nature of the actions or the rule from which they derive.

What is meant by a sense of duty to do the right thing? Kant explained this by the notion of universalisation. A sense of duty to do the right thing is to have respect for moral principles, or rules that have the strength of universal rule. A universal rule or maxim is one that should be followed at all times. Kant's definition of ethics contends that no matter what the consequences are, it cannot justify a person breaking a moral rule. For example, Kant argued that not to lie under any circumstances and always to keep one's promises can be universalized because by not doing so would be a self-confounding argument. In other words, if you feel it is acceptable to lie and break promises, upon applying the rule of universalisation it must be acceptable for others to lie and break promises. If it is so, we cannot trust anyone and this could be very detrimental to the society.

FINDINGS

The summary of demographic findings is illustrated in Table 1 below:

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Science	23	51
Social Science	22	49
Total	45	100
Male	21	47
Female	24	53
Total	45	100
Teaching years in UiTM:		
Less than 2 years	12	27
2 to 5 years	15	33
5 to 10 years	9	20
More than 10 years	9	20
Total	45	100

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

Referring to Table 1, the number of returned questionnaires meet the minimum sampling size (n=30) and the respondents are almost equally divided into science and social science lecturers. This survey successfully covers both science and social science academics in UiTM Kampus Jengka. The number of female respondents exceed the opposite gender by three, that is fifty-three percent of lecturers participated in this survey were female lecturers. This is not surprising as the actual number of female lecturers outnumbers male lecturers. Majority of respondents are young lecturers who have been teaching in UiTM between two to five years. Lecturers who have been teaching in UiTM for more than ten years are twenty percent of the total respondents.

How do lecturers define ethics?

It is not surprising to find out that this survey suggests majority (about 71 %) of lecturers gave the best definition for ethics, that is, they define ethics as a set of well-based standards of right and wrong that provide a framework of human behaviour. This is a very promising finding that shows the lecturers do have a reasonable knowledge about ethics. Very few lecturers define ethics as something related to feeling, religion beliefs, laws and regulations and the standard of behaviour society accept.

Which ethical theory applies to lecturers?

A majority of respondents are deontologist (64.4%). This suggests that these lecturers consider intentions as more important than the consequences in deciding whether the action is right or wrong. It is quite practical to think so as consequences are future events and, therefore, they are very difficult to measure. On the other hand, the remaining respondents (35.6%) follow teleological theories. As it was stated earlier, these theories determine right from wrong based on the consequences of the proposed action. Besides that, this survey also attempts to gather responses about from whose perspective the consequences are to be evaluated, either the decision maker or to those who are affected by the decision. The survey shows that 28.9 % of respondents apply utilitarian theories where the theories state that an act is right if it gives the greatest benefits to the majority of people or if harm is inevitable, the action that minimizes harm to the greatest number of people is considered right. Not many respondents are restricted egoists (6.7 %) who choose action that gives them the most benefit but they put a limit to it by obeying the convention of fair play, rules and the legal system.

Is obeying moral values a must in all situations?

A third of the total respondents agree that everyone must always obey moral values even if doing so will produce more harms than good to others. A majority of them are science lecturers. This shows that there are lecturers who consider moral values are of high importance, which must be followed in any

circumstances. It is good to know that some lecturers think moral values is not an option but a must at all times. These lecturers believe that they must always be truthful despite harm it may bring to him or her and others, for doing otherwise would be unethical. This suggests that there are academics who not only convey knowledge but also emphasize on the importance of good values to students.

The remaining respondents disagree that everyone must always obey moral values even if by doing so will produce more harms than good to others. Moral values should always be upheld but this finding suggests that some people may think that there are always exceptions, particularly if it will produce more harm than benefits to others.

Is it a duty not to deceive people?

It is a duty to treat every individual as a product and not instrumentally as a mean to an end (Kant). We should not manipulate people to achieve our own goals. Not to deceive people is an example of this act and this survey found out that a majority of the respondents (96 %) of which all twenty-three respondents of science lecturers agree that it is a duty not to deceive people. Only two of the respondents, both from social science lecturers, think otherwise.

Is it wrong for a boss to interfere into employee's personal life?

According to the theory of right, all people have the right to freedom of choice, that is, to live their lives as they choose as evidenced by two-third of the respondents who agree that it is wrong for a boss to interfere into employee's personal life. Any investigation by the employer into these private matters is an intrusion into one's privacy. Therefore, no employer is allowed to inquire into the employee's personal life unless for special reasons or facts that directly interfere with the employee's job performance.

Should all individuals be given equal treatments? Do you deserve more rewards if you work harder than others?

Eighty percent of the total respondents agree that all individuals should be treated equally. The number of respondents agrees that people deserve more rewards if they work harder is slightly less (76%). This support Aristotle's view that individual should be treated the same unless differences exist that require unequal treatment.

Should everyone keep his/her promise?

Every respondent agrees that everyone should keep his/her promise. A sense of duty to do the right thing is to have respect for moral principles or rules that have strengths of universal law (Kant). For example, keeping our words is very

important to ensure that we agree to meet our commitments. Otherwise, no one can be trusted and without this trust in fellow human being, we will live in chaos.

CONCLUSION

Generally, if we may imply the findings of this survey to teaching staff at UiTM Kampus Jengka, we may find that the majority of the lecturers have a sound knowledge of what ethics is all about. The awareness of ethic is quite good. Many lecturers know that ethics are not all about rules and regulations, religious beliefs and moral values but are a set of well-based standards of right and wrong that provide a framework for human behaviour.

This survey looks at two main normative ethical theories, teleological (consequences) and deontological (duties) and it shows that more than half of the lecturers follow deontological theories. In addition, a sense of duty or good intentions plays a vital role in determining a right from wrong action or decision. This is supported by answers given by the respondents to specific questions or statements that indicate that the majority of them will always agree that good intentions and moral principles are very important in making decision. Almost all respondents agree that we must always keep our promises and we should not lie to others and we should be treated equally unless we deserve more.

It is hoped that this paper would give useful insights or input on how the normative ethical theories apply to academics, particularly on how they determine a right action or decision. However, there are several limitations to the study, as it does not cater for people who follow both teleological (consequences) and deontological (duties) theories. More research on ethics may be carried out in future such as a study on individual ethical behaviour and factors affecting moral development.

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