

A brief guide to what normative means.

Normative vs. descriptive

The word "normative" is all about the 'shoulds' and 'ought tos' of life. It's a lens through which we view the world not as it is (that would be "descriptive"), but as we believe it should be, based on our values, ethics, and standards.

The distinction between normative and descriptive perspectives is crucial in discussions about social entrepreneurship because it separates what is happening from what activists, scholars, and entrepreneurs believe should happen. Imagine we're analyzing the landscape of social enterprises. A descriptive statement would look something like this: "Many social enterprises focus on environmental sustainability by recycling waste materials to create new products." Now, let's shift gears to a normative statement within the same context: "Social enterprises should prioritize environmental sustainability, utilizing innovative recycling technologies to mitigate waste and reduce the carbon footprint."

Different normative theories (in SE)

Understanding different normative positions and perspectives is crucial in the context of social entrepreneurship (SE), as highlighted by Kimmit & Munoz (2018). The challenge within SE research to define a framework for how entrepreneurs select the social problems they tackle underscores the complexity and importance of normative considerations. Questions like "How do you define social?" and "How do you know it is contributing to social justice?" illustrate the ambiguity and subjectivity inherent in determining what is deemed 'social' within SE. This ambiguity raises concerns about the neutrality of the term 'social' in SE, suggesting that the chosen approach by social entrepreneurs is far from trivial—it carries significant implications for their beneficiaries. The nuances in defining and operationalizing 'social' objectives highlight the need for a deeper exploration of the normative underpinnings that guide social entrepreneurs' decisions and actions, emphasizing the consequences of these choices for achieving social justice and effectively addressing societal challenges.

In particular, building on Amartya Sen (2009), Kimmit & Munoz (2018) distinguish between two distinct types of SE who have different normative understandings of how social justice should be implemented: The concept of *institutional arrangement* builds on the notion that justice has to be theorized in terms of certain ideal institutional arrangements. In contrast, the *realization approach* pursues to distinguish between real situations with a focus on the outcomes realized by actual social institutions, without the attempt at delivering a definition of what would constitute a just institution.

For instance, Ranville & Barros's (2021) paper offers a comprehensive review on normative theories in social entrepreneurship, highlighting the ethical and moral foundations that should guide SE practices. Common normative theories in the context of SE could include but are not limited to:

Utilitarianism: This theory suggests that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority, focusing on the outcome or consequence of actions to ensure the greatest happiness or least harm.

Deontological Ethics: Contrasting with utilitarianism, deontological ethics argue that actions are morally right based on their adherence to rules or duties, regardless of the outcome.

Virtue Ethics: This approach focuses on the inherent character of a person rather than on the specific actions they perform, advocating for virtues like honesty, bravery, compassion, and fairness as the basis for ethical social entrepreneurship.

Capability Approach: Proposed by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum, this theory emphasizes enabling individuals to achieve outcomes they value, through enhancing their capabilities and opportunities.

Feminist Ethics: This perspective highlights the importance of considering gender inequalities and advocating for ethical principles that promote gender equity and address the specific needs of women and marginalized groups.

Communitarianism: This theory emphasizes the importance of community values, social solidarity, and the building of social capital. It suggests that social enterprises should foster a sense of community and collective responsibility.

Citizenship: Focused on achieving democratic goals through democratic means, this theory advocates for social entrepreneurship that promotes active citizenship, participation in democratic processes, and the strengthening of civil society.

Liberal Egalitarianism: This approach argues for protecting basic rights and meeting fundamental needs, suggesting that social enterprises should prioritize initiatives that ensure individuals have access to basic goods, services, and opportunities, thereby promoting equality.

Multiculturalism: Recognizing the importance of cultural preservation and norms, this theory supports social entrepreneurship that respects and promotes cultural diversity, addresses the needs of various cultural groups, and fosters an inclusive society.

Libertarianism: With a focus on free market principles and property rights, libertarianism argues for minimal government interference, advocating for social entrepreneurship that leverages market mechanisms to address social issues while respecting individual liberties and property rights.

Focus: Teleological (utilitarian) vs. deontological ethics

For the sake of simplicity and due to their significant relevance in interpreting everyday life situations, in this piece we will primarily focus on the comparison between teleological (utilitarian) and deontological ethics. These two perspectives offer valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of our daily decisions and actions, providing a foundational framework for understanding the complexities of moral reasoning.

Teleological ethics, particularly utilitarianism, focuses on the consequences of actions, arguing that the morality of an action is determined by its outcome with the principle of maximizing happiness or well-being. In the context of social entrepreneurship, a utilitarian approach might prioritize projects based on the scale of their impact—how many people are helped and to what extent their well-being is improved.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuVreCbQOwc&>

Deontological ethics, on the other hand, asserts that the morality of an action is determined by whether it adheres to certain moral principles or duties, regardless of the outcome. In this view, some actions are intrinsically right or wrong. A social entrepreneur guided by deontological ethics might prioritize actions that adhere to principles such as fairness, rights, or justice, even if those actions do not lead to the greatest overall good.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S_XuJTOEJY

Effective Altruism as a prominent example of utilitarianism: The deworming study

Effective Altruism (EA) is a philosophical and social movement that uses evidence and reason to determine the most effective ways to improve the world. One frequently cited example by EA proponents is a study on the mass deworming of school children. This study found that deworming led to increased school attendance and improved learning outcomes, making it a highly cost-effective intervention. By administering inexpensive deworming tablets, more children could attend school without the need for additional expenses like school fees or uniforms. This approach demonstrates EA's focus on maximizing the impact of resources to benefit as many individuals as possible.

However, while the deworming study showcases the potential for scalable and impactful interventions, it also highlights what the EA approach might neglect. Specifically, the deworming initiative reaches children who are already within the school system, likely living in urban or semi-urban areas where parents can afford to send their children to school. This raises critical questions about children who are excluded from such interventions due to deeper systemic barriers. Girls, for example, may be granted fewer resources by their families and are more likely to be kept out of school. Similarly, children living in remote areas without easy access to medical supplies or those who cannot afford even the most basic medical care are often overlooked.

Furthermore, because deworming tablets are distributed through schools, the approach inherently excludes children who do not have access to education to begin with. This oversight points to a larger issue within the EA framework: the focus on cost-effectiveness can sometimes overlook or undervalue interventions that are crucial yet less quantifiable or more challenging to implement. The pursuit of Pareto efficiency—aiming to do the most good without making anyone worse off—can lead to the marginalization of the most vulnerable populations for whom access to education and healthcare is fundamentally out of reach. The last few percent of the population hardest to reach with medical care, for instance, require a disproportionate amount of resources to help, raising ethical dilemmas about the distribution of aid and the moral obligation to treat easily preventable diseases.

In summary, while effective altruism offers a pragmatic approach to addressing global challenges, it also faces criticism for potentially neglecting those in the most precarious situations. The movement's emphasis on quantifiable impact and cost-effectiveness might inadvertently sideline complex issues of access and equity, particularly in education and healthcare. This critique calls for a more nuanced understanding of how to allocate resources ethically, ensuring that interventions do not just maximize efficiency but also address deeper inequalities and reach those most in need.

How to critique both normative frameworks

Utilitarianism, with its focus on maximizing happiness or well-being for the greatest number of people, is a significant and influential normative position within ethics. However, this approach has faced various critiques that question its practical applicability and ethical coherence:

Defining Happiness and the Good: One of the foundational critiques of utilitarianism concerns its central concept: happiness or the good. Critics argue that utilitarianism lacks a concrete method for defining what constitutes happiness or the good life, leaving it ambiguous who decides what happiness is. This ambiguity can lead to subjective interpretations, where the determination of what is considered "good" might reflect the views of those in power rather than a universal standard. Moreover, since perceptions of happiness can vary greatly across different cultures and individuals, utilitarianism struggles to provide a universal criterion for evaluating the ethical dimensions of actions or policies.

Cultural Relativism and Diverse Views on the Good: The critique extends to how utilitarianism navigates the diversity of cultural views on what constitutes happiness or the good. Different cultures may have vastly different understandings of what is valuable or desirable, making it challenging to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to ethics. What may be seen as beneficial in one cultural context could be detrimental or unethical in another, raising questions about the theory's capacity to mediate between conflicting cultural values and norms.

Justifying Means by Consequences: Utilitarianism's emphasis on the consequences of actions—as opposed to the actions themselves—can lead to ethically questionable justifications. By prioritizing outcomes, utilitarianism could theoretically justify immoral means if they result in a net increase in happiness. This aspect of utilitarianism raises concerns about the moral integrity of actions and the potential for ethical shortcuts, where the ends are seen to justify the means, regardless of the moral implications of the actions taken to achieve those ends.

Potential for Majority Tyranny: A significant ethical dilemma within utilitarianism is its potential to justify the oppression of minorities if such actions benefit the majority. This critique highlights the danger of "majority tyranny," where the interests and well-being of the minority are sacrificed for the sake of the majority's happiness. Such a stance can lead to ethical violations and injustices, as the rights and well-being of a significant portion of the population may be disregarded or violated in the pursuit of a utilitarian calculation.

Challenges in Assessing Consequences: Lastly, the practical application of utilitarianism faces significant challenges in accurately assessing the consequences of actions. Predicting outcomes with precision is often difficult, if not impossible, particularly in complex or long-term scenarios like those involving global warming. The uncertainty and limitations of scientific and predictive models mean that utilitarian decisions may be based on incomplete or inaccurate assessments of future outcomes, potentially leading to misguided or harmful actions.

Deontological ethics, particularly as conceptualized by Immanuel Kant, emphasizes that the morality of an action is determined by whether it adheres to a set of duties or rules, rather than by the outcomes of the action. While deontological ethics has been influential in developing a framework for ethical decision-making based on principles, it has faced significant critiques, especially regarding its applicability to real-world ethical dilemmas and its alignment with moral intuition.

Conflicting Duties: A fundamental critique of Kantian deontology is its apparent inability to navigate situations involving conflicting duties. In real-life scenarios, individuals often face decisions where duties to different entities or principles are at odds. For example, during the Nazi occupation of France, a person might be torn between joining the resistance to fulfil a duty to their country and staying safe to fulfil a duty to a surviving parent. Kant's framework does not offer clear guidance on how to prioritize or choose between these conflicting duties, leaving individuals without a practical means to make ethical decisions in complex situations.

Conflict with Moral Intuition: Kant's strict adherence to duty over outcomes can lead to decisions that starkly conflict with common moral intuition. A poignant example is the dilemma of whether to lie to a potential murderer to save a friend's life. While most people's intuitive response would be to lie to prevent harm, Kantian ethics, with its emphasis on the categorical imperative, would consider lying immoral regardless of the consequences. This stance can result in actions that, while adhering to duty, lead to outcomes widely regarded as morally reprehensible, such as allowing harm to come to an innocent person.

The Role of Emotions in Moral Decision-Making: Another area of critique concerns Kant's dismissal of emotions as irrelevant to moral decision-making. According to Kant, the only valid motive for moral action is a sense of duty, rendering emotions such as guilt, sympathy, or even pride and jealousy as inconsequential. This viewpoint is at odds with the common understanding that emotions play a significant role in ethical behaviour and moral judgments. Intuitively, emotions such as sympathy or guilt can guide individuals towards actions that are not only ethical but also compassionate and empathetic. The exclusion of emotions from moral consideration risks fostering a cold, detached form of ethics that does not fully account for the human experience.

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