

# Moral theories as tools in programme evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the nature of programme evaluation. Its main focus is to explain the role of moral values in programme evaluation. It argues that the idea of value neutrality which is popular in scientific discourse is mistaken and impossible to realize. This is because evaluation necessarily involves value judgements which express the values of the evaluator. The article demonstrates how values, especially moral values, come into the scientific processes of describing, analysing and evaluating programmes. This is done through discussion of three different types of moral theories, that is, egoism, utilitarianism and duty-focused theories.*

A normative vision also informs the ways we discern, describe, explain, and forecast social phenomena. How we read the situation, as well as how we describe and classify it, will be a function of our value commitments and even our moral sensitivities. (David Crocker 1996:213)

## Introduction

WE LIVE IN A WORLD that has been described as the Third World or the Developing World. Part of what it means to live in such a world is that we are made to feel that we are behind others in terms of development and civilization. This lagging behind is usually explained in terms of a lack of the culture of objective science, which has enabled those who are said to be advanced to objectively understand the true nature of reality. We are told that the scientifically advanced, having understood

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the true nature of objective reality, are able to manipulate it through science and technology, to their own advantage. Some of these advantages include urbanization, industrialization and commercialization. Development is understood in terms of the success of this kind of manipulation of reality. As the Third World, we are supposed to accept the idea of objective science which could facilitate our needed advancement and development. It is our ticket to civilization.

This idea is applied even to social, cultural and political reality. We are encouraged to analyse social and cultural reality as if it were physical reality. And to achieve the desired objectivity, we are supposed to do so in a detached, value-neutral way. It is this value neutrality which is emphasized even in assessing development in general and in specific educational and service programmes. Programme evaluation is assumed to be scientifically objective when it comes to assessing raw data. It is assumed that raw data speaks for itself. All that is needed is for the evaluator to discover it. The evaluator is not allowed by science to speak for raw data. From this point of view, evaluators are not allowed to reveal that their conclusions are arrived at from a particular perspective. Thus the pronoun "I" is banished from their discourse. It is as if their position is a "view from nowhere".

The present article refutes this common view. It argues for the inescapability and, indeed, the desirability of values in scientific discourse in general and in particular, the role of moral values in scientific processes describing, analysing and evaluating programmes. I take moral discourse to be part of a more general philosophical discourse. I therefore hope to show the relevance of philosophy to those discourses that have generally been understood to be scientific in the sense of being value-neutral.

It was refreshing to hear Jeremy Winston<sup>2</sup>, an internationally acclaimed expert in evaluation, declare that "raw data does not speak for itself"

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<sup>2</sup> Jerome Winston is the Director of the Programme for Public Sector Evaluation Group, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), University of Melbourne, Australia. He ran, by invitation of the Zimbabwe Evaluation Society, an evaluation workshop in April 2000

and that evaluation necessarily involves value judgments. In this paper, I will explain Jeremy Winston's position on the role of value judgements in programme evaluation. Being sympathetic to this position, I will then suggest that, moral theories are tools that are useful in guiding programme evaluation.

David Crocker, writing on the challenge of world hunger argues convincingly that moral theories are part and parcel of how we interpret facts about reality. Commenting on the popular Humean view which argues for the separation of facts from values, he says,

It might be objected that analysis of the causes and cures of world hunger is purely a factual, empirical, or technical matter to which ethicists cannot contribute. Yet I would argue that facts and values cannot be so easily kept separate, for we discern ethically salient features of facts on the basis of our moral values. Ethical reflection, whether the work of philosophers or non-philosophers, plays not only a critical and guiding role but also an interpretive role in relation to social reality and change. An ethic proposes norms for assessing present social institutions, envisaging future alternatives, and assigning moral obligations (Crocker 1996:213).

I understand Crocker's position to imply that the distinction between facts and values should not be interpreted rigidly. Hume maintained this distinction to the extent that he declared the facts could not be deduced from values or the other way round. I do not read Crocker to be saying this. The distinction between facts and values can clearly be made without precluding the influence of one on the other.

### **Programme evaluation**

Jeremy Winston defines a programme as a planned intervention for change. There are different types of programmes. These include educational, service and development programmes. Some programmes target specific groups of people like the youth, girls, women, single mothers, the unemployed, or those affected by AIDS. Other programmes are community wide: for example they can focus on the rural community

or the high-density areas. Whatever the scope and type of the programme, it is put in place as an intervention for change. The change that is aimed at is supposed to be worthwhile change. It is a form of process, or activity put in place to improve the lives or some aspect of the lives of the targeted group. In the language of Mufunani Khosa (1999, unpublished), the first president of the Zimbabwe Evaluation Society, programmes are established to add value and make a difference in a positive way.

Hence, programme evaluation involves the assessment or evaluation of the planned intervention, determining whether their processes and activities are worthwhile and whether they actually add value to people's lives. Philosophers have, for a long time debated on the criteria for identifying worthwhile activities. We will see that different moral theories identify different criteria. Some moral theorists are consequentialists, others are duty-focused ethicists and still more others are virtue ethicists. I will go through these three moral theories, explaining how each informs criteria for determining worthwhile interventions. Through this process, I hope to demonstrate the relevance of philosophy to programme evaluation.

### **Value judgments in evaluation**

In the Evaluation Workshop, Jeremy Winston explained the meaning of evaluation by dividing and explaining the constituent parts of the concept.

- E – valu – ation. His explanation is as follows:
- E – Fully explained. The evaluation ought to be explained fully. This means that evaluation is not an unjustified expression of emotion, attitude or opinion.
- Valu – Value judgment about the worthiness of the planned intervention.
- Ation– Reported activity. This is either looked at as the final report of evaluation or the process of evaluation itself.

Evaluation is a kind of peer review and it can be used to inform decisions. This means that Habermas (1971) was right to link knowledge and human interests, arguing that our interests in development and emancipation

are intricately linked to the kinds of things that we want to know. The idea of knowledge for its own sake is problematic.

What I want to emphasize here is the idea that evaluation involves value judgments. But these value judgments are not simple expressions of prejudice or opinion. They must be judgments which are explained fully. The question that then comes to mind is, what kind of explanation is needed in order for the value judgments to be valid, as opposed to being unsupported opinions or prejudices. What are some of the things that we must appeal to in making value judgments that are relevant to programme evaluation? I am arguing for the contribution of moral theories in guiding and providing relevant and legitimate support for value judgments made in the context of programme evaluation. Value judgements, in this sense, must be understood as public statements which are open to questioning and demand demonstration.

### **Moral judgments and moral theories**

When we make moral statements, we are making value judgments. We express moral judgments through moral statements such as the following;

- Abortion is a bad thing to do;
- Caring for others is good;
- Exploitation is unjust;
- Taxation involves robbing those who work to benefit the lazy. This is unfair.

To say that these statements are value statements is not to say that they are correct. It is only to say that they express the values of the person who is making the statements. Value statements evaluate. They try to determine the worthiness of the thing being evaluated. They express judgments of what is good or bad. In doing so, they assume criteria or principles according to which the rightness, goodness, wrongness or badness of whatever it is we want to evaluate is judged.

In the case of exploitation, the above judgment assumes a moral principle in light of which one can say that exploitation is a bad thing. Thus a particular moral judgment and action tends to be informed by certain value principles. This is so because we do not want to be doing

things or making statements without justification or without guiding principles. To do so would be similar to expressing prejudice. Prejudice usually has no justification. This can be seen in the case of racial, sexual, and tribal prejudice. If we are asked what the justification for the guiding principles we use in legitimate evaluation, we have to give some justifying account which amounts to being the justifying theory.

In many cases we do not use principles directly. Rather, we formulate rules which are in accordance with our principles. Particular value judgments are, as their name denotes, particular in the sense that they refer to particular cases. For example the judgement, "Mr. Jairos Jiri was a very compassionate person" is a particular judgement about a particular person's character. Rules are more general than particular judgments and in turn, principles are more general and they serve as justification for the rules. Rules and principles group particular cases and access them as a group. For example, the group of acts that are called suicide can fall under one rule, "Thou shalt not commit suicide" and the principle, "All acts which threaten human life are evil". For many people, rules and principles simplify their lives. Instead of thinking what to do in each moral case, rules and principles help people to decide for one case and then apply that decision to other similar cases.

Theories are integrated systems of principles and rules, which often help in ultimately making sense of the particular judgments and decisions about the correct action to take. Moral theories ultimately make sense of the particular value judgments we make. In the context of programme evaluation, moral theories provide an explanation of what is considered to be morally worthwhile in the programmes evaluated. They consciously bring out the underlying values that are pursued or undermined by specific programmes. Differences in value judgments will usually be a reflection of differences in the assumed moral theories.

However, this is not always the case. Sometimes evaluators agree on their values, but disagree on the facts of the programme to be assessed. For example two evaluators may agree that it is wrong to distribute condoms among teenagers, yet disagree on the facts of why it is wrong. Many people oppose the command economy, but disagree on what it is

about the command economy that is bad. They, thus agree on values but disagree on facts. Below, I would like to introduce some moral theories, which have been used to explain how some evaluators identify what is worthwhile in development, educational and social programmes.

## Some modern moral theories

### *Theory of the ego*

"Ego" means the self. Egoism is a theory which highlights the self and its subjective goals and interests. As a moral theory, it says that self-interest is the highest good and therefore the ultimate reason for any individual action, social arrangements, or any programme to be judged as good. Such arrangements are judged to be bad, or not adding value, if they stand in the way of self-interest. Ethical egoists tend to support those policies, regulations, institutions and programmes which allow them to fulfill their own interests as individuals. They tend to support the political position popularly known as libertarianism. It was also known as the anarchism, since it gave the impression that any rules established to restrict individuals were bad.

Libertarians argue for the least possible interference from the State and its apparatus. The best example of this position can be seen in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* where he argues,

Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate a person's rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and that the minimal state is inspiring as well as right. Two noteworthy implications are that the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their own good or protection (Nozick, 1974: ix).

Thus, from the egoist perspective, any programme which attempts to force some people to help others is unjust and therefore does not add value to society.

Many people feel that the moral point of view is distinct from the egoist perspective, that self-interest is one thing, and moral requirements are another. Many people feel that morality is of greater value than self-interest. Libertarians usually argue that morality is a disguised way of promoting some people's self-interests. Therefore, morality, for them, has negative value for it undermines the interests of the less powerful and less influential.

### ***Utilitarianism***

The term, utilitarianism, comes from utility, meaning usefulness. According to the moral theory of utilitarianism, an action is useful if it promotes happiness. Happiness is understood in terms of the promotion of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Thus an action, arrangement, or programme is good if it has the results of promoting the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory in the sense that it judges actions, social arrangements, institutions and programmes as good on the basis of their consequences or results. If the results of an action are good, then the action is considered to be good and if they are bad then the action is seen as bad. Utilitarians will support those rules, laws, institutions and programmes which promote the greatest amount of happiness or welfare and the least amount of pain or suffering. Many utilitarians understand this happiness in terms of the welfare that is promoted by the actions and arrangements assessed and the suffering that may be caused by them.

On the surface, utilitarianism looks as if it promotes self-interest since it encourages the promotion of pleasure. But it is not the individual person's happiness alone that is promoted. All the people affected by an action, programme, or social arrangement must be taken into account. A utilitarian will accept that an individual may be required by morality to do what may bring displeasure to him personally if, on the whole, that action would promote the greatest amount of happiness for everyone affected by it. This, an egoist will not accept. An egoist looks at the value added to himself alone, not necessarily to the rest of society or to those affected by the action concerned.



Because utilitarianism looks at the overall amount of happiness promoted by programmes, some people feel that it ignores the interests of the minority and it has a tendency of encouraging programmes that may not take justice seriously. It is argued that the minority in society will always be subordinated to the majority and that individuals are treated as a means to the happiness of the majority, even if what the majority wants is inhuman. For example, slavery of the Africans has been justified on the basis of its role in modernizing the world. Marx saw the colonization of India by the British as the inevitable way of introducing Indians into industrial civilization. This concern informs duty-based moral theories, for there seems to be no protection of the individual person or the minority against the interests of the majority in the way that duty-based theories attempt.

### *Duty-focused theories*

Some moral theorists argue that moral obligations do not depend on our subjective experience or on our private opinion. They also argue that moral obligations do not depend on the consequences of actions. Certain actions, programmes and arrangements must be wrong even though they may please the majority of the people affected by them. Immanuel Kant is the greatest of the philosophers who argued for the duty-oriented position. He argued for the respect of human individuals as ends-in-themselves. What this means is that each human being has intrinsic value which must never be compromised, even for the sake of greater happiness of the whole community. John Rawls has defended this position very strongly in his book, *A Theory of Justice*,

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many (Rawls 1971:3-4).

A duty-oriented theory emphasizes the separateness and sacredness of each and every individual human person. It tries to uphold those

rules and principles which guarantee that separateness as obligatory. A duty-oriented theorist will therefore support programmes which respect the inviolability of these moral obligations. The obligations must depend on some objective duty that gives us what we ought to do.

What duty requires us to do may not be what we want to do. This means that if we believe there is a duty for us to do, we must be prepared to argue for it as an objective duty. Our moral obligations have got to be based on judgments which are explained fully. The question that comes to mind is what kind of explanation is needed to justify our moral obligations? What are some of the things that we must appeal to in making value judgements that are relevant to moral judgment in general and programme evaluation in particular?

A non-consequentialist or duty-focused theorist will support those programmes which respect the inviolability of certain moral obligations as the objective requirement of duty, whether or not they please anybody. The above moral theories are a sample of theories which illustrate the possible justifications of value judgements which are made in the process of programme evaluation. It is clear that each one of the theories points to important aspects of programmes that need to be considered in evaluating them. Some programmes will be justified by their consequences, others by the fundamental rights they guarantee and still others by the liberty they allow. Context may sometimes help to decide what criterion to use. But sometimes, it is simply a question of evaluators fully explaining and justifying their value judgements.

However, the role of value theories goes even deeper than has been demonstrated so far. As the quotation from Crocker at the beginning of this article illustrates, moral values influence our empirical analyses. He explains this point in the following way,

For instance, if we ask, "How is India doing?" we are seeking an empirical analysis of what is going on in that country. Yet alternative ethical perspectives will focus on distinct, though sometimes overlapping facts: hedonistic utilitarianism attends to pleasures and pains; preference utilitarianism selects preference satisfactions and dissatisfactions (or per capita productivity and

consumption); human rights approaches emphasize human rights compliances and violations; and contractarians investigate the distributions of "social primary goods" such as income, wealth, liberties and opportunities. In each case the ethic structures determine what counts as morally relevant information. (Crocker 1996:213)

This means, then, that the way we describe, analyse and evaluate development, educational and service programmes is deeply influenced by our ethical commitments. Moral philosophers spend most of their time identifying, clarifying and explaining the moral theories behind particular moral judgments.

### **Conclusion**

I hope I have demonstrated the relevance of moral philosophers to programme evaluation. To the extent that programme evaluation involves full explanations of assumed criteria for making value judgements, the skills of the moral philosopher are indispensable. This, of course, is not to say that these skills can only be practiced by the moral philosopher. What it means is that any team that is involved in programme evaluation must include someone who is conversant with different criteria for moral evaluation and how the criteria inform programme analysis. In such a team a moral philosopher may not be bad company.

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