



The relationship between ethics, common sense, and rationality

Ethics, common sense and rationality

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to re-think the definition of three commonly used terms; discuss links between ethics, common sense and rationality; offer a model integrating these; and present findings regarding the understanding of common sense and rationality.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reports on data collected from a convenient sample on their definitions of common sense and rationality. A constant comparison method of analysis is used to identify common themes in the definitions from this sample of 38 responses. Percentages and Yule's Q statistical data as well as descriptive statistics of demographics are obtained and examined.

Findings – Our findings indicate that a much higher percentage of respondents understand common sense to have a very similar meaning to the literary definition than those understanding the literary meaning of rationality. Statistical analysis of the findings agree.

Research limitations/implications – Further research should include a random sample and definitions of the term "ethics" and further consider the integration of ethics, common sense and rationality.

Practical implications – One implication of this research is to focus on a common understanding of these terms to those who use them. The model presented is intended to provide practical perception of the integration of ethics, common sense and rationality for application in management and life.

Originality/value – This paper adds to current literature on ethics, common sense, and rationality by extensive literature review of all three and combining that research as not presented previously. We offer a view that integrates common sense, rationality and ethics from distant philosophers and considers the current lack of literature connecting the three as shown in the form of a Figure.

Keywords Decision making, Rationalization, Ethics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Looking at the world today, ethics, common sense, and rationality seem to be oddly rare. Do we even understand what they are? How can we adhere to ideals of which we have very limited understanding? What is common sense? How has it been defined over previous millennia and has it changed? Is it rational to believe the majority always has the best "sense" or the ethical standard? Do people understand the meaning of these common terms?

Rose (2007) quotes former Deloitte & Touche CEO James Copeland about business ethics stating that "the only common denominator [in financial and business failures] seems to be unethical behavior and a lack of character and integrity." Waddock (2005) goes even further, stating that "ethical problems have stemmed from the fact that our business leaders are hollow and lack appropriate moral and ethical standards." This belief is not new. Socrates purported that students become cynical about ethics because "airtight definitions of ethical terms [...] can [not] be found" (Hartman, 2008). Aristotle



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claims “that ethics is about virtues primarily, and that one can be virtuous without having the sort of knowledge that characterizes mathematics or natural science” (Hartman, 2008).

The view of common sense is similar. Kinsey (2004) pointedly asks “Where has all the common sense gone?” He discusses common sense in the legal and accounting professions (Kinsey, 2004). Humphreys (2002) laments the loss of common sense in engineering; Finamore (2005) views common sense among internal auditors; and Karpus (2008) echoed Kinsey’s question when examining the subprime mortgage problem. Howard (1994) wrote a book expounding the death of common sense in the American legal system. He laments that “in the decades since World War II, we have constructed a system of regulatory law that basically outlaws common sense” (Howard, 1994). If, as Rausch (2007) suggests, “everyone’s judgment and ‘common sense’ improves with experience and learning,” there is much needed.

Rationality “is championed by a wide range of disciplines, because of its ability as a theory to tie together so many of the social sciences within one rubric” (Pickard, 2005). “Rational choice theory says that people will assess the advantages and disadvantages of a given behavioral choice and then act in the way that maximizes their advantage” (McCullough and Faught, 2005). Aristotle believed “a virtuous person can make ethical decisions rationally” but that “truly good character [is] rare, in part because rationality is” (Hartman, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to re-think definitions for ethics, common sense, and rationality and discuss links between the three. We will look at a sample of peoples’ definitions of two of these terms to determine the amount of understanding for these common terms. Data collected from a convenient sample of definitions of common sense and rationality will be presented. Recommendations for future research will be offered.

Literature review

Ethics, common sense and rationality have been discussed, compared, and contrasted for millenia. Aristotle believes that “ethics is available to us all, that correct views about ethics are generally compatible with common sense [but] truly good character to be rare, in part because rationality is” (Hartman, 2008). Literature seeks to define and explain each but also indicates a close relationship between the three terms.

Ethics

Guttmann (2006) explains the Greek foundation for the word “*ethicos*, meaning habit or custom relating to morals” and further defines ethics as “the science of duty.” Greek, Roman and modern day philosophers continue to debate the definition and working out of ethics. Aristotle, Socrates, Maimonides, Immanuel Kant, Albert Schweitzer, the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, and many others offer philosophies of ethics and ethical behavior (Guttmann, 2006). Considering the theory of each in depth is outside the scope of this article, but deserves attention from those studying ethics. Aristotle says “ethics is the art of living well” (Hartman, 2008). Socrates purports that “ethics is about improving one’s soul; the best reason for being ethical is that it makes one’s soul better and makes one a happier person than otherwise” (Hartman, 2008). Epicurus’s main teaching on ethics was that “its chief principle is joy [...] Satisfaction with what one has leads to joy. Thus satisfaction is an important virtue in Epicurean philosophy and ethics. Humans should weigh and calculate that which is useful and that which is harmful and avoid the kinds of joy that can cause bodily pain and mental anguish”

(Guttman, 2006). Schweitzer believed “ethics is created when we think positively about the world, about life, and about the need to fulfill our goals and dreams” and claimed being ethical “means refraining from harming others and helping all in need” (Guttman, 2006). Kant “thought that sacrifice, experience, personal interest, and theoretical knowledge could not serve as the basis for morals and ethics [...] deeds must be based on selfless interest and on a real sense of responsibility” (Guttman, 2006). “Dalai Lama teaches that an act is ethical when it meets the Tibetan term of *kon lung*, meaning something that comes from the depth of one’s heart that fills one with enthusiasm and expresses one’s total commitment to life. If we relate to others and to life thus, then we can speak about a real revolution, about an ethical evolution” (Guttman, 2006). Gandhi lived his life based on two basic ethical standards: service to others and material simplicity (Guttman, 2006).

Even well-known and oft-used dictionaries view ethics from different points of view. Ethics is defined by The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy (2005) as “the branch of philosophy that deals with morality [...] [and] is concerned with distinguishing between good and evil in the world, between right and wrong human actions, and between virtuous and non-virtuous characteristics of people.” Dictionary.com (2008) defines ethics as:

1. a system of moral principles [...]
2. the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc. [...]
3. moral principles, as of an individual [...]
4. that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.

Ethical behavior involves “the way you act even when people aren’t looking” and includes “doing the right thing, showing concern for people and treating people right, being open and communicative, and demonstrating morality in one’s personal life” (Trevino *et al.*, 2000). Lozano (1996) proposes:

ethics [...] should be understood to mean more than simply ‘applying certain values’ and stresses that this definition of ethics should be rethought in order to foster a closer relationship between ethics and the decision-making processes.

The AACSB (2004) report on ethics education says this process:

requires reflection on underlying values [...] Research indicates that people around the world tend to identify a similar set of values, suggesting that people from different cultures generally agree that honesty, fairness, and respect for human life, for example, are important.

Guttman (2006) summed up:

the purpose of ethics is to acquire mental powers that will enable one to overcome fleeting instincts and passions by means of preferring the general good over the bad, and [to] develop the self to a level at which the decision to be moral or ethical will come from the heart and soul and does not have to be imposed by any outside power.

Common sense

Descartes believed common sense “to be the most widespread of human propensities” (Hensmans, 2003):

Aristotle’s idea is to denote certain cognitive ‘givens,’ which are common to all human beings, at least to people belonging to the same sociocultural sphere. These conceptual categories,

like space, time and causality, provide people with a number of common concepts that make communication possible (Jaaskelainen, 1998).

Adler sees common sense as “the basis of reason [...] [and] the integration with the social demands of our life and the resulting insight in their social relatedness” (Jaaskelainen, 1998). He defined common sense:

not as a traditional *summum bonum*, the highest good, but as a *totum bonum*, the whole of goods [...] the ultimate normative end [...] to which all other goods are ordered as means (Nitecki, 1987).

More recently than those philosophers, Voltaire from the eighteenth century stated that “common sense is not so common” (Kinsey, 2004). Thomas Reid defines common sense as:

certain principles [...] which the constitution of our nature leads us to believe, and which we are under a necessity to take for granted in the common concerns of life, without being able to give a reason for them (Lundestad, 2006).

Kant believes common sense indicates:

essential commonalities among people, including that of subjective responses to aesthetic objects, be they the makings of nature or culture. According to him, all judgments of taste and all attempts to communicate such judgments presuppose a common sense, an abstract and intangible fund of sensibilities in which all people participate by virtue of their communal status (Poulakos, 2007).

Dewey purported that “common sense is continuously changing” and consists “not of a set of beliefs, but of a set of conventional practices” (Lundestad, 2006). Dewey believes “all knowledge to be hypothetical in character [and] even our most firmly held beliefs may therefore come to be revised” (Lundestad, 2006).

Thomas Paine’s famous “Common Sense” pamphlet called for American independence from England, obviously “arguing against prevailing common sense, otherwise his call would not be needed” (Nitecki, 1987). Einstein’s theory of relativity was once considered “an affront to common sense” (Nitecki, 1987). Because of these and similar confusions, Nitecki (1987) explains that:

common sense may indeed be considered as the beginning stage of an intellectual discernment providing an initial value judgment about the meaning of perceptions received through physical senses.

Bogue argued that “today’s common sense is often yesterday’s heresy” (Nitecki, 1987). Nitecki (1987) defines common sense as:

a manifestation of “normal native intelligence” [...] suggests wisdom possessed by everyone, a kind of practical knowledge consisting of ‘simplifications separated from all complexities,’ dictating simple solutions to frequently complex situations.

Kinsey (2004) believes “common sense is based on simple beliefs that have been proven over the ages and passed from generation to generation.” Klein (2006) defined common sense as “the intuitive knowledge or appreciation of what action or judgment is appropriate to a given situation or sphere of activity” but admitted that “for every person who thinks that a particular finding is obvious and common sense [...] there will be someone who thinks the opposite is obvious and common sense.”

Rationality

Leibniz, Spinoza and Descartes are credited as being “the three great Rationalist philosophers” (*Computerworld*, 2006). The rationalists “hold reason to be a faculty that can access truths beyond the reach of sense perception, both in certainty and generality” (Remenyi and Money, 2006). Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* views rationality as “minded or deliberative action” (Prus, 2007). Aristotle “views rational agency as in need of assistance in order to develop, and as developing more or less well depending on the character of the circumstances and efforts made” (Curren, 2006). These conditions are thought to be dependent on equality in citizenship and material circumstances (Curren, 2006). Kant reasons “that rational nature is an end in itself; that it is the only thing which is unconditionally valuable; and that it is the ultimate condition of all value” (Regan, 2002). Albert Schweitzer studied Chinese philosophy believing their ethical philosophy “might help the West regain [their] rationality that had been lost because of irrational trends in Western thought” (Roetz, 2003). Amartya Sen defines rationality “as the discipline of subjecting one’s choices – of actions as well as objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny [. . .] the need to subject one’s choices to the demands of reason” (Walsh, 2007). Sen notes that the “most direct use of rationality [. . .][is] to think and act wisely and judiciously, rather than stupidly and impulsively” (Walsh, 2007).

Different disciplines view rationality differently. “Rational choice is championed by a wide range of disciplines, because of its ability as a theory to tie together so many of the social sciences within one rubric” (Pickard, 2005). Gramajo (2008) defines “rationality as the relationship between means that humans use to reach certain ends, ends which themselves become means to reach other ends.” Weber:

distinguishes between substantive and formal rationality; substantive rationality [. . .] designates material behavior shaped by political, religious or ethical standards; [. . .] formal rationality refers to action based on calculation and means-to-ends reasoning (Gramajo, 2008).

Goldthorpe (1998) defined rational action:

as action of an “outcome-oriented” kind in which certain requirements are met regarding the nature of, and the relations among: actors’ goals, their beliefs relevant to the pursuit of these goals, and the course of action which, in given circumstances, they then follow.

Rational behavior has been expressed and manifested in various terms. Narrow rationality (*homo economicus*) tries to maximize general happiness. Daniel Bernoulli, in 1738, called this utility (Bell and Farquhar, 1986; Kritzman, 1992). John Stuart Mill, a nineteenth century philosopher, concurred with Bernoulli, and believed that given a choice, the rational choose the highest expected utility consistently (Anonymous, 1999):

A broader definition of rationality [. . .] includes the notion of a person’s beliefs being based on logical, objective analysis of all the available evidence. Whether this is a meaningful definition continues to be the subject of much philosophical debate (Anonymous, 1999).

Walsh (1994) defines instrumental rationality as “internal consistency of choice [and] the maximization of self-interest.” Boudon (2003) quotes Coleman (1986) as stating that “the very concept of rational action is a conception of action that is ‘understandable,’ action that we need ask no more questions about.” He further quotes Rescher (1995) that:

cognitive rationality is concerned with achieving true beliefs. Evaluative rationality is concerned with making correct evaluation. Practical rationality is concerned with the effective pursuit of appropriate objectives (Boudon, 2003).

Methodology

We conducted a phenomenological study to explore personal definitions of rational and common sense using an unstructured, open-ended questionnaire requesting such information from an online convenient sample. A total of 76 e-mails to personal acquaintances of one of the authors simply requested each receiver to “define: rational and common sense.” Two months later a follow-up e-mail was sent to those who did not previously respond. These e-mails produced 33 responses. A duplicate request via a bulletin was posted to an internet social site. This bulletin produced only one response. Four additional responses were received from forwarded e-mails, 38 total responses are categorized. A total of 38 responses were received giving a response rate of 46.9 percent. The respondents were approximately one-third male and had a mean age of 45. Over 52 percent have only a high school diploma. We used this as a pilot study and hope to do further empirical research using appropriate scales.

A constant comparison method of analysis was used to identify common themes in these definitions. The authors subjectively considered the literary definition of rational and common sense, then chose anchors from the responses to place on a continuum. The continuum for each was composed of those definitions closest to the literary definition on one end and those opposite or very different from that definition on the other end. Each response was considered by the authors and agreement was formed on where each would be placed on the continuum. The number of responses is different from the number of respondents because several wrote longer responses that would not fit neatly into one category and was therefore counted in more than one category. The continuum was divided in the middle with the upper 50 percent of responses considered to have sufficient understanding of the literary definition of the term and the lower 50 percent considered not to have sufficient understanding of the term. Percentages and Yule’s Q statistical data were obtained and examined. Yule’s Q is an appropriate measure of association for a 2×2 table such as we obtained from the continuum data of the two terms and whether or not understanding is indicated in the definitions obtained from the sample data (Baker, 1994). Data obtained in our research is documented in Table I.

Results

The anchoring definition responses for common sense were “intuition developed from observation or experience, not formal education” (most closely matching the literary definition) and “thinks before doing” (least matching the literary definition). After subjective agreement for all responses, the authors found 36 common sense definition responses fell nearer to most closely matching the literary definition while only six fell nearer to least matching the literary definition. This indicates nearly 85.7 percent of

| | Understanding of literary meaning as provided by previous literature | |
|--------------|--|--------|
| | Yes | No |
| Common sense | 36 (a) | 6 (b) |
| Rational | 28 (c) | 18 (d) |

Table I.

Notes: Yule’s $Q = \frac{ad-bc}{ad+bc} = \frac{648-168}{648 + 168} = \frac{480}{816} = 0.5882$

Source: Morgan and Thiagarajan (2008)

respondents have an understanding of common sense sufficiently close to the literary definition, while only 14.3 percent do not. Yule's Q indicates a substantial positive association (0.5882) between the respondents' understanding and the literary definition of common sense.

The anchoring definition responses for rational were "thinking a situation through before making a decision" (most closely matching the literary definition) and "a flavor of truth, but not always right" (least matching the literary definition). After subjective agreement for all responses, the authors found 28 rational definition responses fell nearer to most closely matching the literary definition, while 18 fell nearer to least matching the literary definition. This indicates only 60.9 percent of the respondents have an understanding of rational sufficiently close to the literary definition, while 39.1 percent do not. Yule's Q indicates a substantial negative association (-0.5882) between the respondents' understanding and the literary definition of rational.

Discussion

The literature review and findings of this research suggest an integrated relationship between ethics, common sense, and rationality. In essence, ethics is considered the science of values or morality. Ethics is a branch of philosophy studying personal, business or cultural values, but is also those personal, internal values and morals. Ethics is the internal principle one has ingrained in who they are that leads to how they feel and respond whether anyone else sees or knows that feeling or response. Many ethical values, such as doing no harm to others and serving and helping others, appear to transcend geography, family or culture but remain personal values of each individual.

Rationality, on the other hand, is the external action outcome determined by disciplined reasoning of internal values. It is the end result of that reasoning that produces wise, judicious behavior. However, as seen in the data collected for this research and the philosophy of Schweitzer and others, rationality is not well understood in American minds.

Common sense interfaces ethics and rationality. It understands the ethical underpinning of a situation and judges the knowledge required for the appropriate, rational action for this particular time and place. Our findings indicate people have a better understanding of common sense than rationality, though no presumptions are made as to its use in everyday life.

Figure 1 portrays our understanding of the relationship between ethics, common sense, and rationality. Ethics is internal to each person though influenced by culture and nature. Rationality is the external manifestation and portrays the behavior of said persons' ethical perception and judgement of the situation. Common sense links the internal understanding of right and wrong to the external behavior in a given situation.

Conclusion and limitations

Aristotle demonstrates "that ethics and self-interest may overlap, that ethics is largely compatible with common sense, and that Aristotle's virtuous person can make ethical decisions rationally" (Hartman, 2008). Our findings and understanding are in agreement with this belief. Ethics is the internal belief of what is right and wrong. Common sense judges that belief before rationality acts on it. Common sense is a reasonably understood term in American minds while rationality is less so. The presumption that people understand common terms, at least in this case, is shown to be a fallacy.

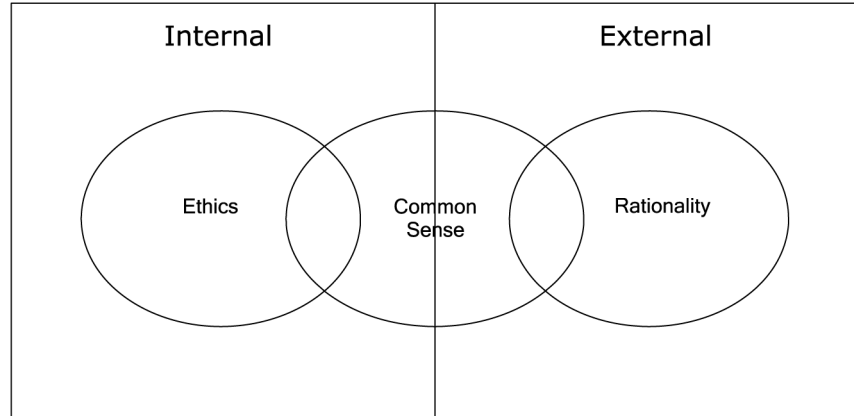


Figure 1.

Source: Morgan and Thiagarajan (2008)

One implication of this research is to focus on a common understanding of these terms to those who use them. The model presented is intended to provide practical perception of the integration of ethics, common sense and rationality for application in management and life. Several limitations of this study need to be addressed in future research. A much larger, random sample should be conducted and more extensive statistical findings computed. The small sample of this study severely limits these findings but is used only as a beginning point for this research. The subjective nature of this study should be replaced with a more objective questionnaire to make the study more replicable in further research.

This study lays the foundation of previous and current understanding of the definition of ethics, common sense and rationality and attempts to show the integration of them. Further research should be completed on the understanding of ethics and ethical behavior to integrate a better understanding of its relationship with common sense. Also interesting would be studying the difference in Southern United States and other cultures' understanding of each of these terms.

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Further reading

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