
'Our cultural values are no longer prescriptive but a matter of personal choice.' To what extent is this true?

Introduction

Our values are a set of beliefs that form the basis of our behaviours and attitudes and we use them as a moral compass to allow us to make moral judgments. In the context of modern society, the influx of liberalistic values and behaviours normalise the view that our values, behaviors are no longer inherited from our family, society or heritage but rather motivated by personal agency and will. On the other hand, traditionalists assert that our personal, communal or political values and behaviour are indoctrinated within us. Therefore, to examine the extent of the agreement we need to assess whether our values are still inherited, inculcated or indoctrinated by various institutions of modern society and whether the individuals possess the innate capacity to develop their values.

Main Body

Point 1

Advocates of individualism believe that moral values and behaviours are not prescribed as the education received by the individuals grants them opportunities for empowerment and self-cultivation of moral values and behaviours. Individuals have the intelligence and rational capacity to think for themselves, as stated by Locke that individuals 'have the perfect freedom to order their actions according to the law of nature'. Consequently, this would manifest in the development of subcultures – with unorthodox behaviours and values which differ from the traditional ethnic and cultural environment. Take for example the revolutionary philosopher Frederich Neitzsche. In the late 1800s, the professor and scholar decided to embark on the path of reorienting western and Christian values and break away from his Christian roots. He perceived the heavily influenced Christian values as “slave morality” that degrade the soul. Instead, he proposed the concept of Ubermensch as a counter alternative, encompassing the idea that values and ideas originate with the individual and then impact on others in society to form a culture. Therefore, this example serves to show that in the ever entrenched individualistic culture today, our cultural values and behaviour are a matter of personal will and choice.

EOA 1

However, detractors do not share the view that values and behaviours are no longer prescriptive as individuals are easily manipulated by the influence of educational institutions at their most vulnerable years of development. Within the confines of the educational institute, the instructional approach of learning compels individuals with nimble minds to conform with the teaching content. This instills a dictated moral compass within them. For example, under Civic and Moral Education, individuals are inculcated shared moral values such as offering community support; resolving issues through consensus, not conflict; and racial and religious harmony. Such communal moral values are reflected in the National Youth Survey, done in 2016 where 2 in 5 youths consider contributing to society and helping the less fortunate as important life goals. This means that values such as compassion and kindness are instilled in the minds of individuals shaping our values and behaviours to be prescribed in a paternalistic manner by the state.

Point 2

It can be argued that our cultural values and behaviours are no longer prescriptive but a personal choice due to the diminishing functional roles of family in the modern era which minimizes the influence of inherited values on the individual. The family interaction is trivialized and has become less interactive. This reduces the understanding and undermines the acceptance of the values. In this way, the values of the individuals are not prescribed by the family as very few will adhere to traditional family values. For example in China there is a widespread phenomenon known as the Little Emperor Syndrome where single children command authority and dominate over their parents. This erodes the authority of the parents with the young individual imposing his own set of values. The Fortune magazine explored the problem, interviewing teachers and employers who complained that one-child-policy babies never learn how to “eat bitterness” or cope with disappointment and frustrations in ways that would better prepare them for life. Therefore, our cultural values and behaviour are no longer prescriptive but a matter of personal choice as traditional values cannot no longer influence the individuals.

EOA 2

Yet such a view holds a modicum of truth as in certain societies, family heritage is one source of influence that will prescribe rather than allow the self creation of values due to the extensive influence of the parents as cultural role models in the developmental years of the child. During the developmental years of the child, the parents induce the effect of primary socialisation on the child. Piaget's theory of the Cognitive Stages of Development indicates that until about age eleven, children cannot think abstractly. Until the formal operational stage of development, children accept the values and expectations of their families without giving much thought to other possibilities. For example in the 2015 National Values Assessment, Singapore ranked values such as family and responsibility on the top of their personal values, reflecting the omnipotent influence of the family on our personal values rather than the case of self-creation of values.

Point 3

Nonetheless, our cultural values and behaviours are no longer prescriptive but a matter of personal choice due to the extensive influence of new media that spearheads the political democratisation of values among modern individuals. This era of social media has removed barriers of state induced indoctrination on the individual. There is the free flow of information, values and behaviours across the virtual network where individuals are exposed to them and curate their self-defined ideals and behaviours. For example, in the infamous Arab Spring in 2011, the advent of Twitter and Facebook allowed the broadcasting of democratic and humanistic ideals on the internet. Individuals no longer were bound by the state-defined ideals of authoritarianism and absolute power and control and spearheaded the political revolution that overthrew the dictator regimes in Syria and Yemen. Therefore, in this technological era, our cultural values and behaviour are no longer prescriptive but a matter of personal choice.

EOA 3

However, it can also be argued that our cultural values and behaviours are prescriptive as the omnipotent influence of the political institutions is difficult to ignore when they engage in state censorship of new media and indoctrinate dictated values on individuals. The free relay of information in the internet is all a deluded reality that does not fruitalise in reality. Government utilises legislative means to restrict the freedom of speech on the internet and impose propaganda messages and content on the web. For

example Chinese apps such as Wechat and TikTok often bury or hide words that reflect political movements, gender and sexual orientation or religion in most countries where it operates according to a report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Most of the content censored on WeChat supported pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, as well as messages from the U.S. and U.K. embassies regarding a new national security law enacted by Beijing at the end of June that has provoked protests across the city. Consequently, this state defined ideals acts as an echo chamber that indoctrinates its users. Therefore, our cultural values and behaviour are no longer a matter of personal will but instead prescribed by the state.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world where individualism is constantly emphasized, it gives a false illusion that the individuals can no longer prescribe to moral, social or political values. Although individuals are given more opportunities to interact and are highly educated, the influences of the respective social institutions are still immense and would never cease to prescribe the values of the individual.