Ethics of *good* and *right* tourism

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Abstract

There is a plethora of forms of tourism that strife to be good and/or right. This invokes ethical concepts. This paper reviews various ethical theories, including relativism, teleology, and deontology. Good is related to the outcomes of an action and thus is closer to teleological ethics. Right requires establishment of principles to ensure justice and thus is deontological. However, what is right and what is good may be dependent on one's culture, and thus relative. The paper then applies these theories to tourism to demonstrate challenges of identifying ethical forms of tourism. The issues of ethics in tourism are discussed at both institutional and individual level.

Keywords

Ethics
Sustainability
Justice
Tourism

Introduction

Much of recent discussions about tourism (e.g. Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder & Salazar, 2020), especially those related to 'building back better' tourism post-COVID-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2020a), strife for tourism that is *good* and/or *right*. There is a plethora of *good* and *right* tourisms, including sustainable (UNWTO, 2005), responsible (Goodwin, 2014) and regenerative tourism (Duxbury et al., 2021). Arguably, much of focus of sustainable and regenerative tourism is on their outcomes, i.e. what *good* they bring to society and nature. On the contrary, responsible tourism focuses on what the *right* behaviour is for individuals and organisations involved in tourism. What is *good* and what is *right* are the questions of ethics (Benn, 1998). Thus, this paper discusses *good* and *right* tourism from various ethical perspectives.

Ethics theories

For millennia, philosophers have been trying to identify the nature of ethics and what would be the *right* thing to do in any given situation. The nature of morality is a domain of meta-ethics (Benn, 1998). One school of thought suggests ethics are universal, i.e. same principles guide all humans. However, another theory suggests that ethics are relativist, i.e. ethics may vary between cultures (Fennell, 2006). Behaviour that is ethical in one society may not be so in another. Furthermore, there is some subjectivity to ethics, as individuals have autonomy in deciding what behaviour is ethically acceptable for them. However, since humans live in societies, there is some level of social contract present that creates common moral norms (Benn, 1998).

Normative ethics examine moral judgments. Two major groups of theories that appear at odds with each other are teleology and deontology. Teleology focuses on the consequences of actions — on the *good* that an action can bring to self and/or others. Bentham's (2008) utilitarian approach to ethics suggests that the *right* action is the one that brings the most overall benefit to the highest number of people. Deontology focuses on the action itself rather than its consequences — an individual should always do what is *right* irrespective of the outcome. Kant's (2013) suggestion for identifying a morally *right* action is to apply that action as a universal law and then consider how society would be changed by that. Both teleological and deontological approaches have their shortcomings. Even though an action in itself may not be morally *right*, it can be justified by the *good* that it will create. Conversely, it may be impossible to know all of the consequences of an action. Weighing the benefits of an action against its drawbacks might be controversial. For example, can killing a person ever be justified? What if killing a person will save the lives of two other people? (Benn, 1998; Fennell, 2006). Essentially, teleology tells us what *good* we should aim for in our actions, and deontology tells us what the *right*, legitimate actions are to achieve that *good* outcome. The tension here is that the *right* action does not necessarily maximises the *good* and vice versa (Ronzoni, 2010).

The concept of "justice as fairness" (Rawls, 1991) deserves a special mention. Justice as fairness is a deontological theory that prioritises *right* over *good*, although the action that is *right* should ultimately lead to the outcome that is *good*. Distributive justice that guides the distribution of utility in an equitable manner is an example of deontological consequentialism — a rule is installed to maximise benefits. However, distributive justice may apply different rules. For example, egalitarianism of the outcome would suggest that it is fair that all outputs are equally distributed to all people irrespective of their inputs. Some may suggest, that that's not fair and benefits should be distributed according to merit, i.e. each individual should acquire outputs according to their own inputs to create those benefits (Ronzoni, 2010). Quantifying inputs and outputs is a value-laden challenge. Moreover, each individual pursuing their own *good* (e.g. 'pursuit of happiness' in any way one might see it) may constrain others' ability to pursue their own *good*. Thus, justice needs to ensure equal opportunity for individuals to pursue their legitimate goals. Ultimately, the main principal of justice as is in providing all with equal liberties and opportunities, while helping those in need to the greatest extent possible (Rawls, 1991).

Not always is an ethical judgment based on a sound deliberation over a dilemma. Some decisions are made unconsciously or intuitively. Those that are made consciously, involve several stages of a decision-making process. First, an individual needs to recognise they are facing a moral dilemma.

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Then, applicable moral principles need to be identified. These principles are then applied, which leads to a resolution of a dilemma (Woiceshyn, 2011). Notably, several gaps can occur in such a process. Individuals may not be aware of a moral issue involved. They may not be aware of a different way to deliberate over a dilemma, or may have other constraints that ultimately lead to an action that is neither fair nor leads to most benefits. Interestingly, an individual may judge an action as unethical and still pursue it regardless (McDonald, Oates, Thyne, Timmis & Carlile, 2015). All of the above issues in ethics: nature of morality, ethical decision-making process, theory guiding ethical judgment, are of major importance to tourism, as is demonstrated in the next section.

Good and *Right* tourism

Relativism and tourism

Tourism studies have a lot to contribute to the ethics discipline. The context of tourism (both international and often domestic) is multicultural. Individuals leave the place of usual residence and travel to a place with its own customs, rules, and traditions. On arrival, tourists constantly need to make decisions, whether they will behave according to their own culture and habits, or that of the destination. Leisure tourists are predominantly driven by hedonism (McKercher, 2015), thus their egoistic goals may be at odds with local residents' perspectives on ethical behaviour. As such, tourism serves as a perfect context to explore relativism of ethics.

Cultural differences between tourists and residents may lead to clashes on cultural grounds. Concerns of neocolonialism may arise in cases when tourists' culture, values or pragmatic preferences are prioritised over local culture. One such example are Sunday flights to Aitutaki Island in Cook Islands, which faces local opposition due to residents observing the Sabbath (Tolkach & Pratt, 2021). Similarly, specific types of travel may be viewed as unethical and be unwelcome in a destination, such as begpacking. Begpacking is a practice where travellers beg or busk in destinations to fund their travel (Tolkach, Thuen Jørgensen, Pratt & Suntikul, 2019).

Relativist perspectives on tourism need to be explored within specific scenarios as different rationalisations of behaviour may guide tourists. This is evidenced by Tolkach, Pratt & Zeng's (2017) study of differences in ethical judgments between Hong Kong residents, and Chinese and Western tourists visiting Hong Kong. The results demonstrate that some scenarios were more acceptable to Chinese tourists (e.g. purchase of counterfeit products), while other scenarios were more acceptable to Western tourists (e.g. using services of a sex worker). Hong Kong residents were generally less accepting of ethically dubious activities than tourists.

Teleology and tourism

The discussion of whether principles of an action or its consequences are more important applies to tourism. What would be the just way of developing tourism in destinations? Should whatever tourism development that brings the most benefit be prioritised, or should certain principles be followed, even if they do not maximise the benefits?

If a teleological approach is taken, the benefits need to be defined. Even within the sustainable development paradigm, identifying and prioritising different benefits is difficult. UN (2021) Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) include sustainable tourism as a target within Goal 8, decent work and economic growth. However, the only measure for it in the SDGs is "Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate". This is inadequate, as this indicator is abstract and does not demonstrate tangible benefits delivered to specific people. At the same time, there is a plethora of sustainable tourism frameworks, each with their own indicators. This diversity of frameworks led to Agyeiwaah, McKercher and Suntikul (2017) investigating what the core indicators of sustainable tourism should be. Their indicators fall within measurable outcomes of tourism on economy, society, culture, and nature. Overall, discussions on goals and indicators of specific targets demonstrate prevalence of utilitarian ethics in sustainable tourism, thus on the *good* that tourism can bring.

But who should tourism be *good* for? This leads to the typical utilitarian dilemma: how to measure maximum benefit from tourism? Then the next question is: do certain outcomes, groups of people and/or aspects of nature have priority over others? A myriad of other questions may follow. When it comes to priorities, there has been a recent shift towards prioritising destination's residents (e.g. Higgins-Desbiolles, Carnicelli, Krolikowski, Wijesinghe & Boluk, 2019; Moscardo & Murphy, 2014; Simpson, 2008). Simpson (2008) suggests that the priority should be on the benefits to local communities, whereas how these benefits are achieved is of less importance. Other scholars use a more deontological approach in their focus on community-based tourism (CBT), which includes a principle that tourism initiatives must be owned and managed by local communities (Tolkach & King, 2015). Higgins-Desbiolles's et al. framework (2019) is ultimately about justice, however the theme of 'degrowth' is interesting from a utilitarian perspective. The degrowth argument suggests one measure of utility, e.g. tourist receipts, may lead to unbalanced development that undermines other aspects of well-being. As a result, the overall utility decreases despite one (or a small group) of the indicators demonstrating positive dynamic.

While much of this section focuses on institutional perspectives, ethics of tourism ultimately depends on behaviour of individual tourists. If tourists are driven predominantly by egoistic motives (McKercher, 2015), their behaviour may not benefit and even be do the detriment of a destination. In pursuit of their hedonic happiness, if not limited by rules, regulations and physical barriers, tourists' judgment may be clouded. This may lead to a situation where a tourist action harms the destination, others, and self. Pratt & Tolkach (2020) discuss such occurrences as stupidity in tourism. In summary, the utilitarian *good* of tourism faces many challenges, and therefore the next section discusses the deontological perspective of tourism that is done *right*.

Deontology and tourism

What is *right* tourism and how to do it is debatable. UNWTO's (2020b) *Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics* is the world's first international convention about tourism that approaches this debate from an institutional perspective. The convention emphasises rights, liberties, and responsibilities of different stakeholder groups in relation to tourism. Principles established in the convention ultimately seek to establish tourism that is just. In order to do so, UNWTO (2020b) relates tourism ethics to other United Nations frameworks such as UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (UN, 2021) and *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* (UN Human Rights Council, 2011). Critics may note that the convention is underpinned by the assertion that growth is *good*, which suggests prevalence of utilitarian values. However, other aspects of the convention are close to Rowles' (1991) views of justice as fairness, as it aims to ensure liberty to travel, to protect rights of all involved in tourism and to

support less advantaged groups' ability to participate in tourism in various capacities. A sceptical view of the convention would suggest that tourism will remain a domain of the privileged few and tourism's expansion is predominantly benefiting tourism businesses rather than people and planet.

Decoupling justice from growth, as done by Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019), then appears to be a right approach. However, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2019) and Moscardo & Murphy (2014) prioritise destinations' local residents over other stakeholders, which may also prevent an equitable form of tourism. For example, if local residents decide scamming tourists is fair, would an independent observer agree such tourism is *right*? Jamal's and Higham's (2021) special issue on *Justice and ethics: towards a new platform for tourism and sustainability* views justice in tourism from the following approaches: social justice, equity, and rights; inclusiveness and recognition; sustainability and conservation; well-being, belonging and capabilities; posthumanistic justice; and governance and participation. Taking the principle-based approach to the extreme, Tolkach (2017) conceptualises forms of tourism that comply with the ideas of justice, freedom and solidarity as perceived by anarchist political philosophy. This approach also favours individuals, communities and the natural environment over governments and multinational corporations in order to address unjust power imbalances. It remains to be seen whether justice-based forms of tourism can become mainstream.

Moving on from the institutional to an individual perspective, there is much controversy between the stated principles and the behaviour of travellers. This has become known as the attitude-behaviour gap and is prominently demonstrated in literature on sustainable consumption (ElHaffar, Durif, & Dubé, 2020). Even individuals that declare themselves to be "green" consumers engage in consumption of unsustainable products and services. Flying is one such example (McDonald et al., 2015). Juvan & Dolnicar (2021 demonstrate that travellers use a range of neutralisation techniques to address the cognitive dissonance between their sustainability values and their actual behaviour on holidays. Most frequently, tourists rationalise their behaviour by comparing themselves with other tourists, or comparing tourism impact to other industries. They also suggest they lack resources to plan a more sustainable holiday. Furthermore, some tourists consider a holiday as a special time at which it is fine to be less sustainable than usual. The unsustainable behaviour on holidays is compensated by other sustainable behaviours (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2021). That is, tourists know what is *right*, but they choose other course of action out of their own hedonic pursuits. The view that leisure tourists exempt themselves from ethical concerns is supported by Tolkach et al. (2017) finding that Western tourists were more likely to engage in ethically dubious behaviours on holidays rather than at home. However, the opposite was true for Chinese tourists. This interplay between deontology and relativism on holidays merits further investigation.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates the importance of ethics to tourism research, as well as the opportunity of the tourism context to contribute to understanding of ethics. Various considerations of *good* and *right* tourism are discussed using different theories (i.e. teleology, deontology, justice, relativism). Ethical theories provide guidance to questions on how tourism should function at both institutional and individual levels. It should be noted, however, that an extreme adherence to any one ethical approach may be detrimental. It is important to have certain principles for tourism development, such as community involvement and protection of the natural environment. Tourism should not be imposed on people. Moreover, it is important to maintain the view that tourism is not an end in itself, it is a means to improve well-being of people and to help conserve the environment, among other exigencies.

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