Universal Ethics: The Principles

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"Ethics is not just an abstract intellectual discipline. It is about the conflicts that arise to meet real human needs and values".



INTRODUCTION:

Ethics by definition is not an exact science; it is a branch of philosophy, regarded as a meta-subject as it permeates other subjects. Moral Universalism is the meta-ethical position that there is a universal ethic which applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality, or other distinguishing feature, and all the time.

INTERPRETATIONS

Cronyism: A specific form of in-group favouritism. The act of favouring close friends, allies, or associates.

Fidelity: Sincere and continued faithfulness to a trust, obligation, or duty. Fidelity means being loyal to patients and keeping promises.

Integrity: The antithesis of hypocrisy.

Meta -Ethics: The range of issues, puzzles, and questions - consistently abstract. An attempt to step back from particular substantive debates within morality to ask about the views, assumptions, and commitments that are shared by those who engage in the debate.

Meta subject: A subject that permeates, and/or supersedes, other subjects.

Moral Relativism: Describes several philosophical positions concerned with the differences in moral judgments across different peoples and cultures.

Moral Universalism: the meta-ethical position that some system of ethics, or a universal ethic, applies universally, that is, for "all similarly situated individuals", regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other distinguishing feature.

Purview: Scope of influence or concern

Universal Ethics: A moral system that applies universally to all of humanity.

Veracity: The quality of being true, honest, or accurate. Veracity means always telling the truth and sharing accurate information with patients.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics by definition, is not an exact science; it is a branch of philosophy, regarded as a meta-subject as it permeates other subjects. Moral Universalism is the meta-ethical position that there is a universal ethic which applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality, or other distinguishing feature, and all the time. A universal ethic is a moral system that applies universally to all of humanity and thus transcends culture and personal whim. The source or justification of this system is variously claimed to be human nature, a shared vulnerability to suffering, the demands of universal reason, common themes among existing moral codes, or the mandates of religion.

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics believed in a kind of Universalism. Many religions, including Christianity and Islam, have morally universalist positions, and regard their system of morality as having been set by a deity, and therefore absolute, universal, perfect, and unchangeable. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations can be seen as an example of global efforts to bring a universalist, equal and common moral justice to all people, and Moral Universalism is, at least in part, the basis for modern human rights, and an integral part of any Humanist philosophy.

Criticisms of Moral Universalism

How do we come to know what universal morals are? For morals to be truly universal and absolute, they would have to have a universally unquestioned source, interpretation, and authority, which critics claim are an impossibility. The sheer diversity of moral opinions which exist between societies (and even within societies) in the world today suggests that there cannot be a single universal morality. If there was a set of universal ethical principles that applied to all cultures, philosophies, faiths, and professions, it would provide an invaluable framework for dialogue.

Moral Relativism embraces the idea that there is no universal or absolute set of rules to determine right or wrong, and describes several philosophical positions concerned with the differences in moral judgments across different peoples and cultures.

The Golden Rule

Most of the principles are outcomes of the mother of all principles – unconditional love and compassion, which is expressed in several ways as **The Golden Rule** in virtually all faiths and belief systems. In essence, it is the "concern for the well-being of others" that has relevance. This guiding principle can be revealed and put into practice instinctively in many situations as an act of 'love.' The person who expresses that love needs not be able to explain their reasons. The Golden Rule, alone, can often provide all the clarity they need to understand how they should treat others and put ethics into practice.

A Framework of Universal Ethics

A framework was developed by Larry Colero of Vancouver, Canada which incorporates a separation of principles into three types of moral responsibility, namely:

- Interpersonal
- Professional
- Global Ethics

The moral responsibility types are depicted in the form of a flame, to illustrate their simultaneous interrelationship. They overlap like the typical colours of a flame, and the interplay between them is constantly changing. Any category may seem to disappear at times, yet each one remains as a potential with its prevalence dependent upon the circumstances.

Global Ethics

Global Ethics was placed at the top of the flame illustration to suggest it as an evolutionary ideal to which humanity can ultimately aspire. It is the most controversial of the three categories, and the least understood. Open to wide interpretation as to how, when or whether they should be applied, issues related to these principles can generate emotional response and heated debate.

Principles of Global Ethics include:

Reverence for life (in all its forms)

Interdependence & responsibility for the 'whole'

Society before self / social responsibility

Global justice (as reflected by international laws)

Environmental stewardship

Reverence for peace

Each of us influences the planet simply by living on it. As we learn more about our human impact on the world, it is increasingly important for each of us to 'think globally' by applying the 'precautionary principle' (recognizing and respecting the unknown) to minimize our harmful impacts on Earth's countless ecologies and cultures.

Influential or fiduciary enterprises such as governments, large corporations, or NGOs (Non- Governmental Organizations) take an added measure of accountability. Responsibility comes with power whether we accept it or not, and one of the moral burdens of leadership is to influence society and the state of the world in a positive way. Global Ethics can inspire us to accept shared responsibility.

Professional Ethics

Individuals acting in a professional capacity take on an additional, formalized level of ethical responsibility. Professional associations' codes of ethics prescribe required behaviour within the context of professional practice such as medicine, law, accounting, or engineering. These written codes provide ethical standards and rules of conduct commonly based on the principles below.

Even when not written into a code, the principles of Professional Ethics imply duties and responsibilities commonly expected of employees, volunteers, elected representatives, and many others in the workplace.

Principles of Professional Ethics include:

Impartiality (objectivity)

Openness (full disclosure)

Confidentiality

Due diligence (duty of care)

Fidelity to professional responsibilities

Avoiding potential or apparent conflict of interest

Interpersonal Ethics

Interpersonal Ethics might also be called morality, since this category of principles reflects the general expectations of any person in any society, acting in any capacity. These are the principles we typically try to instil in our children and expect from one another without needing to state the expectation or formalize it in any way.

Principles of Interpersonal Ethics include:

Concern for the well-being of others

Respect for the autonomy of others

Trustworthiness and honesty

Benevolence (doing good)

Preventing harm

Basic justice (being fair)

Willing compliance with the law (with the exception of civil disobedience)

Co-existence of Principles

Many situations will never lend themselves to an easy formula, and these principles can only be used to trigger our conscience or guide our judgement. Principles often conflict with each other in practice, and some can trump others under certain circumstances. Here is an example of how principles can collide or override each other.

Let's say you are a scientist working on a government project to study the effects of a certain chemical on human health. Over time, it becomes clear to you that your government's intention is to use the chemical as a biological weapon. Since the project is top secret, you have a patriotic duty as a citizen and a professional duty as an employee to maintain confidentiality. (Trustworthiness is fundamental to professionalism.) However, if there was an opportunity to inform United Nations observers, then Global as well as Interpersonal Principles would likely justify divulging confidential information to save lives and protect the overall good of humanity.

Similarly, when judging if a corporation has been 'socially responsible,' we need to include principles of Interpersonal as well as Professional Ethics as prerequisites for corporate integrity. In other words, the company cannot be internally corrupt and deemed socially responsible at the same time. Contributions to charities and the like (benevolence) may be in the interests of society, but these actions lose significance if the corporation has not also taken responsibility to minimize any damage their business activities may cause to customers, employees, and other stakeholders. (In this case, the Interpersonal principle of "preventing harm" would prevail.)

Universality versus Selective Application of the Principles

When these principles are applied selectively or only within set boundaries such as next-of-kin, countrymen, race, gender, and so on, that 'cronyism' effectively negates their value. For example, the mother of a friend was born in Sicily, which is also the birthplace of the Sicilian Mafia, a crime syndicate that has committed many despicable acts. Yet they had a rigid code of honour within their own 'family' where trustworthiness was highly valued, and they had a strong (albeit perverse) sense of justice.

My relative ran away from home at an early age and married into what she and her family described as "the Gypsy life." Some of my cousins were trained to pick pockets, but they would never steal from me because I was part of the family. Limiting application of ethical principles in this way converts them from a universally virtuous path into an exclusionary code of conduct.

Apart from cronyism, there are contextual interpretations of the principles that many societies consider acceptable. For example, murder may be illegal but forgiven if the killer is taking another life in self-defense or to save others. Lying is considered wrong unless we tell an untruth to protect someone from harm. These interpretive variations sometimes cause people to conclude that ethical responsibility is entirely relative to personal beliefs or local standards and cultural practices.

This 'moral relativism' (the concept that no one can be wrong) is a dangerous assumption that relieves us of any responsibility other than what we choose to interpret in our own interests, what is prescribed by faiths or governments, our own values as an individual, or the local status quo.

It is to be noted that morality cannot simply be distilled into a universally acceptable list of specific rules. The principles listed in the framework above can only describe commonly recurring patterns of ethical responsibility that our conscience can use as enduring landmarks in a wide range of situations.

Nurses Association

The American Nurses Association Code of Ethics is the source of ethical principles in nursing. The Code of Ethics was established as a guide for carrying out nursing responsibilities in ways consistent with the ethical obligations of the profession, promoting quality patient care. There are 7 (seven) reasons why ethical principles are so Important for health care providers such as in Nursing:

1. Using ethical principles as the foundation of practice assists nurses in making good judgment calls.
2. Ethical principles in nursing guide nurses in providing high-quality care within the laws that govern nursing practices.
3. Nurses who work within the guidelines of ethical principles support the emotional, physical, and mental health of each patient, acting with their best interest in mind.
4. Applying principles of ethics in nursing is beneficial to developing strong nurse-patient and interdisciplinary relationships, which is essential for collaboration and quality patient care.
5. Patients cared for by nurses with solid ethical standards are typically more compliant than those whose nurses disregard ethical principles. When patients are compliant with prescribed health and nursing care plans, they experience improved health outcomes.
6. Ethical nursing practices help reduce risks to patients and nursing safety. Because the ethical principles of nursing focus on acceptable behaviours and promoting the welfare of others, nurses who demonstrate these behaviours are instrumental in reducing patient and staff safety risks.
7. Healthcare organizations that have nurses who exercise ethical nursing principles typically have higher patient satisfaction scores, higher employee satisfaction, and lower employee turnover rates.

The Ethical Principles in Nursing

Sources vary regarding the actual number of ethical principles in nursing. Any behavior that is honorable and professional, upon which a set of rules is established, may be considered an ethical principle. For the purposes of this article, we will discuss the following seven main ethical principles all nurses should demonstrate:

1. Accountability
2. Justice
3. Nonmaleficence
4. Autonomy
5. Beneficence
6. Fidelity
7. Veracity

Universal Health

The concept of Universal Health is firmly based on the 1948 World Health Organisation (WHO) constitution which:

- Declares health a fundamental human right.
- Commits to ensuring the highest attainable level of health for all.
- Reorients health systems towards primary health care (PHC).

In practical terms, Universal Health is a powerful expression of:

- Fairness
- Solidarity
- Recognition of Health as a human right

Universal Health Coverage (UHC)

Universal Health Coverage embraces that principle that all people have access to the full range of quality health services needed when and where they need them, without financial hardship. UHC covers the full continuum of essential health services, which include:

- Health promotion
- Prevention
- Treatment
- Rehabilitation
- Palliative care across the life course

Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all united nations member states including South Africa. The concept of the SDGs was to provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.

In essence, there are17 SDGs which represent an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing – to form global partnerships. The SDGs are well captured in the following statement: "ending ***poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests*** ".

The 17 SDGs are listed below.

1. No poverty
2. End hunger
3. Good health and wellbeing.
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions.
17. Partnerships for the goals

Section 27 of the South African Constitution

It would be remiss not to refer to the South African Constitution within the context of this article, which states that "***Everyone has the right to have access to health care services, including reproductive health care services."***

Furthermore, references to the SA Constitution as well as the National Health Act 61 of 2003 have relevance, which refer to a single health system for South Africa and encompasses the principles that no-one may be refused emergency medical treatment and sexual reproductive health rights are enshrined in Section 27 of the Constitution

The National Health Insurance (NHI)

The NHI is to be regarded as South Africa's strategy to achieve Universal Health Coverage. In essence, the NHI can be regarded as a system to include the following principles:

- A centralised, national insurance fund from which the government will buy healthcare services from healthcare providers in both public and private sectors.
- All eligible South African residents, as defined in the NHI Act, will be able to visit these providers whenever they need healthcare, without any payment.
- Healthcare is more affordable by reducing the cost of healthcare due to the economies of scale that can be achieved by purchasing healthcare for the entire population.
- Contributions will be made through taxes and special contributions, in line with what each person can afford.
- The NHI fund will pay for the costs of care.
- Universal health for all
- 'Free' service delivery at site
- Accreditation of practices
- Allocation of patient base
- Multi-disciplinary practices
- Per capita payment
- PMBs

POSITION: SA HEALTH PROFESSIONS

In general, it is not unreasonable to state most professional healthcare associations in South Africa are supportive of the concept of universal health coverage. In principle, the information available indicates that such associations are also supportive of the stepwise, resource-informed, and evidence-based approach to the implementation of any major reforms in the health system. However, the views expressed indicate that many of the intended changes have yet to be fully researched for their effectiveness and potential to actually improve service delivery by ensuring that there are sufficient funds and the desired framework to achieve this. In addition:

- There is a deep-seated lack of faith amongst our health professionals in the ability of government structures to provide financial support for quality services.
- There are concerns regarding potential corruption relating to the fund itself.

Taking cognisance of the above, most professional associations have expressed concerns regarding the NHI as currently constructed.

Universal Healthcare Access Coalition (UHAC)

Whilst entities such as the Board of Healthcare Funders (BHF) and Business Unity South Africa (BUSA) who have instituted legal action against the Department of Health there are others who would prefer to engage the President, Cyril Ramaphosa, regarding the possibility of amending the NHI Act as adopted. In this regard, driven by the Soth African Private Practitioners Forum (SAPPF) the South African Medical Association (SAMA) , and the Progressive Health Forum (PHF) , the Universal Healthcare Access Coalition (UHAC) was formed, in pursuance of developing a joint proposal to the President of the republic, from the widest range of health professional, patient advocacy and related organisations.

Concluding Remarks

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), like the sustainable development (SD) concept itself, are open to multifaceted interpretations, and the same is true for their ethical implications. While SDG values are widely accepted as universal, the ethical structure of the SDGs is complex, with differing interpretations and ideas, e.g.,

on how to regard and value nature. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define a future development agenda for 2015–2030 meant to encourage the international community to move toward a global sustainable future in the next few decades. Against this backdrop, SDG interpretations raise ethical issues.

Nevertheless, the concept of Universal Ethics, from a healthcare perspective, driven by organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), is a reality with initiatives and interventions being introduced in different shapes and forms by Governments around the world. The purpose of this article was to expose the readers to factors and forces, under the banner of Universal Ethics which have contributed to the introduction of interventions such as the National Health Insurance.