

Universal Ethics - A Foundation for Global Dialogue

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Introduction

Ethics should be a reflective and critical attempt to find the grounds for reasonable moral beliefs. If moral values are neither right nor wrong but simply opinions, then a dogmatic insistence that a given view is correct is pointless. Throughout the world ethical issues are tabled and discussed. Many organisations and individuals at home and abroad are trying to change practices, they believe are unethical and an abuse of basic human rights. There is still child slavery, child abuse in various forms and the oppression of both men and women within the group.

It is not an easy task working within different cultures and tradition but moral values if they are to have any meaning should be stated in unambiguous language and applied in different moral situations. There are fundamental principles that underpin what we recognise as human rights and these principles can be universally applied. This is not 'imperialist relativism' (the imposition of ethical requirements by one culture - usually Anglo American or Western European on a less developed country) nor interference or insensitivity towards other cultures. There should always be an appreciation for the diversity of cultures throughout the world. Diversity encourages a variety of thought and action. However traditional practices that are harmless and an integral part of the cultural beliefs of a group of people should not be confused with practices that violate human rights. Multiculturalism embodies everything that is good within the global society, ethical relativism which is dealt with later, can be narrow and limiting, detrimental to the support for human rights.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is "a social intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect as equals." This sounds like a value to which few people would object. Intolerance of another's traditional practices that are posing no threat or harm is a prejudicial attitude and not tolerated in most societies. Multiculturalism has aided and supported moral progress as in the example of racism. The continuing and ongoing movement to end racism and support its eradication by civil law is an example of basic ethical principles being put into practice. However we know that there are still practices in the world where there would appear to be no moral progress and where the violation of human rights are an everyday occurrence.

Multiculturalism does not say that all the beliefs of all cultural groups must be equally respected. It is one thing to require that cultural, religious, and ethnic groups be treated as equals, it is another thing to say that all cultural practices, are to be tolerated and

respected equally. It is illogical to accept and tolerate the numerous forms of injustice in those cultures that oppress certain members of the group.

Human Rights

The language of human rights is known throughout the world; it is fully integrated into the global language along with the various charges, defenses and counter charges of human rights violations. The terminology and rhetoric has become so common and widespread, that the term 'human rights violation' is in danger of losing its meaning and import. It is generally agreed that in relevant respects human beings everywhere are fundamentally alike and that rights belong to all people wherever they may live, and whatever their gender, or their racial, ethnic, religious or economic background.

We know that this does not happen and yet there are those who believe there can be no condemnation of the actions of a certain society if those actions are consistent with the moral beliefs of that person's culture. This position known as relativism is often adopted by anthropologists and some sociologists amongst others to support the claim that we should respect the beliefs and cultures of other people and not interfere or try to change beliefs or traditions. It is argued that different cultures throughout the world have different moral standards, and it is simply a prejudice of our own cultural perspective to find fault with opposing views. But surely, if human rights is a meaningful concept, then ethical relativism must be false. Is the killing or harming of an innocent human being ever justified? Human rights are by definition rights that belong to all people wherever they may dwell and whatever may be the political system or the cultural traditions of their country or region of the worlds. Ethical relativism implies that moral norms and rules derive from specific cultures.

Many actions such as the marriage of young girls to older men or female circumcision although prompting almost universal condemnation are defended by the proponents of such practices and cultural relativists. They argue that religious and cultural traditions should render societies immune from criticism from moral outsiders to their culture. They support this belief because they hold the view that moral rightness and wrongs of actions varies from society to society, and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all, at all times. If the doctrine of ethical relativism was true then we would not be in a position to pass moral judgement on others.

Positive Aspects of Ethical Relativism.

Ethical relativism can sound plausible and persuasive and indeed this doctrine when not taken to extremes can provide some positive aspects.

- (i) It does give us the need for tolerance and understanding.
- (ii) It does acknowledge the fact of moral diversity. It does remind us that we should not pass judgement on some practices in other cultures that we do not understand and to accept that sometimes reasonable people from different cultures may differ on what is morally acceptable.

However, is the need for tolerance an adequate defence against the legitimacy of making ethical judgements As Ruth Macklin would put it. “are we to keep quiet and condone the perpetration of a ritual or tradition when it clearly violates general ethical principles, such as justice, doing harm to others, respecting all persons and showing compassion to all the members of the group? Are we prepared to say that oppression of men, women, minorities and children is wrong in the Western world but right in other societies?” Macklin believes that respect for tradition cannot serve as an ethical justification of an action, custom or practice, but can only function as an explanation for why people continue to do what they have been doing for centuries.

Why Universal Ethics?

- (i) Conflict prevention begins with a shared moral ground. A common ethical language has to be the bridge between cultures before a foundation for further dialogue can be laid.
- (ii) The imperative is for dialogue to continue. Shared values already exist amongst peoples in the world. Recognition and respect for diversity need not lead to relativism of values and principles
- (iii) The central challenge facing the world today is how we can live together with differing and conflicting values. Universal ethics is certainly not like painting by numbers but neither is it the belief held by many that no truth can be found and morality is just a matter of how you look at it.

How can Universal Ethics work?

Without some kind of universal ethics there can be no way forward and no possibility of change. There are organisations and individuals working world-wide for the restoration or establishment of human rights. This may be in the grand arena of war, famine and refugees but also in smaller areas of the violation of human rights.

The guidelines set out below include some suggestions for universal ethics by organisations such as UNESCO, and by Ruth Macklin based upon her experiences serving on international ethical review committees. These guidelines at the same time remain faithful to the principles of Multiculturalism.

- * Firstly and perhaps the most important criterion is that the greatest catalyst for change can come from within. The best way to bring about change, strategically as well as ethically, is to form alliances with people within those cultures who are seeking to bring about such changes.
- * Secondly actions, whether in one’s own country or abroad, which are not seen as permissible should be placed on any discussion table as the foundation for dialogue, whilst bearing in mind that there are actions and values in which legitimate differences are possible and should be tolerated.

* Thirdly most if not all ethicists recognise that ethical principles are situation sensitive and that no specific rules can handle all the situations that we face. However situation sensitive rules will only be effective if we know and have on hand the basic moral principles, including quite simply concern for the welfare of others.

* Respect for the autonomy of an individual although the concept of autonomy does vary within different cultures. The belief in basic justice, being fair and refusing to take unfair advantage. Benevolence, doing good and preventing harm.

Conclusion

Universal ethics does not mean the imposition of one set of morals by one group on another. It means a shared way or means of reaching a consensus on norms and values that also accepts diversity. A shared understanding of what is right and what is wrong. In any circumstance or situation we can start by examining the *present state of affairs*. This should be done with the aim of gaining an understanding of other cultural differences, history and tradition, remembering that an explanation is not necessarily a justification.

Next, what is the *minimum* that is acceptable. There has to be an acceptance that some disagreements cannot be resolved at that time. The aim is to change the present situation for the better. Once an acceptable minimum is reached, it is possible to work towards an *eventual ideal state*.

We are all one community and we are all responsible for upholding human rights for each other. More than ever there is a need for agreement on the existence of universally held values and the content of those values. It may prove to be impossible to find one set of universal ethical principles that applies to all cultures, philosophies, faiths and professions but the destination is only part of the journey. The value lies in the search for principles that can be shared by all and can underpin the framework for global dialogue on ethical issues.