

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.

Since 1997, the following framework of principles has been used by six instructors to facilitate learning and spark dialogue with a wide variety of students, business people and professionals in Africa, China, Czechoslovakia and across North America. In each case, participants were encouraged to suggest changes, additions or deletions. Only one minor change has ever been suggested.

What Good is a Set of Principles?

There are many tools for decision making, but few (secular) guides to indicate when situations might have an ethical implication. Yet this awareness is a crucial first step before decisions are made. Recognizing the moral context of a situation must precede any attempt to resolve it. Otherwise, what's to resolve?

Ethical dilemmas rarely present themselves as such. They usually pass us by before we know it or develop so gradually that we can only recognize them in hindsight - a little like noticing the snake after you've been bitten. But what are the signs that a snake might be present? An ethical framework is like a 'snake detector'.

I offer the following principles as landmarks - generic indicators to be used as compelling guides for an active conscience. They are NOT absolute rules or values. They are more like a rough measurement where an exact one is not possible. They often conflict with each other in practice, and some will trump others under certain circumstances. But as principles that need to be considered, they appear constant.

These principles are compatible with the argument that we should simply follow our intuition and rely on the 'inner voice'. However, that voice is not always audible, and today's society presents a wide range of complex circumstances that require more guidance than simply 'concern for others' or 'does it feel right?' And so these principles are offered effectively as a more detailed reference.

In a sense, the principles are outcomes of the mother of all principles - unconditional love and compassion - which appears in virtually all faiths, and is expressed here as 'concern for the well-being of others'. (This principle is at the heart of the stakeholder model of ethics, i.e. what is my impact on others?) At first glance, they will appear obvious and perhaps trite or simplistic. Keep in mind that they are meant to be practical rather than groundbreaking, and that many people have found them useful in the absence of other guides.

The principles have been organized into three categories for ease of use: personal, professional and global ethics.

Principles of Personal Ethics

Personal ethics might also be called morality, since they reflect general expectations of any person in any society, acting in any capacity. These are the principles we try to instill in our children, and expect of one another without needing to articulate the expectation or formalize it in any way.

Principles of Personal Ethics include:

- Concern for the well-being of others
- Respect for the autonomy of others
- Trustworthiness & honesty
- Willing compliance with the law (with the exception of civil disobedience)
- Basic justice; being fair
- Refusing to take unfair advantage
- Benevolence: doing good
- Preventing harm

Principles of Professional Ethics

Individuals acting in a professional capacity take on an additional burden of ethical responsibility. For example, professional associations have codes of ethics that prescribe required behavior within the context of a professional practice such as medicine, law, accounting, or engineering. These written codes provide rules of conduct and standards of behavior based on the principles of Professional Ethics, which include:

- Impartiality; objectivity
- Openness; full disclosure
- Confidentiality
- Due diligence / duty of care
- Fidelity to professional responsibilities
- Avoiding potential or apparent conflict of interest

Even when not written into a code, principles of professional ethics are usually expected of people in business, employees, volunteers, elected representatives and so on.

Principles of Global Ethics

Global ethics are the most controversial of the three categories, and the least understood. Open

to wide interpretation as to how or whether they should be applied, these principles can sometimes generate emotional response and heated debate.

Principles of Global Ethics include:

| Global justice (as reflected in international laws) |

| Society before self / social responsibility |

| Environmental stewardship |

| Interdependence & responsibility for the 'whole' |

| Reverence for place |

Each of us influences the world by simply existing; and it is always wise to 'think globally'. An added measure of accountability is placed on globally influential enterprises such as governments and transnational corporations. (Responsibility comes with power whether we accept it or not.) One of the burdens of leadership is to influence society and world affairs in a positive way. Can a person, nation or company truly be 'successful' while causing human suffering or irreparable environmental damage? A more modern and complete model of success also considers impact on humanity and the earth's ecology.

Co-existence of Principles

Principles can only provide guidance. There are a myriad of situations that will never lend themselves to an easy formula, and the principles can only be used to trigger our conscience or guide our decisions. (As stated earlier, they are also useful for ethics education.)

It is important to note that principles of personal ethics are the first checkpoint in any situation, often overriding those at the professional and global levels. For example, when judging if a corporation has been socially responsible, we still need to consider principles of personal ethics as prerequisites. Contributions to charities and the like (doing good) may appear to be in the interests of society, but loses its significant if the corporation has not also taken responsibility to minimize the damage done by their core business operations (preventing harm). Similarly, trustworthiness is fundamental to professionalism, and so on.

As well, there are many times when principles will collide with other principles. Let's say you are a scientist who has been coerced by a corrupt military dictatorship into designing a biological weapon. Since the project is top secret, you have a professional duty to maintain confidentiality. But if there were an opportunity to inform United Nations observers, global and personal principles would justify divulging confidential information to protect the overall good of humanity. (Compare this to selling confidential information for personal gain.)

Still, the scientist is faced with a tough decision since they or their family could be harmed as a result of the whistle-blowing. This is where the principles must be viewed in the context of universality.

Principles versus Absolute Rules and Universality

It is tempting to apply these principles selectively, or only within set boundaries, such as

next-of-kin, countrymen, race, gender, etc. This is called cronyism. For example, I'm half Sicilian and also related to Gypsies. The Mafia will engage in despicable acts, but have a rigid code of honor within their own 'family'. Trustworthiness is highly valued, and they have a strong (but perverse) sense of justice. Many a gypsy will have no qualms about picking your pocket, but would never pick mine since I'm a relative. Limiting the application of ethical principles negates their value. They must *all* be applied to *everyone*.

There are also selective violations of the principles that society considers acceptable. Murder is illegal, unless we are fighting a (just) war. Lying is wrong, unless we are telling a child about Santa Claus, or saving them from harm. And so on. These interpretive variations cause people to conclude that there are no universal standards for ethics, and that moral responsibility is relative to cultural practices. This is a dangerous conclusion that relieves us of any responsibility other than what we choose in our own interests, what has been dictated by the rules of our faiths or governments, our personal values, or the local status quo.

As generic principles, these can be practiced in many different ways. For example, virtually all cultures value trustworthiness; but they have different views on truth telling. This is illustrated by Eastern vs. Western preferred values for harmony vs. forthrightness. An Asian being polite to maintain friendly relations may be perceived by an American as deceitful, although that is not the case. Both cultures agree in principle that deceit is unethical and trustworthiness is ethical, but misunderstandings can arise when the underlying principle is embodied in diverse ways that reflect different cultural values and virtues.

Morality can never be distilled into a universally acceptable list of absolute rules (even killing can be justified, vis. a sniper who refuses to negotiate). These principles are simply recurring patterns of ethically responsible behavior that our conscience can use as landmarks.

Qualifiers

It is important to understand that these principles are not the result of scholarly research, have not been proven in any way by empirical data or rigorous philosophical debate, and are not presented as an authoritative or complete list. In honoring the (professional) principle of full disclosure, I must state that I have no qualification as an ethicist. I created this framework primarily for my own use in business, where I found it difficult to get a clear idea of how ethics related to my everyday work. Like most business people, I had no time to study philosophy or theology in depth, and simply needed a quick reference tool.

The framework is intended to be acceptable to anyone, anywhere, and from any walk of life. I have personally tested it on audiences from diverse backgrounds, with opposing objectives, people at both ends of the political spectrum, in small and large groups, etc. In every case I asked for feedback on any principles that might be objectionable, inappropriate, or unclear. (The “reverence for place” principle serves to test for shyness since it is not an obvious one, especially to Western audiences.) With one minor modification, the framework has so far stood the test of over a thousand people attending talks and seminars. I hope to refine it further through feedback on this document.

Feedback may be sent to < services@crossroadsprograms.com > (Please do not send feedback of a religious nature, since the essential purpose here is to develop a secular guide.)

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This page is maintained for Larry Colero by Bryn Williams-Jones at the U.B.C. Centre for Applied Ethics. Substantive comments should go to the author. Comments about typos, etc., should go to: brynw@ethics.ubc.ca