Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics

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Welcome to the Summer Edition of *Australian Ethics*!

This edition's themes surround matters of truth, complexity, and life journeys. Alan Tapper interrogates the Golden Rule, showing that the ethical insight the Rule gives us is far less simple and useful than we may imagine. (Congratulations go to Alan for the recent acceptance of his paper on this topic by the International *Journal of Applied Philosophy*!) James Page considers the anthropological ethics and pursuit of truth at work in collaborating on life histories, especially when this occurs in the context of refugees who have lived through great violence. Next is an update by Jacqui Boaks on the *Ethics outside Philosophy group*, and their recent work-in-progress day. Peter Davson-Galle then invites us to interrogate the idea of 'needs'—showing the concept to be more complex and subjective than typically understood. Regular contributor, Theodora Issa, considers how sustainability and a moral compass can function within contemporary business practices and mindsets. Vandra Harris reflects on teaching ethics to development and global studies students, and the importance of an ethics of 'good enough' when the graduates will in their careers confront inevitable gaps between humanitarian goals and available resources. Finally, Joe Naimo considers the significance of acceptance, and how it opposes moral intolerance and apathy. Warm thanks to Charmayne Highfield for putting together another fascinating edition!

In broader AAPAE news, this year the AAPAE is looking into running an applied ethics stream in the annual *Australian Association of Philosophy* conference, which is being hosted in 2013 by the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne (2-6 July 2023). More details will follow soon in emails to members and on our website.

In 2023, the AAPAE is also looking into deepening its support for the Ethics Olympiads (https://ethicsolympiad.yahoosites.com/). The Ethics Olympiads have been running for many years, giving school students an opportunity to explore and argue about ethics issues in a way that encourages reflection and respect. In 2022, the AAPAE sponsored the Ethics Olympiad as it moved for the first time into tertiary institutions, with teams from different universities taking part. The AAPAE is looking into extending its support for the Tertiary Ethics Olympiad in 2023. More details will go up on our website soon, and any AAPAE members interested in being involved (including helping students in your university form a team, or being a 'judge' on the day) are welcome to contact me!

Best wishes for a great 2023 to all!

Hugh Breakey

FOUR PROBLEMS WITH THE GOLDEN RULE

Alan Tapper

The Golden Rule ("what you want done to yourself, do to others") is the most widely accepted concise statement of human morality. My view, however, is that the rule suffers from four faults. One, it fails to explain how to deal with non-reciprocation. Two, it fails to make clear that my obligations are obligations regardless of how I would wish to be treated by others. Three, it lacks any special value in explaining the right understanding of benevolence. And, four, it has no power to motivate benevolence. I explain these claims below.

Non-reciprocation
The first fault is simple to understand. Suppose you try to follow the Golden Rule. Two scenarios may then follow. In the first scenario, person A (you, for example) treats person B, as the Golden Rule recommends, with the sort of benevolence that A would wish B to treat him. Later, when A is in need, B sees the opportunity to reciprocate and takes that opportunity. In this sort of case the Golden Rule has worked well. Presumably, that is why many think it is a good moral rule.

But consider the other possible scenario: B does not reciprocate. B takes the benefits but gives nothing back in return. What should A now do? There are two options. One, A can carry on as before, practising the Golden Rule ethic. Or two, A can decide that enough is enough, the Golden Rule ethic asks too much. Person

A can say that he is within his rights to call a halt to his practise of the Golden Rule.

Common sense morality, I think, is on the side of the second option. Morality does not require A to follow the Golden Rule if the other person does not reciprocate. Person A has a right to not go on assisting person B. No-one's rights are violated if A chooses to stop following the Golden Rule in this sort of case.

But the problem is worse than that. Suppose that B takes the benefits and uses them for unjust or evil ends. What should A now do? To carry on as before, practising the Golden Rule ethic, now seems to be aiding and abetting injustice and evil. Common sense morality, in this sort of case, is very much on the side of ceasing to follow the Golden Rule. Common sense morality regards it as a duty to not aid and abet wrongdoing.

In general, then, Golden Rule ethics has no coherent response to the case of the non-reciprocating beneficiary of Golden Rule beneficence.

The objectivity of obligations
The second problem with the Golden Rule is that it fails to recognise the objectivity of obligations. The Golden Rule fails to make clear that my obligations are obligations regardless of how I would wish to be treated by others.

The scenario here is this. Suppose that person C practices the Golden Rule ethic. Suppose that C owes person D, let's say, $100. C, following the Golden Rule, asks herself whether if she were owed $100 she would wish for the money to be repaid. She concludes that she does not care whether the money is repaid. Being a logical person, she concludes from this that she is not obligated to repay the $100 she owes to D.

Obviously, in common sense ethics, whether C would wish D to pay C is quite irrelevant to whether C should pay D. Obligations are objective. The Golden Rule lacks this objectivity, because it rests on how a person would wish to be treated. The point here applies to any sort of obligation, not just to monetary debts.

The Golden Rule is logically flawed. It permits us to waive our obligations to others. Common sense morality permits us to waive others' debts to us, but not our debts to others.

Appropriate kinds of benevolence
Thirdly, the Golden Rule seems to work like this: You see someone in need, you think about how you would wish to be treated if you were in similar need, you conclude that you would wish to be treated benevolently, and so—following the Golden Rule—you choose to act benevolently.

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But what has been added by thinking about how you would wish to be treated? My answer is "nothing". We can easily see whether someone is in need of help, without any reference to how we would feel if we were in the same situation. So the third problem with the Golden Rule is that it lacks any special value in explaining when benevolence is appropriate.

This matters. Benevolence is a good thing, but only within a certain framework. It needs to be the right sort of benevolence. Would-be benevolence can go wrong in a variety of ways—for example, by involving injustice, or by creating dependency. Common sense morality knows this. The Golden Rule—doing as you would have others do to you—tells us nothing about that framework. The sort of benevolence that I would have done to me is not of any special value.

Motivating benevolence

The fourth problem with the Golden Rule is that it has no power to motivate benevolence.

Motivating benevolence might seem to be one of the great strengths of the Golden Rule ethic. But how is it supposed to do this? Suppose I am a selfish person. I do wish very keenly that others would treat me well. But how does my recognition of this lead to me wanting to treat them well? My problem is that I only really care about myself.

A person might become less selfish through the realisation that selfishness is self-harming. On this view, becoming less selfish is seen as a pathway to greater personal happiness or satisfaction. But the Golden Rule says nothing of this sort. It promises no such self-improvement to the person who follows the rule.

Benevolence, properly understood, involves attitudes as well as actions—attitudes such as kindness, generosity, good will, care for others. These must be motivated not by benefit to the benefactor but by simple concern for the beneficiary. Benevolence arises spontaneously. In its nature, it needs no motivation from how I would wish to be treated by others. The Golden Rule is here a hindrance, not a help, to motivating what is ethically desirable.

Some General Comments

In my view Golden Rule ethics is deeply at odds with what I think of as "common sense ethics". What do I mean by this? Common sense ethics has a number of key tenets.

- There is a basic distinction between justice and benevolence, both of which are morally good.
- Justice takes priority over benevolence.
- One can't act benevolently by behaving unjustly.
- Obligations arise from the necessity of avoiding injustice.
- Benevolence is necessarily voluntary and optional, not obligatory.

The Golden Rule reduces morality to a single criterion: acting as you would that others should act to you. It offers a procedure for obtaining moral guidance. The justice-and-benevolence morality reduces things down to two substantive moral concepts, whereas the Golden Rule employs no substantive moral concepts.

It may be that I am interpreting the Golden Rule differently from those who support it. Many defenders of the rule think of it as a "rule of reciprocity". That is, the rule promotes the practice of reciprocity. To me, this is obviously an incorrect interpretation. As I see it, the Golden Rule applies whether or not the other party follows the rule. It is a unilateral rather than a bilateral rule.

Finally, I haven't here mentioned the most common criticism of the Golden Rule, that it only works where there are common values. The weakness of this objection is that often values are the same, and in that case the objection cannot apply. In my view, values are often held in common. But that is a different topic.

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REFLECTIONS ON LIFE-HISTORY WRITING AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHICS

James Page

Ethics can perhaps be most simply thought of as what we should do, and thus logically professional ethics is what we should do in a professional endeavour. In this essay, I want to reflect upon some aspects of anthropological ethics, based upon my involvement in a life-history project telling the experiences of a former Congolese refugee.

Life-history writing is an established anthropological method, whereby the anthropologist interviews an informant and constructs a narrative which tells the informant's story. The anthropologist then goes through this narrative with the informant, to check for accuracy and to check that nothing has been left out. Typically, the published narrative will have two authors, the informant as the first author and the anthropologist as the second author.

We might say that this method is attractive because of the element of collaboration. Interestingly, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (2013) describes collaborative anthropology as ethically conscious anthropology and indeed Article 3.9 of the Australian Anthropological Society *Code of Ethics* says that anthropologists should seek joint status with research participants. In life-history writing, both the anthropologist and the informant collaborate in the creation of the story and have joint status.

The narrative in life-history writing is in the first person, which is ap-propriate—it is, after all, the informant's story. The first-person narrative also gives the writing a power and authority which might not otherwise be the case. It is the power and authority of the eyewitness, someone who has experienced the events which are being described.

> **Even for those of us who have not experienced violence, we often have the feeling that we would like to go back and change what has happened in our lives or what we have done.**

Life-history writing seems particularly appropriate when dealing with traumatic events. One of the challenges of dealing with traumatic (violent) events is that when these events are occurring there is a lack of control. For the person witnessing or experiencing violence, one of its most devastating ramifications is a sense of helplessness–there is a feeling that there is nothing the person can do to stop what is happening.

Obviously, there is no way we can go back and change the past. Even for those of us who have not experienced violence, we often have the feeling that we would like to go back and change what has happened in our lives or what we have done. Yet one small way

a person can fight back against trauma is to shape what the past looks like. This at least gives a person some control over the past, in that the person telling the story gets to frame and describe what happened.

Yet there may be a more fundamental ethical aspect to life-history writing, in that it encourages the truth-telling process. Truth may be seen as an unfashionable concept within the social sciences, although there is an argument that the purpose of anthropological writing, and indeed all writing, is in some way to tell the truth. Significantly, if one searches professional codes, it is difficult to find references to truth –some references to honesty, but not to truth.

Why then the imperative to tell the truth? The answer is that in part the notion of truth helps give sense to terrible events, sometimes involving shocking violence. I would argue that the notion of truth is related to the notion of moral order, and that in writing about terrible events, often those involved in such events are looking for some moral order or at least acting on the basis of faith that such a moral order exists.

We might not know what that moral order is–in other words, why terrible events happen. Yet by writing truthfully, or as truthfully and accurately as possible about terrible events, we affirm

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that there is some moral purpose or order to the world, even if we do not know what that purpose or order is. If this were not the case, we would not go to the trouble of telling the narratives of terrible events. Our actions in doing this truth telling are themselves significant.

Is telling the truth simple and easy? No. At a basic level, we all have to some degree a tendency to lie to ourselves. The challenge is to go past this, and to be as honest and direct as is possible. This also applies to life-history writing. The challenge is to be as open and direct as we can in the process of writing about past events, even though this invariably will be painful for the person telling or retelling their experiences.

The other challenge for telling the truth is that we live in a world which routinely engages in a failure to tell the truth—specifically about war and violence. We live in a world which routinely sanitises and mythologises war and violence, often under themes of sacrifice and heroic struggle. The value of life-history, and specifically life-history involving a personal experience of war, is that this narrative can undercut this level of dishonesty. In short, we can see what war and violence are really like.

Hopefully, all writing, including anthropological writing, involves a commitment to make the world a better place. If life-history writing as a genre can achieve some of the above objectives identified in this essay, then it may help serve this overall aim.

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References: Please contact the author direct for a list of references.

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ETHICS OUTSIDE PHILOSOPHY GROUP: WORK-IN-PROGRESS DAY

In January 2022, the WA group of academics working in "Ethics Outside Philosophy" held its inaugural "Work-in-Progress" day. This day was a shift away from informal and sporadic networking and was an opportunity for participants to present and seek feedback, on in-progress versions of papers. Given the increasing demands of academic workloads—especially for those in teaching intensive roles—we felt a focus on in-progress work would allow ourselves to create some momentum on projects we wished to begin or further, without requiring the time commitment of full papers.

We also took the opportunity to explicitly frame the approach and culture for the day. From the start we were clear that this should be a relaxed, collegial, constructive environment framed as a chance to share work that is currently at any stage of the 'in progress' pipeline and towards the next steps in each project.

The format was simple— participants were welcome to attend as audience members or presenters. Presenters chose between: a 25-minute session for an early idea or a 40-minute session for a well-progressed idea.

Both session types were an even mix of presenting time and feedback. Presenters identified in their submission what level of feedback and engagement they sought. These requests were included in the agenda, along with suggestions for the audience of the kind of feedback that would be helpful.

It was very gratifying for the organisers to see how enthusiastically participants engaged with the day. We quickly saw constructive, positive discussions form, and we have been thrilled to see at least two of the ideas presented progress from "early-stage ideas" to a completed paper and submitted for journal review.

The WA Ethics Outside Philosophy group will hold a second Work-in-Progress Day, in 2023, 12 months after the first Work-in-Progress Day. This time, participants are invited to deliver a 25-minute session as an update on the idea presented last year.

We would be pleased to hear from others who might have had success with similar approaches or who would like to explore whether a similar day might work in their own setting.

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THE "N" WORD

Peter Davson-Galle

In many applied ethical discussions, appeal is made to what individuals et c. ***need*** (often in deliberate contrast to what they might merely want). As usually deployed, I suggest that "needs" talk is perniciously obscurantist & should be eschewed. Why?

Note that "needs" talk is relational. It is incoherent to say that Horace is fatter without further clarification. Fatter than what? than Boris, than he was earlier or what? Sometimes context of utterance provides that clarification. The counterpart question for "needs" talk is: 'needs *for what*?'. The "what" here is some goal or aim or end state. And, in using 'needs', the goal is endorsed. In the context of this note, such endorsement is moral, a goal that should be achieved.

So, the first issue is obscurity. As the unstated (and perhaps not clear from context) end state is not explicit, it would help were it to be so. The speaker-valued state of affairs which some action is needed for might not be valued by others at all or might be valued but outweighed by some clashing value. Challenge is easier if one knows what is to be challenged. Interrogation of the mix of moral principles bearing on a decision situation is hindered by unfinished off talk of an action being needed if the end state value endorsed by the speaker is obscure.

And the situation is worse than that in two ways.

Take the claim that X is "needed". Now make the end state explicit to get 'X is needed for Y'. So, we have two component claims here. The first is an empirical claim that X is a necessary condition for Y; the second is a compound moral claim that Y is a good thing and that no competing end or combination of them outweighs Y in moral importance. Each of these might well be disputed.

Note that the empirical claim is very extreme. It is

that Y is not able to occur unless X does. This denies causal pathways to the achievement of Y that do not involve X. Understanding this *explicitly* assists one to generate criticisms that might lead to a more watered-down and more plausible empirical claim about the links between X and Y.

Challenge is easier if one knows what is to be challenged

Similarly, once made *explicit*, the two elements of the moral commitment to the end state might each be more readily challenged than if left unstated and unclear. To say that a goal is such that no competing one or combination of them outweighs it is, again, a rather extreme claim which would plausibly be open to challenge.

So: the messages so far are that "needs" talk is usually obscure and that *making its component bits and pieces explicit assists challenge* to what are, in part, rather extreme claims.

I suggest also that the oft-claimed distinction between **needs** and **wants** is confused. How so?

I start with the meta-ethical assumption that moral realism is false. (A safe assumption in that no sensible metaphysical story can be told about rightness, goodness and so on as objective features of external reality.) Allowing this, what one is left with is some sort of non-realist or subjective meta-ethical construal of morality. Rightness, goodness and so on, like beauty, are "in the eye of the beholder". A way of putting this is that moral claims by people are expressions of types of *wants*.

"Needs" talk is, as explored above, an amalgam of an empirical necessary condition claim and a moral "end" commitment. The latter is a sort of want. Given this, the best way of construing challenges like: 'you don't need that, you just want it' or 'you may not want that, but you need it' is as a clash of wants, not as a clash of a want and a quite distinct thing, a need. So, the seeming superiority of the

BUSINESS ETHICS AND A MORAL COMPASS FOR OUR TIMES

Theodora Issa

How should we teach expressions such as **virtue**, **morality**, **business ethics** and **moral compass**? Add to this list the trendy expressions of 'Sustainability', 'Sustainable Development' and 'Sustainable Business and Ethical Strategies'. The primary question here is not how should we teach but do we know where and when these expressions were first formed, shaped and fashioned? I will talk about this later, but first allow me to share with you a short story about my involvement in the teaching of sustainable development and ethical strategies.

I have been involved in the development and the facilitation of a unit at a French University, under the title of Sustainable Development and Business/Ethical Strategies. This was a challenging experience, as I needed to cater for the different cultures within the cohort who were gathering in France from different countries around the world. In addition, this same material was to be taught in relation to Green Information Technology at the same French institution.

This was an experience that continues to be with me. During this intensive course, I watched the students develop from non-believers in the idea of being sustainable and not even thinking of expanding their strategies to incorporate anything related to sustainability or considering the three Ps (People, Planet and Profit) into thoughtful individuals. I noticed at the beginning of the course the students would think of and advocate for profits rather than any other matter. It seemed to me that these Business School students had been taught the Machiavellian method where the end justifies the means. The students are taught that is the way the corporate world thinks and continues to think; they must satisfy the needs of the greedy individuals from the planetary resources without consideration of the fact that human beings have been appointed stewards of our precious planet. There seems to be some movement towards understanding the impact of human actions on our fragile and beautiful home, our planet earth. I hope it is not too late, and good results can still be achieved before such greed consumes whatever is left of our planet.

For me, my involvement and understanding of expressions like **virtue**, **morality** and **moral compass** is not recent, and began when I was introduced to the true meanings of these expressions through the Holy Bible at an early age. Even '**Good Business Ethics**' draws on the Holy Bible (Lamsa, 1933; for instance, Leviticus 19:11 "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another").

Sadly, good business ethics is now rare. The modern-day corporate person who boasts putting greed over good, contends that their definitions and explanations of such expressions are the ones we should follow—spruiking a "new normal". Definitions that are at odds with how these terms are mentioned in the Holy Bible. This "new normal" has fuelled inequality by creating a digital divide that promotes a lack of appreciation of the other brothers and sisters in the humankind who might be at a lessor status than them.

Over the years, we have allowed the corporate world to corrupt our view by falsely linking these expressions with the latest fads and trends, making us forget their true origin. We have become so obsessed in trying to find our happiness, thinking that by ditching anything relating to these expressions, an abundance of happiness would result. We are mistaken. As Aristotle opined, you cannot be virtuous without having the ability to act voluntarily, and responsibly, maintaining a good rational character. Likewise for the corporate world and for those who operate within it.

Being an ethical business has many advantages, but it is not without its challenges. Many businesses struggle to sustain the balance between being an ethical business and being profitable. At those times, where does our primary allegiance as human beings and corporate stewards lie?

SMALL SUCCESSES IN TEACHING ETHICS TO DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

Vandra Harris

At the end of each year the students in the capstone course of our Masters' program present on their research journey. They are nearing the end of a two-year Master of International Development or Master of Global Studies (MGS) program, and the capstone requires them to partner with industry on a project or internship, or to write a thesis. Part of their assessment includes identification of three 'most significant learning' moments, a reflection on their studies, and connections with the courses they have undertaken. The task is designed to push the students to reflect on how the many parts of their studies feed into the whole of them as current and future practitioners in diverse globalised professions. I have noticed that it also speaks to us as educators about how well we have done in our aims of modelling and fostering certain characteristics—in particular, to be 'creative, critical and curious, and to maintain humility in the face of development's complexity and messiness'[1].

One of the required courses in the Masters' program is *Practical Ethics for Development* (recently renamed *Global Ethics* to reflect the broader focus of the MGS program), which has been offered annually since 2014. The course guides students through a range of ethical frameworks, as well as practical application of a decision-making process I call the SODA model (Situation-Options-Decision-Analysis). The idea is to give grad-

uates a toolkit that consists of a structured way to respond to ethical challenges (SODA), together with a library of possibilities in the ethical approaches they have explored—in order that they feel equipped to engage with the diverse challenges of practice in an unequal world. Onetime President of AAPAE, Howard Harris, and I explored the efficacy of this in an article currently in press.

The ethics course concludes with the idea of 'ethically good enough'—whether we can strive and fall short, or whether we must always be ethically perfect.

I have been struck this year by how much the capstone students have referred to this ethics course in their reflections. This is partly because our program is very practically oriented—we ground students in the theory but focus on how that intersects with real-world practice. We challenge students to wonder why the same questions come up over and over again in decades of reports and academic literature; together we question why the terminology and buzz-words change but the underlying problems of inequality and injustice remain. In this context, a more esoteric course on applied ethics feels a bit of an anomaly

and yet the students consistently return to it as they reflect on their learning.

Many students have unpicked the pervasive utilitarian inclination of community organisations and government, particularly in the ways such organisations justify their use of funding that is woefully inadequate to meet the needs they hope to address. Students reflect on their own process of recognising the utilitarian urge, interrogating it, and coming to what they self-identify as a more complex understanding of what matters and how to achieve it—and they look for ways to balance this with the approach of the organisation they have been working with.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the orientation of the Masters' program, students are often highly engaged with the range of non-Western approaches we examine. One student recently introduced her partner organisation (a major Australian NGO) to the idea of communitarian and Ubuntu ethics. In particular, she focused on how this understanding is expressed in some of the communities they work with and can be used as a framework for improving partnership and collaboration on tricky issues such as child protection. Examining approaches including Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic and Australian Indigenous ethical approaches, has opened up conversations about universalism, colonisation and knowledge

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systems, and about how (and whether) we work with people and systems with framings contradictory to our own.

The ethics course concludes with the idea of 'ethically good enough'—whether we can strive and fall short, or whether we must always be ethically perfect. The intention is to review questions of universality and responsibility within applied ethics, and for students to examine their expectations of self and others. In particular we reflect on whether ethics is aspirational or an absolute, binary status one does or does not achieve. The intention is to reinforce foundations of resilience for when our graduates encounter the very real personal challenges of working in environments where they simply do not have the resources to meet all the needs they are trying to respond to. This is particularly acute when those needs relate to the most basic of human needs and may critically influence a person's very survival. To my mind it is not only an ethical requirement in preparing our students for work, but also a small act of service to these current and future professionals, resourcing them for a long career of service in challenging contexts.

This year, one student took that further in their capstone reflection, presenting a 'good enough compass', exploring not only her own capacity and limitations in professional practice, but also that of her colleagues and peers. By articulating her own culture and ethical framework, she was able to recognise the ways she was using this to determine success in others. Reflecting on this, she realised that having a clear sense of 'good enough' practice allowed her to design better tools, which others could adapt and use in pursuit of their own practical goals and within their own professional and ethical expectations. There was a liberation in this realisation, because it allowed her see others and their drivers more clearly–and thus work better with them for the shared goal of improving lives.

So often in our university courses we deliver information or training, and are left to draw our own conclusions about the utility and impact of the study. Certainly, there are (many) times I question the place of ethics as a required course in an International Development program. It is true that at times our team also questions the utility of the reflective component of the capstone. I think I have finally come to fully understand the place of both.

First, that teaching ethics in this way does indeed give students a toolkit for approaching challenging questions and devising their own answers; and second that students' reflections feed back into our teaching, showing us where we are impacting them and that we are achieving some of our lofty goals. Beyond this, though, the students inspire us with their ability to see, think and reflect in complexity, unexpectedly building our own resilience as educators and practitioners in the complex environments where we strive to learn, teach and change the world in our own small ways.

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1. RMIT International Development staff statement of development pedagogy (internal document) 2020.

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Should we continue to do what is right or pursue profit?

My hope is that all will be open to understanding the true meaning of these expressions and act accordingly, by strengthening ties between countries and continents to deliver better for all people and the planet, which ultimately will bring in the profits.

References
For a list of references and further reading, please contact the author direct.

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The concept of "Ethical Mindset" was coined in 2009 through my research 'ethical mindsets, spirituality and aesthetics in the Australian Services Sector'. The research is now being updated with the aim of assisting managers and individuals to enhance their capacity to manage ethically and strengthen the ethical and moral environments of their organizations and individual lives.

I invite you to participate in the 'Ethical Mindsets in the era of COVID-19' by visiting:
https://curtin.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8zRnCEEqidUKeEd

RUMINATING ON ACCEPTANCE: AN ETHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY PIVOTAL CONCEPT

Joseph Naimo

Social interactions, the kind most prominently involving ethical parameters, commonly revolve around the lack of acceptance, for a variety of challengeable behaviours and practices whose justifications fall short of satisfying intent. Similarly, the concept of 'moral intolerance', generally described as an 'unwillingness to accept views, beliefs, or behaviour' at variance from one's own, tends to invoke reaction of some kind, if only attitudinal.

But there appears to be a variant of moral intolerance related to the concept of acceptance that arises when what should be challenged is evaded, excused, even normalised. By this I mean a form of resistance or cognitive dissonance that manifests as wilful ignorance. That is, an intolerance that arises from apathy to act, which is not the same as a tolerance of difference. Nor is it the same as tacit resignation (loss of hope). No, we are dealing with something more deceptive that requires the agent wilfully turning a blind eye.

> **When competing ideologies or belief systems are central to the issues in question, oftentimes the unwillingness to accept the position of the other causes friction, frustrating reasonable resolve**

This kind of moral intolerance (characterised by apathy and an unwillingness to talk to one's dissenters) is evidenced mainly through the failings of individuals to challenge, to stand up against poor treatment, for example, that which is for those vulnerable lives impacted by unacceptable treatment. I have in mind practices and treatment exposed by the Aged Care Royal Commission and by the current Disability Royal Commission. Practices conducted under the guise of care, which involves sector-wide perpetration by individuals entrusted with the wellbeing of our most vulnerable, extending to those working in oversight agencies whose job entails preventing harm from abuse and exploitation.

When competing ideologies or belief systems are central to the issues in question, oftentimes the unwillingness to accept the position of the other caus-es friction, frustrating reasonable resolve. Indeed, the concept of acceptance serves pivotal forking roles. For example, in the field of identity, as in the field of comparative religion, as in the fields of socio-political and economic discourse. Taking one strand, whether an individual is a person with a disability or a person from the LGTBQ community matters not, what matters most for these individuals is to be accepted.

Across time, what any person makes of oneself, one does from the material life provides—much of which is beyond choice—which rests upon the facticity of one's life (i.e., biological and historical determinants). What we do with what we have available to us, recognising limitations, is attitudinally, if not physically, in our control to act.

We can now recognise the relationship between the concept of 'acceptance' and the concept 'truth'. For if the concrete circumstances of the world that impact our lives are out of our control and beyond anyone's control, then that truth is what makes accepting that reality a matter of recognition. But if the circumstances of our reality are not met by some test of truth, then acceptance will not easily be achieved. This is a point that makes ethics a dynamic process. It is what motivates the ethically minded to strive to change that which is unacceptable and to nudge those expressing moral intolerance as described above.

Real acceptance, from a Stoic perspective, requires the accepter to first answer two questions: 1) Can this (circumstance/condition) be changed? and 2) If the answer is no, what work needs to be done to accept this, be it emotional or otherwise? Seen from a psychological or existential perspective then, there is no use getting upset over something beyond

your control. As such, an important point to bear in mind, one's perspective or belief system will have a bearing on how one regulates their own experience of the prevailing conditions and circumstances presented to oneself.

But what if the answer to question (1) is yes? Though difficult to achieve perhaps, change is nonetheless possible. Herein lies the well of will-power. A spark of determination gives rise to the question: what work is required to bring about the desired or necessary change? Developing the virtues of honesty and integrity will help no end.

Perhaps the oldest recognised institution known to human kind is the family. Collaboration has been pivotal to our development no doubt. Yet what constitutes the family? The definition is not universally fixed and is not limited to the concept of blood relation.

Historically, however, because of past highly contentious and repugnant practices (e.g., stolen generation) if a family member was deemed disabled then usually this meant segregation, isolation, institutionalisation, or even worse, euthanasia (murder?). Today, being disabled, depending on one's geograph-

ical location, is many times better for the disabled individual than what it was like to be disabled even 20 years ago. But having certain rights, have along the journey, been hard fought for to achieve. Still however, combating ableism is an ongoing battle. The same can be said for members of the LGTBQ communities: their rights have been hard fought to secure. For both the disabled and for members of the LGTBQ communities, being accepted is front and centre.

What more can be said regarding the concept of acceptance? Majority rule: if fifty-one percent of a population vote one way and the losing forty-nine percent the other way, how does that losing proportion learn to accept the outcome? Acceptance is no mere feature of our mental lives. Think about it!

Please accept my apology. I accept you as my critic.

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References: Please contact the author direct for a list of references.

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"need" side of the clash (as conflicting with a mere want) is illusory.

An example: Horace says to Boris: 'you might not want to upskill your IT competence, but you need to'. Say that, when unpacked, this "needs" claim becomes: 'Boris having upskilled IT competence is a necessary condition for Boris being a more productive employee and him being a more productive employee is a good thing and no other competing end or combination of them is more important than Boris being a more productive employee'. But, in line with the above meta-ethical view, the moral bits of this amount to Horace wanting a more productive Boris and not having any rival wants that outweigh that. What is present is a clash of Horace's wants

and Boris's competing want (to avoid IT upskilling). Portraying this as something else loads the conflict illegitimately in favour of Horace. How could anyone who accepted something as *needed* resist doing it simply because they didn't want to?

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Peter Davson-Galle is a retired academic. His discipline is (analytic) philosophy and a sub-discipline is philosophy of education. A relevant publication is: Reason & Professional Ethics, Ashgate, 2009 (especially Chapter 8, Babble & Murk).

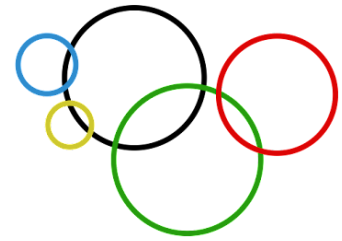**References**: Please contact the author direct for a list of references.

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