

Media Ethics Beyond Borders: A Global Perspective

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EXCERPTS FROM CHAPTER 1

**The Ethics of
Universal Being¹**

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We live in a world of unrelenting conflict and face a monumental challenge in producing a legitimate ethics. On the theoretical side of this difficult task, we need to be certain about our moral foundations. Without a defensible conception of the good, our practices are arbitrary. How can we condemn violent practices such as suicide bombings in the name of jihad except through widely accepted principles? We are stunned at the blatant greed and plundering of the earth, but without norms we are only elitists and hot-tempered moralists. Conflicts among people, communities, and nations need principles other than their own for their resolution. A credible ethics, as a minimum, must be fundamentally transnational in character.

Within communications, revolutionary changes are underway in media technologies. Digital information systems now dominate industrial societies worldwide. An ethics of integrity for media professionals must be developed in an era of overwhelming electronic instruments. The origins of media ethics are rooted in print technology. Journalism ethics in its contemporary form has included broadcast media and made some advances in understanding visual literacy. The dominant ethical issues in news, persuasion, and entertainment have been articulated in a pre-digital context. Now the media ethics agenda must be developed for the cyber world of search engines, online networking, and computer data bases. Some issues are new, some amplify or transform moral principles of the past, and others create new levels of complexity. And with a philosophical foundation in place, the difficult choices can be made more responsibly. A thin parochial ethics is obviously inadequate for coming to grips with today's global technologies. As a *Media Ethics Beyond Borders* takes shape in this volume, the overarching framework is a universal ethics of human dignity, truth, and non-violence, these principles themselves grounded in the sacredness of human life.

Within the turbulence at present – political, economical, and cultural – this paper argues for universalism in ethics. It demonstrates that the modernist construction is no longer credible. Enlightenment rationalism contending for absolutes across time and space has been exposed as imperialistic, oppressive of non-Western perspectives, and exclusively male. The subjective-objective dichotomy on which it is based is no longer epistemologically viable. While media ethics has generally depended on the ethics of rationalism, in the search of a universal foundation in a global world, reviving the modernist version is not viable.

However, an ethics of universal being is an alternative. It enables us to start over intellectually with the holistic notion of humans as humans-in-relation, rather than with a truncated notion of humans as rational individuals. It speaks against the claims of both philosophical and cultural relativism. It is held together by a pretheoretical commitment to the purposiveness of life in nature, defined in human terms as the sacredness of life. In our systematic reflection on this underlying perspective, three ethical principles emerge as entailed by it – human dignity, truth-telling, and non-violence. Instead of the individual autonomy of ethical rationalism, ethics begins with its opposite – universal human solidarity. And from that starting point, we enter our own communities and work professions with standards to guide our decisions and behaviour.

2. Sacredness of Life as Protonorm

The German philosopher Hans Jonas illustrates one strategy for establishing the idea of universal norms in ontological terms. He turns to nature rather than to modernist foundationalism rooted in a static, Newtonian cosmology. Natural reality has a moral claim on us for its own sake and in its own right. The philosophical rationale for human action is reverence for life on earth, for the organic whole, for the physical realm in which human civilisation is situated.

The Enlightenment worldview assumed that humans alone are conscious and purposeful and that nature is spiritless. Jonas contradicts this dichotomy. In his perspective, purpose is embedded in the animate world and its purposiveness is evident “in bringing forth life. Nature evinces at least one determinate goal – life itself” (Jonas, 1984, p. 74). Thus, Jonas concludes, “showing the immanence of purpose in nature . . . with the gaining of this premise, the decisive battle for ethical theory has already been won” (p. 78).³

Our duty to preserve life is to be understood as similar in kind to parents' responsibility for their children. It is an obligation "independent of prior assent or choice, irrevocable, and not given to alteration of its terms by the participants" (Jonas, 1984, p. 95). When new life appears, the forbears do not debate their relationship to it as though the offspring is neutral protoplasm and their responsibility a matter of calculating the options. Parental duty to children is an archetype of the natural accountability Jonas thus establishes – an *a priori* ought, grounded ontologically, an obligation that is timeless and non-negotiable.

Human responsibility regarding natural existence contributes the possibility of intrinsic imperatives to moral philosophy. It demonstrates the legitimacy of concluding that collective duty can be cosmic, primordial, and irrespective of our roles or contracts. Through the preservation of life as the ground for human responsibility, Jonas has established normative discourse to help contradict the postmodern assumptions that metaphysical truths do not exist and that no 'ought' can be derived from being.⁴

Jonas gives the preservation of life a taken-for-granted character. Our human identity is rooted in the principle that "human beings have certain inescapable claims on one another which we cannot renounce except at the cost of our humanity" (Peukert, 1981, p. 11). Rather than generating an abstract conception of the good, the primal sacredness of life is a catalyst for binding humans universally into an organic whole. In Peukert's terms, given the oneness of the human species, our minimum goal must be

a world in which human beings find ways of living together which enable every individual to work out a lifestyle based on recognition and respect of others, and to do so ultimately in a universal perspective not confined to small groups or nations.... Universal solidarity is thus the basic principle of ethics and the normative core of all human communication (p. 10).

In other words, there are protonorms that precede their reification into ethical principles. There is at least one primordial generality underlying the logos of systematic thought. And its universal scope enables us to avoid the divisiveness of appeals to individual interests, cultural practices, and national prerogatives. The sacredness of life, evident in natural being, grounds a responsibility that is global in scope and self-evident regardless of cultures and competing ideologies.⁵

In a study of ethical principles in 13 countries on four continents, the sacredness of human life was consistently affirmed as a universal value (Christians and Traber, 1997). Our duty to preserve life is taken for granted, outside subjective experience. The scientific view of the natural world cannot account for the purposiveness of life itself. Reverence for life on earth is a pretheoretical given that makes the moral order possible.

The veneration of human life is a protonorm similar in kind to the proto Germanic language – *proto* meaning beneath – a lingual predecessor underlying the Germanic languages as we know them in history. Reverence for life on earth establishes a level playing ground for cross-cultural collaboration on the ethical foundations of responsible communication. Various societies articulate this

protonorm in different terms and illustrate it locally, but every culture can bring to the table this fundamental norm for ordering political relationships, and such social institutions as the media. Its dynamic and primordial character contradicts essentialist and static views of human nature. It represents a universalism from the ground up.

4.1 Human Dignity

The universal reverence of life, in fact, presupposes the strongest possible definition of human dignity as

the respect-worthiness imputed to humankind by reason of its privileged ontological status as creator, maintainer and destroyer of worlds. Each self shares in this essential dignity insofar as it partakes in world-building or world-destroying actions. Thus human dignity does not rest on intention, moral merit, or subjective definitions of self-interest. It rests on the fact that we are, in this fundamental way that is beyond our intention, human....To assert dignity is to both acknowledge the factuality of human creative agency and to accept responsibility for its use (Stanley, 1978, pp. 69–70).

Different cultural traditions affirm human dignity in a variety of ways, but together they insist that all human beings have sacred status without exception. Native American discourse is steeped in reverence for life, an interconnectedness among all living forms so that we live in solidarity with others as equal constituents in the web of life. In communalistic African societies, *likute* is loyalty to the community's reputation, to tribal honour. In Latin-American societies, insistence on cultural

identity is an affirmation of the unique worth of human beings. In Islam, every person has the right to honour and a good reputation. In Confucius, veneration of authority is necessary because our authorities are human beings of dignity. Humans are a unique species, requiring within itself regard for its members as a whole. Respect for another person's dignity is one ethical principle on which various cultures rest.⁹

From this perspective, one understands the ongoing vitality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. As the Preamble states, "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (Universal Declaration, 1988, p. 1). Every child, woman, and man has sacred status, with no exceptions for religion, class, gender, age, or ethnicity. This common sacredness of all human beings regardless of merit or achievement is the shared commitment out of which we begin to generate notions of a just society.

4.2 Truth

Truth-telling is another basic ethical principle that follows from the ontological grounding of ethics in the sacredness of life. Language is the primary means of social formation and, therefore, human existence is impossible without an overriding commitment to truth. The most fundamental norm of Arab Islamic communication is truthfulness. Truth is one of the three highest values in the context of the Latin-American experience of communication. In Hinduism, truth is the highest *dharmā* and the source of all other virtues. Among the Sushwap of Canada, truth as genuineness and authenticity is central to its indigenous culture (Cooper, 1996). Living with others is inconceivable if we cannot tacitly assume that people are speaking truthfully. Lying, in fact, is so unnatural that machines can measure bodily reactions to it. When we deceive, Dietmar Meith argues, the truth imperative is recognised in advance: "Otherwise there would be no need to justify the exceptions as special cases....Those who relativise truthfulness, who refuse to accept it as an ethical principle, indirectly recognise it as generally valid" (Meith, 1997).

In Sissela Bok's (1979, cf. p. 19) terms, deception is as blatant, destructive, and morally outrageous as physical assault. In an intellectual trajectory connecting to Aristotle, the positive worth of truth-telling has been generally accepted at face value, with deception an enemy of the human order: "Falsehood is in itself mean and culpable, and truth noble and full of praise" (Aristotle, bk. 4, ch. 7). Though often only a rhetorical flourish and reduced in meaning, media codes of ethics typically appeal to truth as the cornerstone of social communication; they reflect in their own way its intrinsic value. As a primary agent of the symbolic theatre in which we live, the public media have no choice but to honor this norm as obligatory to their mission and rationale. The result is a richer epistemology than minimalist notions of accurate representation and objectivist ways of knowing. Truth-telling is axiological rather than a problem of cognition *per se* and integrated into human consciousness and social formation.¹⁰

4.3 Nonviolence

Nonviolence – a commitment to living together peacefully – is likewise a non-negotiable imperative rooted in the sacredness of life. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., developed this principle beyond a political strategy into a public philosophy. According to Philippe Nemo, in Emmanuel Levinas, interaction between the self and the Other makes peace normative. “The first word of the Other’s face is ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me” (Levinas, 1985, p. 89). In the face-to-face encounter, the infinite is revealed. The Other’s presence involves an obligation to which I owe my immediate attention. In communalistic and indigenous cultures, care for the weak and vulnerable (children, sick, and elderly), and sharing material resources, are a matter of course. Along with *dharma*, *ahimsa* (nonviolence) forms the basis of the Hindu worldview.

Darrell Fasching’s comparative study of religions identifies hospitality to strangers as a common commitment, “giving birth to a cross-cultural ethic of non-violent civil disobedience...through movements of liberation which seek to protect the dignity of those who were treated as strangers” (Fasching, 1995, p. 15; cf. 1993). The public’s general revulsion against physical abuse in intimate settings, and our consternation over brutal crimes and savage wars, are glimmers of hope reflecting this principle’s validity. Out of nonviolence, we articulate ethical theories about not harming the innocent as an obligation that is cosmic and irrespective of our roles or contracts.¹¹

5. The Challenge

If we could establish master norms, such as justice, truth, and nonmaleficence, we would have a frame of reference for critiquing media conventions and codes of ethics. It would ensure that the issues addressed in our pedagogy and theorising would be stitched into the common morality. Instead of seeking consensus about prescriptive maxims, master norms of this sort would favour intersubjectivity models and theoretical paradigms that are gender inclusive and culturally diverse. Rather than debilitating relativism, we would have a more vigorous response to the classic paradox – that is, one cannot insist on philosophical relativism without rising above it, and once outside it you have given it up.

Normative ethics grounded in a universal protonorm is a complex architecture. And to shape our communication theory and media practice more effectively by basic principles – themselves universal by virtue of their inscription in an underlying protonorm – more experiments are needed that come to grips with our moral obligation in global terms. Some glimmers of that consciousness are emerging over the environment; abusing one’s share of the world’s resources has now taken on moral resonance; global warming is no longer a political football but a public responsibility. But statecraft, demands for health care, educational strategies, military weapons, modes of transportation – all should be brought to judgment before the ultimate test. Do they sustain life, enhance it long term,

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contribute to human well-being as a whole? The challenge for the mass media is not just political insight in news and aesthetic power in entertainment but moral discernment.

In other words, does news discourse designed to irrigate public debate also connect the issue to universal norms, speaking not only to our minds but revivifying the spirit? Does the press graft the deeper questions underneath the story onto our human oneness? In the process of invigorating our moral imagination, the ethical media worldwide enable readers and viewers to resonate with other human beings who also struggle in their consciences with human values of a similar sort. Media professionals have enormous opportunities for putting this universal protonorm to work, through the sacredness of life enlarging our understanding of what it means to be human. This is discourse that irrigates public debate, refusing simply to focus on politics or entertainment *per se* but connecting the issues to universal norms, speaking not only to our minds but vivifying the spirit, grafting the deeper questions underneath the story onto our human oneness.

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