Where Have Our Ethics Gone?

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"A man without ethics is a wild beast let loose upon this world."
- Albert Camus -

You might wonder why a scholar would opt to ask a question as seemingly banal and commonsensical as 'where have our ethics gone' when you as the Ceylon College of Physicians and others are here to deliberate on your own intellectual, research and policy quests focused on the theme, 'Diversity, Inclusivity and Equity.' When I was asked to speak at this event, I was, at the same time, impacted by a serious personal crisis. It was obvious to me that it would be impossible to deal with my crisis without considering the implication of ethics and its absence in the broader sense. After all, my former university was censuring me for standing up for something I considered was a fundamental body of ethics: freedom of thought and expression on the one hand, and academic freedom on the other. The compromise of these ethics took place in a situation my former superiors and colleagues thought they should be seen as the guardians of what they thought were the interests of the state – in this instance, India. Hence, setting out from how ethics were both impacted and compromised in this situation, and reflecting further, it became abundantly clear that without serious consideration of ethics, you as a group of professionals would also not be able to work in your profession, and all of us would also not be able to collectively imagine our futures as a civilization.

The world we are used to and our taken-for-granted comfort zones in it would be in crisis if we moved too far away from our commitment to **what we used to call ethics**. And to reiterate, I was reflecting upon this in both personal and public contexts where ethics, as I thought I understood them, had become very distant from work and life. It is in explaining this general situation that John Berger has noted, "without ethics, man has no future. This is to say, mankind without them [ethics] cannot be itself. Ethics determine choices and actions and suggest difficult priorities." I have referred to ethics as 'what we used to call ethics.' This is a very conscious choice of words on my part. And this is because ethics in the way we used to understand them in the not-so-distant past that are still remembered by my generation and practised by my parents until they passed on, is not how ethics are understood or practised today. Often, it seems to me ethics is looked down upon as a reflection of foolishness and naivety, and therefore very casually violated too, often without consequences. And I am not talking of our country alone, but also our region and the world. To put it more bluntly, ethics are often seen as a liability and therefore something that can be done away with. This, in a sense, is my point of departure for what I have to say today.

Given this situation of liminality, what would ethics constitute in its most basic sense? Within a commonsensical understanding, I suggest ethics incorporates two interrelated elements.

First, ethics would mean an adherence to well-established standards of what is right and wrong. At this fundamental level, ethics would outline what people, as human beings, should do and what they should refrain from. At this level, ethics are generally understood in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, and notions of fairness. Ethics, for example, refer to those standards that impose reasonable

obligations to refrain from actions that are clearly wrong which includes, but are not limited to, rape, stealing, murder, assault, slander, and fraud.

But looking at Sri Lanka's parliament alone and the extended landscape of our local politics, individuals who commit all or many of these crimes are voted into positions of power by the people themselves. The situation is more or less very similar in South Asia. Against this backdrop, it almost seems as if these ethically wrong acts have become virtues.

So, where indeed have our ethics gone?

Second, "ethics incorporate(s) the study and development of one's ethical standards" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010). We know that personal "feelings, laws, and social norms can deviate from what is ethical" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010). Given this possibility, "it is necessary to constantly examine one's standards to ensure that they are reasonable and well-founded" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010). Ethics, in this sense then also refer to "the continuous effort of studying our own moral beliefs and our moral conduct, and striving to ensure that we, and the institutions we help to shape, live up to standards that are reasonable and solidly based" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010). In effect, ethics have a component of reflection through formal close examination in societies where ethics are taken seriously. But in our context, either in schools, in universities or in other spaces of citizenship training, do we engage in this kind of reflection?

So, where have our ethics gone?

This is a question I constantly asked myself and continue to ask when my own personal crisis began to unfold in my former university. The "deafening silence" of my colleagues in the midst of an unreasonable and targeted attack on me for merely standing up to a PhD student's right to free expression and academic freedom meant that South Asian University, for which incidentally your tax rupees must also have been channeled as a SAARC initiative "will never again stand for academic freedom" (Kuntamalla 2024). As I noted in public at the time, "the fallout of this silence and the institutionalized and choreographed timidity is that no critical and self-reflective research will ever be undertaken at the South Asian University" again (Kuntamalla 2024). This is one small example of the long-term consequences in a single institution when ethics are deliberately placed on the back burner in the interest of mere personal convenience and gain.

I want to flag three misconceptions we often have about what constitutes ethics:

One, people often equate ethics with religion. The main religious traditions in our country certainly stress high ethical standards in the conduct of their adherents. But this generalization makes sense if we only focus on the doctrinal and textual positions of these religions. However, even this cannot be sustained if we consider examples from the public and private utterances and lives of many people who claim to be religious, and particularly religious leaders. The reduction of ethics into religion is also very dangerous because then it could also mean that only religious people would carry the burden of ethics. But we know ethics should matter in the conduct of life of both the pious and the non-believers. For sure, religion can set "high ethical standards and can provide intense motivations for ethical behavior" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010).

But we know from our own experience in this country, and by looking at our immediate regional neighborhood, the first casualty in the practice of local and national politics, are usually ethics. And this

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compromise is often made in the name of religion. So, reducing ethics to religion, and that too without proper reflection is always a grave mistake.

Two, people also often believe being ethical means following the law. Without doubt, the law is expected to incorporate ethical standards drawn from bodies of legal codes, history and civilizational memory. But laws are not always the same as ethics. Let me explain. Championed by unprincipled autocrats and adopted in dubious political climates, laws could very drastically deviate from what are ideal ethical standards for a society.

The recent attempts in Sri Lanka to stifle freedom of expression under the provisions of the ICCPR Act (which is based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), and the much longer-term experience of using the Prevention of Terrorism Act for similar purposes are classic examples. The manner in which blasphemy laws in Pakistan have been drafted and applied historically is another example. Similarly, 'National Security' Laws, 'Anti-Terrorism' Laws and elements of the Public Safety Act have been used in India to repress dissent and to suspend fundamental rights, particularly of minorities in specific situations.

So, in these situations, when laws themselves are proven to be unethical in their application, the ethical position would be the commitment to change these laws and not to become subsumed by their erroneous logic.

Three, many of us also believe that being ethical means adhering to what society considers acceptable. It is generally correct that most of us would accept societal standards and norms that are ethical. Our respect towards elders is one such position. But standards of behavior in any society can deviate from what is ideally ethical to not only to what is simply unethical, but also clearly tyrannical. It is not an exaggeration to say that "an entire society can become ethically corrupt" under specific historical conditions (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks, and Meyer 2010). To use a personal example, whatever society's ideals are, caste, religious and ethnic discrimination is strictly not possible for me. I have never engaged in such discrimination, and I never will. It is about adhering to an ethical principle irrespective of society's dominant trends. The way in which draconian social and political orders have been planned, implemented and broadly accepted by some societies is a classic example of an entire society becoming ethically compromised. Nazi Germany and South Africa under apartheid are two recent examples.

So, what does all this mean?

What concerns me as a person, as a citizen, as an inhabitant of the planet, and I think the least important in this context, as a scholar, is that 'ethics', as an idea and as a set of good practices as understood above, have lapsed from the commonsense in our country; in our extended geopolitical neighborhood; and, in varying degrees, in the world we live in. For those of my generation, the value of ethics came from our parents which they had learnt as part of their colonial education and as part of their citizenship training to be good colonial subjects. Whatever other failures that education might have had due to the very imprint of coloniality and its necessary brutality, it did give a very strong sense of ethics within the colonial framework.

But even after independence, aspects of that education and the ethics that came with it, held sway as a central preoccupation of many people in my parents' generation. For people like my father who was a government surveyor, my mother who was a school teacher and my father-in-law who was a civil servant

– just to take three personal examples, doing anything wrong, and therefore unethical, was simply unthinkable. But their principled positions at times did have negative personal consequences. While there were examples to the contrary even at that time, there was a strong sense of what they called the 'right thing.' This was their reference to ethics. But today, that quotidian emphasis is not something that is easily seen. Our present-day education system does not seem to place too much conscious emphasis on ethics. I am also not sure if this is even done within the family as it used to be. It seems to me, in this time and age, being ethical is understood as depriving oneself of economic, social and political opportunities.

This rupture of ethics, its distancing from day-to-day life is most clearly manifest in our politics at all levels. It is not that an old set of ethics has been deliberately replaced by a new one. It is more like ethics have been overdetermined by what I would call 'non-ethics.' That is, a discourse on power, money, avarice and influence has made adherence to ethics and reflection on ethics immaterial, relegating them to a position of insignificance and relative erasure.

It may be this kind of situation that the 20th century Indian thinker B.R. Ambedkar had in mind when he noted, "history shows that where ethics and economics come in conflict, victory is always with economics" because, as he observed further, "vested interests have never been known to have willingly divested themselves unless there was sufficient force to compel them." Ambedkar of course was talking with the benefit of life experiences of his time.

You may think that I am being unreasonably dreamy, and too idealistic, and our world still knows about ethics, and that I simply do not see it. I have actually been told this before. But to me, the problem is not that we do not know about ethics today, but that we do not allow ethics to blossom as an integral part of our lives, and rule our lives, work and conscience. The problem with ethics anywhere historically is that they tend to be very fragile and are usually among the first casualties in any condition of catastrophe or challenge.

Today, the landscape of ethics and its absence has become more complicated. So far, I have talked about ethics with reference to what many of us can relate to. But what does the future hold for us? What kind of challenges would, for example, artificial intelligence (AI) pose in terms of ethics in domains such as education in dealing with something as fundamental as the truth? Last year, in my class on Research Methods, I asked my students to come up with an actionable research proposal for funding as part of a training program.

By the time I ended my two-hour session, one of the students, under my suggestion gave me a 6-page proposal written by Chat GPT. I also asked them to give me a non-machine generated proposal in a week. Ultimately, in comparison, there was far more sense, nuance and context in what my human class did than what Chat GPT did. But will that separation and that concern for ethics over ownership and authorship in this emerging brave new world always hold?

In my monologue today, I have not tried to provide you with ideal answers. To provide answers to such complex questions is not the role of a sociologist. That is the job of self-proclaimed religious gurus with divine connections, know-it-all politicians we may or may not believe in and certainly street corner magicians. My job and that of others like me is to simply situate problems in context and explore what is possible and what is at stake. That, I think I have done.

As you begin your deliberations within the theme, 'Diversity, Inclusivity and Equity,' you may also want to consider why you came up with this theme in the first place in this time and age when these three principles should already be well ingrained in the way we think and work. But if you were concerned enough to bring this up as a theme, perhaps we share the same anxieties about ethics in our society and work environments, and what our collective futures may look like.

The final question you may wish to ask yourselves is, where would our youth learn and be inspired by ethics that can rebuild a decent world for them. It certainly cannot come from the life lessons imparted by political leaders and publicly vocal religious leaders of our time. There is a vast difference between what is preached by them and what is actually done. For me, this dichotomy is a cartography of the collective failure in our times. This is what Bertrand Russell meant when he noted, "we have in fact, two kinds of morality, side by side: one which we preach but do not practice, and another which we practice, but seldom preach."

My request and suggestion is that we can no longer bank on politics or religion to re-invent our disappearing sense of ethics for the future. We also cannot hope for divine intervention or anticipate that someone else in the form of a local superman or superwoman, or in Sri Lanka's case a super reptile rising from the depths of a sanctified river will resolve our problems.

It can only come from individuals like us whose only vested interest should be our own **stake** in an ethically sound collective future, and to bring that urgency to our families, workplaces and the wider public sphere.

Thank you.

References

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