

Ideal versus Real World Ethics especially during Emergencies and Pandemics

Maria Fernandez¹, Nicholas Antao², Anu Kant Mital³

¹Student, F.I.A.M.C Biomedical Ethics Centre, Mumbai

^{2,3}Faculty, F.I.A.M.C Biomedical Ethics Centre, Mumbai

Corresponding Author: Anu Kant Mital

E-mail: akmital@gmail.com

Biomedical ethics must stand firm on the 4 main pillars of ethical principles of Beneficence, Non-maleficence, Autonomy and Justice. An ethical approach to the varied situations and circumstances in our lives is of great value to humanity, to offer maximum benefits to all affected by any of the adverse or fruitful events.

When an epidemic or pandemic strikes, the situation becomes inherently complex, when civic authorities are expected to promote an understanding and acceptance of necessarily imperfect—but beneficial—public health measures. Navigating through the recent unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic which posed innumerable situations that challenged the norms of ethical behaviors, the ethical distribution of allocating life-saving medical resources and protecting public health interventions seemed to be challenged causing exploitation of the vulnerable groups. The problem of making ethical decisions escalated when the needs of the population affected by the virus by both: whether rich or poor superseded the available resources.

One of the key challenges in crisis situations was the scarcity of resources, such as medical equipment, personnel, and hospital beds. Healthcare providers may be forced to make difficult and quick decisions, prioritizing certain patients over others based on factors like diagnosis, likelihood of survival, or potential to benefit from treatment. Who to serve first? It was the greatest dilemma faced by those in authority.

Clinical trials, hesitancy towards drugs and vaccines, political preferences towards vaccine supplying pharmaceutical companies, magnified the risk of unethical conduct. Healthcare providers often face intense pressure and stress during emergencies and pandemics. The urgency of the situation, coupled with limited resources and overwhelming cases, contributed to moral distress and compromised ethical decision-making.

When authority comes with freedom, responsibility and accountability, often morality is on a fence. It's a stressful decision to fulfill all the 4 basic concepts of ethical decision making. It means taking a courageous decision encompassing leadership with respect, justice, integrity and transparency, especially when the decision is beneficial to some people and the same decision may adversely affect the remaining people. It is imperative that transparent reporting mechanisms, ethical review boards, and independent monitoring bodies can help identify and address instances of unethical behavior, ensuring that healthcare providers are held accountable for their actions even in emergencies.

World Biomedical Advisory Committee WHO-World Health Organization; based on humanitarian grounds plans and provides detailed guidance to the topics in view of emerging concerns and adds a number of newer areas of concern. WHO- Country offices create policies and processes for their governments, health-care systems, and clinicians. Because of the newer scientific and technical advances several nation-wise consultation programs are held. Suitable options for consent, maintenance of confidentiality are set. Ethical policies for general and specific epidemics and pandemics conditions are revised periodically. Most countries conduct National

Research, orientation programs and training to ensure prior preparedness, consent and documentation, on sensitive humanitarian emergencies for domestic and international events like wars, and natural catastrophes like earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, epidemics or pandemics. By anticipating potential dilemmas and establishing clear protocols, healthcare systems can better uphold ethical standards in crisis situations.

In our country, ethics, unfortunately, still seems as, not part of the existing teaching curriculums in both the medical and non-medical streams. This influences both the quality of output in biomedical and health research and the protection of human participants for which the ethical conduct of research is essential. The ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) National Ethical Guidelines document sets the standards for the ethical requirements to be followed in biomedical research in India. It is expected that all biomedical and health research in the country should follow this guide which will go a long way towards improving the quality and outcomes of research.

With issues such as abortion, contraception, euthanasia, professional misconduct, confidentiality, truth telling, professional relationships with relatives, religion, traditional medicine and business concerns, many a times, there arises a conflict between the ethical ideal and the real world.

Ethical ideals: Ethical ideals serve as guiding stars, illuminating the path toward a more just and compassionate society. However, as we journey through the complexities of human existence, we often encounter the stark contrast between these lofty aspirations and the harsh realities of everyday life. The interplay between ethical ideals and the practicality of the real world raises fundamental questions about the nature of morality, the challenges of implementation, and the compromises demanded by circumstances. Let's explore the dynamic tension between ethical ideals and real-world constraints, examining how individuals and societies navigate this intricate moral landscape.

The Nature of Ethical Ideals: Ethical ideals embody the highest aspirations of humanity, reflecting timeless principles of justice, fairness, and compassion. Rooted in philosophical traditions and moral teachings, these ideals provide a moral compass to guide our actions and decisions. They inspire us to strive for excellence, to treat others with dignity and respect, and to create a world characterized by harmony and equality. Examples of ethical ideals include concepts such as equality, human rights, and the inherent worth of every individual.

Challenges of Implementation: Despite their noble intentions, ethical ideals often collide with the complexities of the real world. The implementation of these ideals is fraught with challenges, ranging from practical limitations to institutional barriers and cultural differences. For instance, achieving equality requires dismantling entrenched systems of discrimination and privilege, which may provoke resistance from those who benefit from the status quo. Similarly, upholding human rights necessitates navigating geopolitical tensions, economic interests, and competing values, making it difficult to translate abstract principles into concrete action.

Making Compromises: In the face of these challenges, individuals and societies are often forced to make difficult compromises and trade-offs between ethical ideals and realistic concerns. While ideals provide a moral anchor, they must be balanced against the practical realities of the situation. This can involve making difficult choices between competing goods, prioritizing certain values over others, or accepting incremental progress towards ethical goals. However, the danger lies in allowing realistic pragmatism to overshadow principles, leading to moral compromise and ethical erosion.

Navigating the Moral Landscape: Navigating the moral landscape requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between ethical ideals and real-world constraints. It demands moral courage to uphold principles in the face of adversity, creativity to find innovative solutions to complex problems, and humility to recognize the limitations of our knowledge and perspectives. Moreover, it calls for collective action and solidarity, as individuals and communities work together to bridge the gap between ethical aspirations and lived realities. Conflicting discernment of "truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short term versus long term, and / or justice versus virtue". It is needed to balance the situations.

Ethical ideals represent our highest aspirations for a just and compassionate world, yet they often collide with the practical complexities of everyday life. The tension between ideals and realities raises fundamental questions about the nature of morality and the challenges of implementation. Navigating this moral landscape requires moral courage, creativity, and collective action. While compromises may be necessary, they must not come at the expense of our principles. Ultimately, it is through the continual pursuit of ethical ideals, even in the face of adversity, that we move closer to realizing a more just and humane society.

It is an easy task to talk of ethical behavior in the Bio medical field, but many times the ethical boundaries are violated in emergencies and pandemic situations because of a paradoxical ethical dilemma that comes up when there are two or more options, but neither of them is the best ethical or moral options.

Ethical dilemma can pose conflicting discernment between:

- Truth versus Loyalty,
- Individual versus Community,
- Short term versus long term, and
- Justice versus Virtue.

Some may be related to corruption, but most of the times it could be because of competing values, norms or interests, misaligned incentives, economic growth, or clashing cultures.

Truth & Loyalty: When there are no easy solutions, interpersonal dynamics and situational factors, the perspectives on how to navigate the tension between truth and loyalty surface on the decision makers' inherent characteristics, such as honesty, loyalty and integrity. Emphasis on doing the greatest good for the greatest number without following the set rules, may be taken as a guiding principle of conduct for the sake of utilitarianism. Finding the right balance between truth and loyalty requires careful deliberation and moral discernment. Absolute loyalty or truthfulness may not be possible and demands a compromise.

Individual versus Community: Ideal ethics versus real-world ethical considerations are generally examined, when the perspectives of individuals versus the broader community have a negative effect on the dynamics of either of them.

Ideal Ethics for Individuals: In an ideal ethical framework, individuals prioritize principles such as honesty, integrity, and respect for human dignity. They strive to act in accordance with their personal values, guided by a strong moral compass and a commitment to doing what is right, regardless of external pressures or consequences. Ideal ethics for individuals emphasize autonomy, individual rights, and the importance of personal integrity in decision-making processes.

In this idealized view, individuals are seen as moral agents with the capacity and responsibility to make ethical choices based on reasoned judgment and conscience. They are expected to uphold ethical principles even when faced with difficult dilemmas or conflicting interests, recognizing their intrinsic worth as moral beings capable of self-determination and moral autonomy.

However, in the real world, individuals often face a multitude of external factors and constraints that can complicate ethical decision-making. These may include societal norms, cultural expectations, economic pressures, and institutional structures that influence behavior and shape moral choices. One classic example could be the patrilineal nature of community living whereby discrimination is done between the male & female child. In navigating these complexities, individuals may find themselves torn between their personal ethical convictions and the demands of the environment in which they operate. Also in another scenario, when an employee may encounter ethical dilemmas in the workplace, where adherence to ethical principles may conflict with expectations for productivity, profitability, or organizational loyalty. Similarly, individuals may face moral quandaries in their personal lives, where considerations of family dynamics, social expectations, and personal relationships intersect with their ethical values.

In this view, ethical principles extend beyond the actions of individuals to encompass broader systemic issues such as inequality, discrimination, and the distribution of resources. Ideal ethics for the community emphasizes solidarity, mutual aid, and a commitment to creating a fair and equitable society for all members.

Translating ideal ethics into real-world practice at the community level can be challenging due to competing interests, power dynamics, and structural barriers. Communities may grapple with issues such as resource scarcity, political polarization, and social fragmentation, which can hinder efforts to promote ethical principles and achieve collective goals.

Moreover, communities may face ethical dilemmas that require trade-offs between competing values or interests. For example, policymakers may need to balance the rights of individuals with the need to protect public health during a pandemic, leading to difficult decisions about measures such as quarantine, lockdowns, and vaccine distribution.

Directing the tension between ideal ethics and real-world considerations requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges the complexities of human behavior, social dynamics, and institutional influences. While ideal ethics provide a guiding vision for moral action, individuals and communities must also grapple with the practical realities of ethical decision-making in diverse and dynamic contexts. By cultivating ethical awareness, fostering dialogue, and promoting collective accountability, individuals and communities can strive to bridge the gap between ideal ethics and real-world practice, working toward a more just, compassionate, and ethical society for all.

Short-Term And Long-Term Ethical Dilemmas: Short-term and long-term ethical dilemmas present distinct challenges and opportunities for ethical decision-making. While short-term dilemmas demand immediate action and decisive resolution, long-term dilemmas require sustained reflection, foresight, and a consideration of intergenerational justice. By adopting a balanced and principled approach to ethical decision-making, individuals and organizations can navigate the complexities of short-term and long-term dilemmas with integrity, compassion, and commitment to the common good. Cutting down trees for a comfortable today can be a curse for the next generation. Depleting the oil, mineral and water resources can cause survival threats in the future for human existence. Ethical decision-making in these contexts requires a commitment to moral integrity, a willingness to confront complexity and uncertainty, and a recognition of the interdependence of ethical issues across time and space. The interplay between ethical ideals and the practicalities of the real world raises fundamental questions about the nature of morality, the challenges of implementation, and the compromises demanded by circumstances.

Justice and Virtues: The term “Whistleblowing” can best explain the ideal ethical dilemmas and those of the real world. A whistle blower is generally an employee or promoter for an organization, who has documentary evidence about confidential illegal matters, and chooses to expose and report the matters for the sake of Justice.

From the perspective of justice, the whistleblower is confronted with the duty to uphold fairness, accountability, and the rule of law. By exposing the wrongdoing within the corporation, the whistleblower seeks to ensure that justice is served and that those responsible for unethical behavior are held accountable for their actions. However, pursuing justice in this context may come with significant risks and consequences, including retaliation, loss of employment, and damage to personal reputation. From the perspective of virtues, the whistleblower is guided by principles such as honesty, integrity, and courage. By speaking out against corruption, the whistleblower demonstrates moral courage and a commitment to ethical values, even in the face of adversity. Upholding virtues in this situation requires the whistleblower to act with integrity, transparency, and a genuine concern for the common good, despite the potential personal cost.

The example of the whistleblower illustrates how ethical dilemmas in the real world often involve complex interactions between justice and virtues. Navigating these dilemmas requires moral courage, integrity, and a commitment to ethical values, even in the face of adversity. By upholding justice and virtues in their actions, individuals can contribute to a more ethical and just society, even in the most challenging circumstances.

The topic explores the contrast between idealized ethical behavior in the biomedical field and the reality of ethical boundary violations during emergencies and pandemics. While ethical principles

provide guidance, the pressure and complexity of crisis situations can lead to compromises. Examples include issues of resource allocation, triage decisions, and breaches of patient confidentiality. Navigating this tension requires recognizing the challenges of balancing ethical ideals with practical realities, such as scarcity of resources and the need for swift decision-making. Despite the difficulties, upholding ethical standards remains crucial for maintaining trust and integrity in healthcare.

RECOMMENDED READING

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