
The First Ten Principles for the Ethical Administration of Nursing Services

Leah L. Curtin

At the dawn of the 20th century, postmodern academics stressed the cultural differences among human beings. Philosophers predicated differing value systems based on these cultural differences, and conflicts have arisen among those who hold distinctly different religious traditions. Many people believe there can be no universal system to explain reality and thus form the basis for norms in human behavior. However, at the close of the 20th century scientists and philosophers had come full circle: physics quite literally became *metaphysics*, and ethical systems made sense. Rush Kidder interviewed two dozen “men and women of good conscience” from around the world and asked them if there is a single set of values that wise people use to make decisions. They answered with a resounding YES! Thus, in addition to the customary principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, honesty, and so forth, the author proposes a set of ethical principles based on those universal values, adapted to fit nursing administrators’ dual responsibilities. Ethical decision making and behavior, the author contends, help to reconcile perspectives and interests and to keep values and mission uppermost in one’s mind. In the process, ethical behavior establishes long-term relations of trust and cooperation, which in turn promote consistency and stability in an unstable world. Key words: *ethics, health care ethics, moral responsibility, nursing administration, personnel management, resource allocation*

It really doesn't matter whether you are Muslim or Christian or Jew. In every religion, in every country, in every region at every time, there are some basic principles. We all know what good is, what correct is, what obligatory is—all those things that compose ethics. They are the same.^{1(p. 239)}

Sergio Munoz

SO MANY POSTMODERN academics have stressed the cultural differences among human beings,² so many philosophers have predicated differing value systems based on these cultural differences,³ and so many conflicts have arisen among and between persons who hold to distinctly different religious traditions⁴ that many people believe there can be no universal system, no metaphysic, to explain reality and thus form the basis for norms in human behavior.⁵ Many also believe that there are no rights or wrongs in human conduct—only varying assumptions based on transient beliefs conditioned by circumstances.⁶ God, if there is one, is irrelevant. Metaphysics is dead. Each person must create his or her own reality—

and that includes a personal concept of right and wrong, good and bad. This was the state of secular philosophy at dawn of the 20th century—and, in many ways, the anguished *cri de coeur* of the existentialists.⁷ Indeed, for many it describes the state we are in today, and humans are left swinging—like so many leaves scattered in the wind.

The situation in science was quite different one hundred years ago: scientists around the world believed they had arrived at an accurate picture of the physical world. Indeed, many scientists proclaimed that the study of the physical world was complete—no big discoveries were left to be made, all future work in science would be but an explanatory footnote. Strict adherence to the immutable laws of science and reason offered assurance in an insecure world!⁸ Such arrogant

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certitude, however, was soon to be shattered. Who would believe that science—pure theoretical physics—would prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the ancient metaphysicians were, after all, pretty much on target?

The Scientific Foundations of Ethical Concern

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let us put a timeline on the scientific developments that led to the rebirth of a “philosophical” system—and thus the possibility of an ethical system. In the 1890s, when all of physical science was thought to be known, Roentgen discovered X-rays that passed through flesh. How could this be? Then Henri Becquerel puzzled over the ability of a metallic element (uranium) to cloud a photographic plate even though it had no direct contact with it. How could this be? And in 1897, J.J. Thompson discovered the electron—a tiny particle that seemed to “carry” electricity. Physicists studied these phenomena, and others that followed them, and postulated that each of them represented energy that took the form of continuous, flowing waves. In fact, the recognition that all forms of energy shared this wavelike nature was one of the great discoveries of the late 19th century. The problem is, as Max Planck proved a few years later: energy did not consist of waves, but rather of particles, which he called “quanta,” that usually, but not always, “flow” in wavelike patterns.

Two decades later, Albert Einstein determined that light itself was composed of particles, which he named “photons.” And eventually, Einstein developed his Theory of Relativity (the balance of matter and

energy in the universe), and the atomic age was born. However, two decades after that (1964), J.S. Bell uncovered the unity of the *subatomic* world and postulated that all-that-is is fundamentally inseparable. What came to be known as Bell’s Theorem was later confirmed experimentally by Alain Aspect at the University of Paris in 1972: a discovery described by physicist Henry Stapp of the University of California at Berkley as “the most profound discovery in the history of science.”⁹

Meanwhile, David Bohm of London’s Birbeck College published *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, in which he postulated that both the material world and consciousness are one: parts of a single unbroken totality of movement. According to Bohm, the totality of existence is enfolded within each “fragment” of space and time. Thus a single object, thought, or act affects—however infinitesimally—everything else because all are part of the same unbroken whole.⁹ “This is what Camus meant when he said, ‘When I choose for myself, I choose for all mankind.’ This is what the Taoists mean when they say, ‘If you cut a blade of grass, the universe trembles.’ And this is what Jesus Christ meant when He said: ‘Whatsoever you do . . . you do unto me.’”¹⁰ What is yet to be understood is how the individual exists within the whole, and how the whole exists within the individual. What is even more puzzling, if possible, is: How is consciousness—intentionality—infused, formed, and directed within the one?

Scientists and philosophers have come full circle; physics quite literally became *metaphysics*, and ethical systems make sense—are, in fact, demanded by the findings of science. The leaves finally have learned that they are part of the tree!

Ethics in the “New Age”

Neils Bohr, one of the most important scientists of this century, said: “Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory, does not understand it.”¹¹ Perhaps because its implications are “beyond our capacity to comprehend,”^{8(p. vi)} we humans stubbornly continue to focus on fragments rather than the whole. Our preference for fragmentation is manifested in our language, laws, and behaviors. It has even become politically correct: we are not one, we are many—so celebrate the diversity, respect it, promote it—despite the fact that it feeds the human inclination to isolate people and groups as “other” than oneself, thus “justifying” prejudice, selfishness, privilege, greed—even genocide.

People create barriers between themselves and others by focusing on *nonessentials*—economic status, race, disability, and the like (what the old “natural law” philosophers used to call the *accidents* of the human condition;¹² that is, these conditions have nothing to do with your worth as a human being)—and ignoring the *essentials*: *we are all fundamentally one*.¹ Thus more people were agitated than comforted when Rush Kidder found substantial agreement among people who represented all the major races, religions, and political systems about what is important in life (we call them values). Kidder interviewed two dozen “men and women of good conscience” (so identified by the people from their own cultures, religion, and country) from around the world and asked them two questions: Is there a single set of values that wise, ethical people from around the world use to make decisions? And, if there is a common core of

values “out there,” can it be identified and articulated? The answer was a resounding YES! Here are the values they identified, in descending order of importance (although all of them are very important).

- **Love**—not the passionate kind, nor the soft yielding that speaks more of laziness than of affection, but rather a strong and spontaneous willingness to reach out to others in need. Of all the world’s proverbs and parables, perhaps the one that best expresses this kind of love is the story of the Chinese farmer who, while gathering his rice harvest high on the side of a mountain near the sea, happened to look out over the ocean and saw the first signs of a tidal wave heading rapidly his way. He looked down the mountain at his neighbors gathering in their harvests, knowing that there was no time to warn them all. So, thinking quickly, he set fire to his field and rang the temple bell to summon help. All who came to help him were saved from the tidal wave. “For it is in giving that we receive. . . .”
- **Truthfulness**—not a harsh “facing of the facts” but rather an honesty of intent and purpose—even when one’s perceptions differ—for it is in sharing each person’s interpretation of fact that we come to some approximation of truth. In all cultures. Everywhere. The most pertinent story that illustrates this value may be the time-honored story about the three blind men and the elephant. Each approaches the elephant and explores its body with his hands and then each describes the elephant. “An elephant is long and flexible,” claims the one who touched the trunk. “No, it is large and

very thin and rounded, like a huge cabbage leaf,” asserts the one who felt the elephant’s ear. “You are both wrong!” claims the third, who came into contact with the elephant’s hindquarters. “An elephant is huge and roughly rounded as a boulder with legs like tree trunks,” he confidently claimed. Each is right—and it is in *hearing and believing* each that each is right that we come to some idea of the truth.

- **Fairness**—for many of the respondents, the issue of fairness goes hand in hand with the concept of equality and equity, all of which is nicely summed up in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
- **Freedom**—not a license to do whatever one wishes, but rather a fundamental recognition of the human need for freedom of conscience. Oscar Arias, former president of Costa Rica, put it this way: “Without the principle of individual conscience, every attempt to institutionalize ethics must necessarily collapse. . . . World leaders may see their effect in headlines, but the ultimate course of the globe will be determined by the efforts of innumerable individuals acting on their consciences.”
- **Unity**—all the emphasis on diversity is in direct opposition to the sentiments expressed by the respondents. Dame Whinna Cooper, a New Zealand Maori, said, “I want unity. God wants us to be one people.” All prejudice arises when we focus on our differences—and use them as justification for claiming our own superiority or entitlement. Individualism, as it often is interpreted today, is destructive. Fr. Bernard Przewozny,

the Vatican delegate to the World Council of Churches’ *Conference on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation*, elaborated further: “individualism, carried to the extreme, is destructive of social life, destructive of communal sharing, destructive of participation . . . the world and its natural goods are the inheritance of all peoples.”

- **Tolerance**—Graca Machel, the first lady of Mozambique, said in respect to tolerance, “It is a question of respect for the dignity of each of us. If you have a different idea from mine, it’s not because you are worse than me. You have the right to think differently.” Ideas, and they way in which each of us chooses to interpret and express values are what constitutes the vast majority of our “differences . . . and when such differences are suppressed, each one of us is diminished.” Environmentalist Kenneth Boulding explained it this way: “If the blue whale is endangered, we feel worried about this because we love the variety of the world. . . . In some sense I feel about the Catholic Church the way I feel about the blue whale: I don’t think I’ll be one, but I would feel diminished if it became extinct.” This attitude is what the “two dozen men and women of good will” think will allow for diversity in our unity!
- **Responsibility**—the emphasis here is not so much on the actions of the future as on self-respect in the present. “This is Confucius’ teaching,” says Nien Cheng, “You must take care of yourself. To depend on others is a great shame.” Too often we speak of rights, but they are

no more important than responsibilities. Also given very high marks were respect for life, courage, wisdom, hospitality, peace, stability, women's place, and protection of the environment. Each deserves—needs—more discussion and clarification to ensure that there are no misunderstandings. So say the people of this world!

Ethical Principles for Nursing Administrators

Like all their predecessors and models, health care administrators derive their political and social advantages from their power to allocate the limited resources assigned to their discretion. Moreover, nursing administrators derive their moral authority to allocate resources from their clinical knowledge and professional commitments that are expected to moderate the utilitarian calculus of the marketplace. As both nurses and administrators, executive nurses are concerned about nursing ethics and business ethics. Although these two are not inimical, they are derived from different traditions that, in some cases, may lead to different conclusions.

Professional ethics derive from the *profession*, quite literally the “public promises” (from the Latin *profiteri*) that comprise the profession's social contract: to do no harm, to act in the patient's best interests, to keep in confidence all private matters entrusted to one, to maintain competence, and to advocate for the patient's needs. Thus, for professionals, the public commitments of their profession expand the demands of honesty to include *fidelity to these commitments*. Therefore professional ethics are *deontological*,

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or duty-oriented: all issues and actions are analyzed through the prism of one's professional obligations.¹³

History richly documents an enduring belief that ethical *stewardship* is the key to producing economically relevant services and goods. From ancient times to the present, scholars have directed their ethical reflections, concerns, and principles to the formation of upright men and women who can safely be entrusted with the burden of decision making that will lead to the general prosperity of the people. *General prosperity* is the result, outcome, blessing, advantage, and reward of ethical administration. Thus, for the administrator, the obligation to act for the general good expands the demands of honesty to include *accountability for the outcomes of these decisions*. Therefore, business ethics have, by and large, been *teleological*, or outcome-oriented: all issues and actions are analyzed through the prism of their results, aims, and purposes.¹³

Nursing administrators incur ethical obligations from their professional commitment to meet vulnerable patients' needs and from their stewardship of the public investments entrusted and allocated to them. Their primary ethical responsibility is to assure safe care for patients and to make the risks

of practice tolerable and the practice of nursing safe—personally (proper pay and benefits) and professionally (proper support and recognition)—for the nurses who design and deliver care to the vulnerable. Nursing administrators' role-related obligation to do so within the limited resources available is conditioned by their dual primary obligation. Thus, for example, closing beds is the *right* thing to do when staffing is unsafe, even though it may adversely impact the organization's bottom line.¹⁴

In addition to the customary principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, honesty, and so forth, I propose a set of ten ethical principles based on the universal values identified above and adapted to fit nurse administrators' dual responsibilities:

- **Frugality and therapeutic elegance**—promotes the right degree of economy of means with the right amount of resources necessary to assure competent care (respect for life, wisdom, stability, and fairness).
- **Clinical credibility through organizational competence**—requires disciplining professional practice through application of current practice guidelines, regular self- and-peer evaluations, and mutual teaching and counseling and promoting organizational competence through consistent policies that advance the welfare of employees and provide discriminating and flexible staffing and scheduling patterns designed to safeguard patient care (tolerance, responsibility, freedom, women's place, and equity).
- **Presence**—promotes mutually trusting and beneficent relations with peers, collaborating professionals, patients, families, and members of the general public through communicating decisions in person and monitoring and altering decisions as necessary (love, responsibility, and unity).
- **Responsible representation**—ensures that the clinical and ethical concerns of nurses are heard at the highest levels of organizational decision making (courage, truthfulness, and justice).
- **Loyal service**—forbids exploiting the organization or the staff in order to advance one's own career (justice, responsibility, love, and stability).
- **Deliberate delegation**—demands that the delegation of tasks and duties includes the delegation of enough authority to accomplish them; requires an act of trust (fairness, unity, and courage).
- **Responsible innovation**—requires that organizational change be examined before it is implemented for its impact on patient care and employee morale (respect for life, responsibility, love, and tolerance).
- **Fiduciary accountability**—provides value for the dollar in terms of the safety, quality, and relevance of services offered to the community (justice, truthfulness, freedom, responsibility, and hospitality).
- **Self-discipline**—ensures that decisions made and actions taken are based on careful deliberation, never made in anger or fear, and never for retribution or vengeance (love, tolerance, and responsibility).
- **Continuous learning**—recognizes that time and resources must be invested in self and staff in order to assure continued competence of care and excellence

in organizational performance (love, truthfulness, unity, and fairness).

Ethical decision making and behavior help to reconcile perspectives and interests and to keep values and mission uppermost in one's mind. In the process, ethical behavior—walking your talk—establishes long-term relations of trust and cooperation, which in turn promote consistency and stability in an unstable world. Predictability in this realm is essential; it provides secu-

rity where certainty is not possible. It also helps forestall debilitating waves of anger and alienation, which disrupts productivity and threatens the safety of care.

Ethical principles like those proposed here are not commands so much as they are guides to decision making. They usually are so ingrained that they rarely are called upon consciously. When times are difficult, however, the principles serve as reminders for the “still voice of conscience” within each of us.

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