**Lecture 2.**

**COMMUNICATON ETHICS**

**ACROSS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

**The aim:** to consider what communication ethics is, briefly surveying the development of ethical approaches to intercultural communication, examining some principles for ethical communication; to differentiate among the eleven philosophical perspectives of ethics and how they apply to both business ethics and communication ethics.

**Plan**

1. Distinction between ethics and morality.

2. Ethical principles to guide intercultural communication.

3. Major ethical prospective.

**Keywords:** communication ethics, morality, ethical principles, Kant’s categorical imperative, the good, reflection, cultural relativism, ethical prospective.

1. **Distinction between ethics and morality.** Communication theory is highly relevant to ethics and ethics is vital to communication. Every act of communication may be appraised from an ethical point of view. Furthermore, communication theory provides a fruitful perspective for assessing social processes with regard to values or ethics.

In the field of *communication ethics*, scholars draw upon a variety of ethical theories to address questions pertaining to goodness involving all manifestations of communicative interaction. And because both communication and ethics are explicitly inherent in all human interactions, everyday life is fraught with intentional and unintentional ethical questions **–** from reaching for a cup of coffee to speaking up in a public meeting. Thus, ethical questions infuse all areas of the discipline of communication, including rhetoric, media studies, intercultural/international communication, relational and organization communication, and all other iterations of the discipline. Some scholars specialize in communication ethics as a subfield of communication studies with applications to all aspects of the field, while others work more theoretically in search of philosophical inquiry and understanding.

As a branch of philosophy, **ethics** addresses the question of how we ought to lead our lives. Edward Hall defines **ethics** as the same as morals, or considerations of “what is considered right and wrong”. Richard L. Johannessen, one of the leading writers in the field of communication ethics, contends that, more than cultural values – such as individualism/collectivism, – ethical judgments are more about “degree of rightness and wrongness in human behavior”. Kenneth E. Andersen (1991) makes clear that ethical theories tend to reflect the culture in which they were produced and, therefore, present challenges in intercultural communication.

Throughout history all cultures have developed particular doctrines or philosophies of ***the good***, many of which are classified in the West along four primary lines: *virtue ethics*, which locates *the good* in the virtuous character and qualities of actions or individuals; *deontological ethics*, which locates *the good* in an act or an individual’s adherence to duties or principles; *teleological ethics*, which locates *the good* in the consequences of actions and choices; and *dialogic ethics*, which locates *the good* in the relations between persons. During the 20th century, *postmodern ethics* has called these prior ethical theories into question by challenging not merely the value of rules, procedures, systems, and fixed categories for understanding or theorizing ethics, but the humanist ideas of persons as autonomous agents who can act independently as ethical agents.

The field´s key terms, **morality and ethics**, both refer to acceptable, correct behavior, and are often used synonymously. We will make the distinction that **morality** refers to the right or wrong of any behavior in and of itself. In its turn, **ethics** deals with rightness and wrongness specifically in our interaction with others. "**Ethics** is concerned with the *justification* of actions and practices in specific situations. Ethics generally deals with the reasoning process and is a philosophical *reflection* on the moral life and the principles embedded in that life. (...) **Morality** ... generally refers to *traditions* or beliefs that have evolved over several years or even centuries in societies concerning right and wrong conduct. Morality can be thought of as a social institution that has a history and a *code of conduct* that are implicit or explicit about how people ought to behave..." (Buchholz and Rosenthal).

“A society without ethics is doomed to extinction,” argues philosopher S. Jack Odell. According to Odell, the “basic concepts and theories of ethics provide the framework necessary for working out one’s own moral or ethical code.” Odell believes that “ethical principles are necessary preconditions for the existence of a social community. Without ethical principles it would be impossible for human beings to live in harmony and without fear, despair, hopelessness, anxiety, apprehension, and uncertainty.”

**2.Ethical principles to guide intercultural communication.** *All of us are guided by some ethical principles, even if we are not aware of them. The problem is, if we have not really thought about ethics guides us, the principle that guides us may not be the best principle!*

In the 1980s and 1990s, communication scholars such as Ken Anderson, James A. Jaksa, Richard Johannesen, Clifford Christians, and Ron Arnett affiliated with what was then the Speech Communication Association (it changed its name to ***the National Communication Association***) inaugurated the first communication ethics commission and, subsequently, the first national conference on ethics. [The National Communication Association](http://www.natcom.org/) (NCA) states: "Ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others." ***NCA recently adopted a Credo for Ethical Communication:***

- truthfulness, accuracy, honesty are essential to the integrity of communication;

- endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society;

- strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages;

- access to communication resources and opportunities are necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well being of families, communities, and society;

- promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators;

- condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intolerance, intimidation, coercion, hatred, and violence.

- commit to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice;

- advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality;

- unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well being of individuals and the society in which we live;

- accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

Perhaps one of the biggest debates in the field of intercultural communication is whether we can apply the same ethical dimensions or framework to all cultures, or whether each culture has its own standard. The latter view, that each culture determines for itself what is right and wrong, was held by most anthropologists and interculturalists for a long time, and still held by many.

There are really two main stances:

* **Cultural relativism**: each culture determines on its own what is right or wrong.
* **Meta-ethics**: there is some overarching ethical ideal or system that can be applied to all cultures.

The choice between these is not as easy as it first seems. In a postmodern, multicultural world, we may say “every culture should adopt its own ethical stance”. ***Dr. Robert Martin Shuter*** (an American Research Professor and consultant specializing in intercultural communication) argues that there is no easy answer for ethical questions and we need to re-evaluate how even treat ethics in intercultural communication. Shuter believes that each culture determines its own ethics for everyday communication. He centers his research around different types of ethics:

* **Communicator ethics.** That which contributes to the well-being of others, to their happiness and fulfillment as human beings;
* **Message ethics.** The right or wrong of communication behaviors (aspects of message).
* **Receiver/audience ethics.** What ethical guidelines guide those who receive messages?

His main argument is that the Western, Judeo-Christian ethic emphasizes free choice, with humans at center of the world. Honesty, truthfulness, and giving choice to others are privileged. However, other ethical systems, such as Hindu and Confucian systems focus on harmony over honesty in many instances. His point is that we should consider each culture in its own right to determine what communication is ethical.

***Edward Hall*** (an American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher) presented *“five golden approaches”* to ethics:

* **The golden purse (ethical egoism)**: this approach is based *on what works best for me or my group* (organization, country). This approach considers a weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of a decision and choosing what is best…for me.
* **The golden consequence (utilitarianism):** if something has “utility” that means it is “useful” or “pragmatic”. The difference between this and egoism is that this approach is focused on what works for the most people involved. That is, it seeks ***the greatest good for the greatest number of people.*** What benefit people in one situation may not benefit people in another situation, so things are ***contextually*** right or wrong.

**Utilitarianism** an ethical philosophy in which the happiness of the greatest number of people in the society is considered the greatest good. According to this philosophy, an action is morally right if its consequences lead to happiness (absence of pain), and wrong if it ends in unhappiness (pain).  
Since the link between actions and their happy or unhappy outcomes depends on the circumstances, no moral principle is absolute or necessary in itself under utilitarianism. Proposed by the English philosopher-reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) in his 1789 book Principles of Morals and Legislation. It was developed by the English philosopher-economist John Stuart Mill (1806-73) in his book Utilitarianism.

* **The golden law (categorical imperative/divine right).** This approach suggests that there is ***a single right or wrong that does not differ by context or situation.*** Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) introduced the term "categorical imperative" to characterize the fundamental principle of morality as it presents itself to beings. The principle is categorical, or unconditional, because it is valid for all humans, indeed, for all rational beings, independently of any particular desires or aims they may have. It presents itself as an imperative precisely because human beings have desires and aims that can be incompatible with the unconditional demands of the principle of morality and thus those demands often present themselves as obligations and constraints.

Kant contrasts the categorical imperative with "hypothetical imperative," which express only the necessity of adopting certain means to achieve certain ends that are themselves merely conditional. Hypothetical imperatives can also present themselves to us as constraints, because we are not always sufficiently rational even to accept willingly the means to ends that we have willingly adopted, but in the case of hypothetical imperatives, we are not under any moral constraint to adopt the ends concerned. “Thou shalt not steal,” for example, is categorical imperative as distinct from the [hypothetical imperatives](https://www.britannica.com/topic/hypothetical-imperative) associated with desire, such as “Do not steal if you want to be popular.” Emanuel Kant believed that something was either right or wrong (one of two categories), and that we must do what we know to be right (imperative). We determine what is right through **the use of logic**. Augustine, an early Christian, believed also that there was a single right or wrong, but that it was determined through the scriptures rather than through logic **(divine right).**

* **The golden rule.** It’s originally based on religious philosophy, the Golden Rule states: ***do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*** ***The platinum rule*** might go a step further in both interpersonal relationships and in intercultural communication! Rather than treating others as you want to be treated, treat them ***as you think they would want to be treated.***
* **The golden mean.** Aristotle believed that the best choices ***lie between extremes in any situation,*** and that extremes should be avoided. The “golden mean” refers to the “average” or “mean” between extreme behaviors.

If a universal ethics can be determined (a single ethical system that might apply to all cultures), it will likely come from either studying all cultures to find out principles they have in common, from logic, from dialogue, or from external standard to which all people can agree.

The grounding of ***David Kale’s*** proposed ethics for intercultural communication is his view of human nature. While acknowledging that different cultures develop different value systems and “thus must have different ethical codes”, he also assumes that all people “share a human spirit that is the same regardless of cultural background”. Kale believes that “the guiding principle of any universal code of intercultural communication should be to protect the worth and dignity of the human spirit”. Kale also ground his ethics, not in freedom of choice as a fundamental human value, but rather in world cultures living at *peace* with each other. Based on these groundings, Kale proposes ***four principles*** as a universal code of ethics for intercultural communication. ***Principle 1.*** “Ethical communicators address people of other cultures with the same respect that they would like to receive themselves”. Intercultural communicators should not demean or belittle the cultural identity of others through verbal or nonverbal communication. ***Principle 2.*** “Ethical communicators seek to describe the world as they perceive it as accurately as possible”. Because deception undermines the ability of people of different cultures to trust each other, ethical communicators avoid intentionally deceiving or misleading. ***Principle 3.*** “Ethical communicators encourage people of other cultures to express themselves in their uniqueness”. Their principle respects the right of expression regardless of how popular or unpopular a person’s ideas may be. ***Principle 4.***“Ethical communicators strive for identification with people of other cultures”. Intercultural communicators should emphasize the commonalities of cultural beliefs and values rather than their differences.

***Judith N. Martin*** offers her own ***three principles*** for ethical communication.

* **The Humanness Principle.** It means – ***“Treat others as humans – that is, respect as persons”.***
* **The Dialogic principle.** The point here is ***to understand other persons’ perspective from their point of view, from their power position, and from their contextual perspective.*** This can only happen through dialogue with them.
* **The principle of speaking “with” and “to”.** This principle is very similar to the dialogic principle. The main point here is for scholars who write about other cultures. Scholars must not simply “represent” others, but speak with them, to be “critical” about what they write, realizing their role in their writing. This principle deals with *self-reflexivity, listening, and dialogue.*

**3. Major ethical prospective.**

Johannesen R. notes that ethical issues may arise in human communication when three factors exist: 1) when the communicative behavior «could have a significant impact on other persons»; 2) when the communicative behavior «involves conscious choice of means and ends»; and 3) when the communicative behavior «can be judged by standards of right and wrong». The notion that human communication ethics is multi-faceted is also noted by James C. McCroskey who wrote that an endless debate about means and ends is not sufficient for a «viable systems for evaluating the ethics of human communication». Andersen also notes that «ethics is a dimension in all the communication process». Andersen goes on to explain, «It [ethics] is a dimension that is relevant to all the actors in the communication process – the source or the originator, the person that initiates communication; the person who receives, interprets, hears, reads the communication; and the people who, in effect, are further agents of transmission». In essence, Andersen sees communication ethics as something that needs to be examined from both the source and receiver’s point of view, but he also realizes that understanding ethics from a societal viewpoint is important.

While a discussion of means and ends is a helpful way to frame ethical thoughts, there are many philosophical traditions that have explored the nature of ethics. Table 1 lists eleven major philosophical perspectives used to determine what is and what is not ethical.

Table 1 - Philosophical perspectives

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| Ethical Perspective | Basic Premises | Business Application | Communication Application |
| Altruism | The standard is based on doing what is best or good for others | Ethical business behavior must be good for other people. | Communicative behavior must lead to a good end for the receiver. |
| Categorical Imperative / Deontology | The standard is based on the notion that moral duties should be obeyed without exception. This perspective is very clear on what is good and what is bad – no middle ground. | There are clear business behaviors that are and are not ethical, so all individuals should avoid behaving unethically in business. | There are some communicative behaviors that are never ethical (e.g., deception). |
| Communitarianism | The standard is based on whether behavior helps to restore the social fabric of society. | Business must behave in a manner that helps the social fabric of society. | Communicative behavior must help the social fabric of society. |
| Cultural Relativism | The standard is an individual’s cultural or legal system of values. These standards differ from culture to culture. | 1) The law determines business ethics.  2) One’s nationalistic culture determines what is ethical. | Our legal system and cultures/co-cultures define ethical communication. |
|  |  | 3) One’s organizational culture determines what is ethical. |  |
| Ethical Egoism | The standard is an individual’s self-interest. Emphasis is on how one should behave, or it encourages people to look out for their own self-interests. | People in business should behave in whatever manner is most effective to achieve their self-interests. | People should communicate in whatever manner is most effective for achieving their communicative goals. |
| Justice | The standard is based on three principles of justice: 1) each person has a right to basic liberties; 2) everyone ought to be given the same chance to qualify for offices and jobs; and 3) when inequalities exist, a priority should be given to meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. | Business decisions should be made on how the decisions will affect all relevant stakeholders equally. However, when stakeholders’ needs are in conflict, priority should be given to meeting the needs of those in subjugated stakeholder groups. | People should communicate in a manner that is consistent with a range of stakeholders. |
| Nihilism | Ethics innately prevent individuals from creating new ideas and values that challenge the status quo, so individuals of superior intellect should disavow any attempt by others to subject them to an ethical perspective. | Smart business people should not be hampered in their behavior by any archaic or contemporary notions of good and bad business behavior. | Smart communicators know that what matters is achieving one’s communicative goals, so they should not adhere to any prescribed notions of good and bad communicative behavior. |
| Psychological Egoism | The standard is an individual’s self-interest. Emphasis is on how one actually behaves, or in everything we do is influenced by self-interested motives. | People in business actually behave in whatever manner is most effective to achieve their self-interests. | People actually communicate in whatever manner is most effective for achieving their communicative goals. |
| Social Relativism | The standard is the interests of my friends, group, or community. | People in business should behave in a manner that is consistent with the interests of their social networks and communities. | People in business should communicate in a manner that is consistent with the interests of their social networks and communities. |
| Subjectivism | The standard is based on an individual’s personal opinion of moral judgment. For this reason, perceptions of ethics differ from person to person. | Whatever an individual in business determines is ethical for her or his behavior is ethical for that individual. | Individual communicators determine what is and is not ethical from their own individual vantage point. |
| Utilitarianism | The standard is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. | People in business should behave in a manner that does the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. | People should communicate in a manner that does the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. |

A societal or personal system of ethics is not a magic or automatic cure-all for individual or collective ills. In short, communication ethics concerns the discernment of the good, seeking to balance the competing values, needs, and wants of multiple constituencies inhabiting pluralistic democracies.

**Conclusion.** A societal or personal system of ethics is not a magic or automatic cure-all for individual or collective ills. What can ethical theory and systematic reflection or ethics contribute? One answer is suggested by philosopher Carl Wellman: “An ethical system does not solve all one’s practical problems, but one cannot choose and act rationally without some explicit or implicit ethical system. An ethical theory doesn’t tell a person what to do in any given situation, but neither is it completely silent; it tells one what to consider in making up one’s mind what to do. The practical function of an ethical system is primarily to direct our attention to the relevant considerations, the reasons that determines the rightness or wrongness of any act.” In short, communication ethics concerns the discernment of the good, seeking to balance the competing values, needs, and wants of multiple constituencies inhabiting pluralistic democracies.