

ETHICS MATTER, BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

WORKSHOP PLENARY SESSION

GLOBAL ETHICS DAY, 17 OCTOBER 2018

The reason for our NGO beginnings

It goes without saying that ethics matter to NGO's. The very beginnings of many NGO's are motivated by morally derived reasons¹. Consider one example. Our hosts for today, the Jhb Children's Home was founded in 1892 "with the proceeds from a Fancy Fair (£4779) organised by a committee under the chairmanship of Mrs von Brandis, wife of the Landdrost. These women were nothing, if not courageous! Costs for the upkeep of the home were met by weekly street collections and, since their aim was to help any and every child in distress, it was decided that the Home would be entirely 'undenominational'². Notice the ethics principles of DUTY OF CARE towards "every child in distress", BENEVOLENCE of the women and caring others who supported their efforts, FAIRNESS in caring for children regardless of their denomination – not discriminating because of morally arbitrary factors, i.e. factors of chance that the child had no choice in.

Take a moment to consider your organisation's beginnings and notice the likely morally derived reason for its existence.

Consider too that the beginnings of NGO's often stem from the ethics of individuals, that have probably been shaped by the values and beliefs of their families, communities, sometimes religious orientations, and from an ability to notice and be touched by the distress of other living beings. At times, such individuals may be professionally qualified. Each profession has a set of ethics that those working in the profession are expected to adhere to. In addition to personal ethics, the beginnings of NGO's may therefore also reflect professional ethics of those who step up and respond to morally wrong happenings.

¹ Robyn Waite, "BRINGING MORALITY AND ETHICS TO THE FOREFRONT OF NGO'S LEGITIMACY", *Monitoring and accountability Aid effectiveness Governance* (22 February 2017). Available at: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/blog/bringing-morality-and-ethics-to-the-forefront-of-ngos-legitimacy>

² History of JCH. Available at: <http://www.jch.org.za/history.html>

So, ethics matter profoundly in many of our organisations' reasons for existence.

The reason for NGO's continued existence

It would have been wonderful if NGO work became irrelevant. This would mean that our moral unease about injustices and what goes wrong in our society have no place any longer because they have been addressed, corrected or minimized to a negligible degree. Or, it could mean that the State is taking full responsibility for its citizens.

However, this is not the case. NGO's continue to exist in every corner of South Africa because they are needed in response to so many issues of social justice that we face as a society. One could say that NGO work is actually the responsibility of the Government. This may be so, but this view points to a different discussion about the role of a State. For purposes of our discussion this morning, we depart from a point of view that NGO's play a core role in South African society to address matters of social injustice.

Therefore, in addition to our morally derived NGO beginnings, our continued existence is informed and justified by morally derived reasons. In fact, we can say that not stepping up as civil society to address moral concerns in our society, will show a lack of moral courage.

Ethics connect NGO's on a deeper level

Join me on a satellite journey to observe everyday NGO activities. Notice the busyness, moments of making eye contact with fellow human beings, being still in the face of pain, taking action to ease suffering, the learning that takes place as we work ... Also notice the criticism of other organisations that we perceive as failing in their duty of care, the carefulness in sharing with others the names of our funders, our sense of being alone at times as we try to beat the odds of NGO realities ...

All of this is important - this layer of existence that gives expression to who we are, our values and preferences, our knowledge and skills, our relationships with each other. However, there is a deeper layer of existence in NGO life that connects all of

us, regardless of the nature of our programmes, our like or dislike of each other, our way of doing things etc. It is a connectedness that exists because we draw energy from the same moral/ethical foundation around issues of humanity. This shared foundation strengthens our collective voice, potentially enables us to look through more superficial differences and to strengthen each other as a community of practice. It also justifies questioning each other when we act contrary to what seems to be in service of the deeper commitment we share in service of humanity.

Ethics unites us in a way that matters, without requiring of us to compromise our individual identities.

A more informed understanding of ethics matter and has meaning

Having said, so far, that moral reasons/ethics principles define/justify NGO beginnings and continued existence, and connect us on a deeper level, we have not given structure to our thinking about what we actually mean by 'ethics'. Let us take a theoretical look and consider how the study of ethics can help us in the everyday functioning of NGO's.

What do we mean by ethics or morality? (For purposes of this discussion, the two terms are used interchangeably).

- Ethics or morality as is about what is right and wrong, a desirable or undesirable state of affairs. As Socrates said: We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live³.
- Ethics is about the 'why' of how we ought to live⁴, reflecting our reasoning. Our reasoning reflects our ability as human beings to discern what is a better/desired state of affairs, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways.
- Ethics is about using logic and reasoning about right and wrong⁵. By applying rationality, the reason for an action can be justified or not.

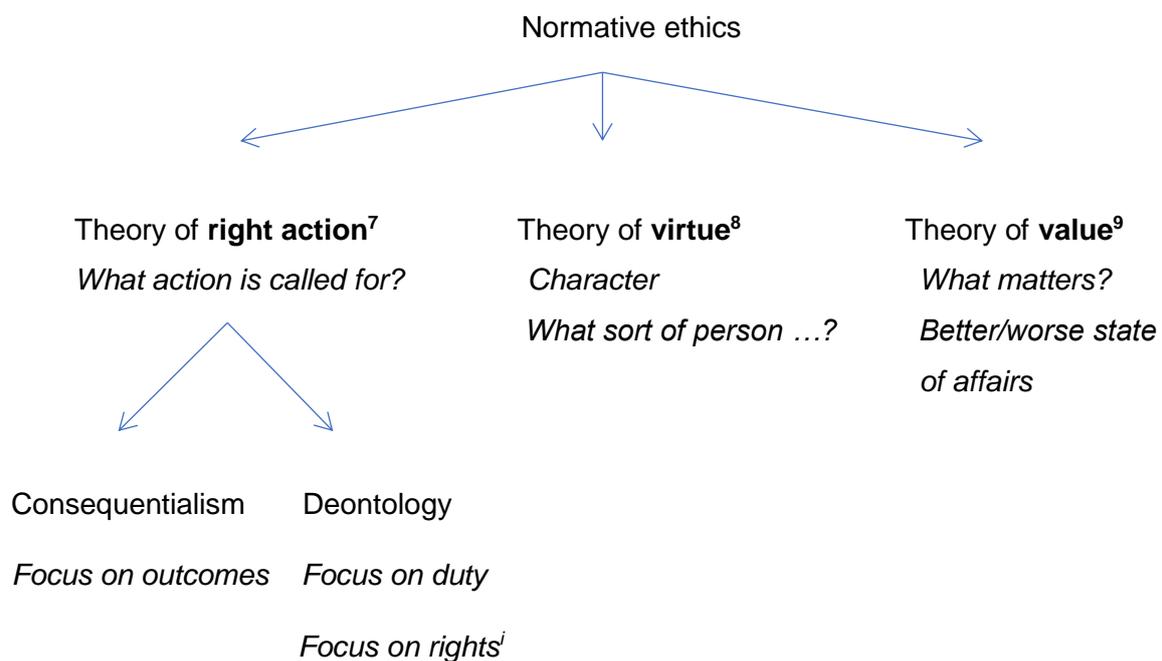
³ James Rachels. 2012. The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 7th edition, ed. Stuart Rachels. New York: McGraw-Hill. P. 1.

⁴ Ibid., P. 1.

⁵ Brian Penrose. AEP Methods Lecture 15 March 2014. University of the Witwatersrand.

- Ethics is about being objectivity is some way⁶. For instance, it is probably better for politicians across the world to tell the truth rather than lie, regardless of nationality, political affiliation, circumstance.

Building on these thoughts, normative ethics is the study that helps us to think about the rules or guidelines for behaving in a specific way, that helps us to understand on what basis we choose right action. Three normative ethics theories, that can serve as categories of a sort to structure our thinking, can be distinguished:



Holding in mind this structure, may help us to better understand our intuitive response to ethics matters, why we behave in a certain manner, and why we may disagree with others at times. It also helps us to make conscious choices about 'right action'.

⁶ Brian Penrose. AEP Methods Lecture 15 March 2014. University of the Witwatersrand.

⁷ S. Darwall. "Theories of Ethics", in Frey and Wellman, eds., A Companion to Applied Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

⁸ N. Davis. 1993. "Contemporary Deontology" in Singer, ed., A Companion to Ethics. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

⁹ P. Taylor. 1972. Problems of Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Ethics. 2nd ed.. Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing.

Conscious practice of ethics contributes to organisational effectiveness

If we are all presumably ethical in our thinking and practice, how do we explain that mental health patients are transferred by those who have a legal and moral duty of care to facilities incapable of meeting their basic needs? How do we explain that a counsellor offers a client material support in exchange for sexual favours? How do we explain that a member of a Managing Board of an NGO insists that the organisation's printing be done by his family member? How do we explain that a director of an NGO uses money provided by a funding partner for a specifically agreed upon purpose without consultation and transparent report back?

Perhaps we can say it is because of ignorance, gullibility, or questionable personal ethics. This may be so. There seems to be no doubt that the helping services like any other sector reflect a sample of society's suspicious characters. However, there is another aspect of ethics that come into focus through these examples, and that is ethics management in organisations, or rather the lack thereof. This is, very specifically, the focus of our continued discussions this morning. Alongside a life journey of maturing in our personal and professional ethics, NGO's should reflect in their histories, a journey of maturing in ethics management. Consider this way of thinking: the records of your organisation and the experience of all stakeholders since its beginnings, should reflect ethics considerations related to for example organisational culture, ways of doing everyday business, what motivates decision making, the thinking behind policies, relationships with all stakeholders, how change and crisis is dealt with. On a personal level it may matter who holds the moral compass, but in the bigger picture over time, what is important is that ethics are thought about and managed in a conscious and justifiable manner across the organisation's history. Each fragment of time will then add to the overall maturing of an organisation in its ethics management.

Though ethics management, as a specific function in organisations, there is a better chance of staying aligned with our foundational moral motivations, as well as manage ethics risks. The focus session that follow this introductory session, deals with three such areas of ethics risk: When we fail in our duty of care, when our working spaces are not carefully enough designed to mitigate the risk of sexual

harassment, and when we engage in the fundraising and funding space with integrity.

In closing:

Ethics matter, because it ...

- Roots our NGO beginnings in moral reasons and ethics principles in service of humanity.
- Justifies the continued existence of NGO's, for as long as they are relevant in relation to issues of social justice.
- Connects NGO's on a deeper meaningful level in service of humanity.
- Gives us a way of articulating moral unease and tools to decide on right action.
- Contributes to organisational effectiveness.

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