

# Morals, ethics and sustainable futures

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After four centuries of scientific, technological and industrial revolution, one can now safely assert that the future sustainability of our world is highly dependent on the quality of human thought, human values and human behaviour. At the core of this challenge lies human morals and ethics: they are the guarantors of harmony and integrity of a 21st century world order, which is now one fully integrated human-natural-system.

Why are morals and ethics the guarantors of global sustainability?

Morals are principles, values and beliefs that people hold regarding what is right and what is wrong. Recent research indicates that a person's morals are outcomes of both heredity and circumstantial determinants, that is a person's morals are phenotypical in their nature. Different people may therefore display different takes on morality and what they consider to be 'acceptable behaviour'. One can foresee that deviant behaviour ('sinning') may cause communal and organisational disruption if there is no governance system that defines and sanctions what is good and bad behaviour within a community or organisation.

Ethics is such a governance system. It possibly emerged out of the human need for communal-based personal survival and development and evolved over time out of the natural moral imperatives of individuals, shaped by communal (prosocial) perceptions of threats and opportunities (recently conceptualised as 'reactive responses') (Tooby & Cosmides 1992), refined by philosophical thought (often then institutionalised in 'religious' directives) and, finally, operationalised in standards of social practice that have a proven track record in terms of moral outcomes – such as the Hippocratic Oath. Ethics presented as values is an integral part of the culture of a community or organisation. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament and Jesus's commandment of love are two of the earliest examples of ethical guidelines.

Research has indicated that humans genetically inherited natural moral instincts, such as the sanctity of life, to be fair and loyal to others, respect for authority, love of liberty, love of beauty and a quest for communal harmony (Lagay 2000). Genetic studies of morality have thus also focused on prosociality (Jenkins 2016) as a state of human consciousness regarding interdependencies between people – and also between people and their sustaining environment. One can conjecture that natural morality and prosociality evolved over time as very practical reactions to problems of communal instability. Disruptive human behaviour impacts social cohesion and ultimately on sustainable futures. But this also reflects on a need for human consciousness: particularly of how personal behaviour may have major implications for society and the world as a whole.

'Human consciousness' is a state of being aware of, and responsive to, one's surroundings (Vithoulkas & Muresanu 2014). More specifically, 'consciousness' is the function of the human mind that receives and processes information, interprets it and then stores or rejects it. Human consciousness, human conscience and human awareness are key dimensions of prosociality, which are seen as a countervailing force against deviant behaviour within communities and organisations. It is a multidimensional concept with cognitive, affective and conative drivers that shape human moral instincts and their behaviour over time. It is suggested that human moral behaviour is shaped by Spies (2019):

- consciousnesses – that is, the ability to be aware of what is going on and to then anticipate the consequences of behaviour (the cognitive)
- the ability to make ethically based judgements of the consequences of behaviour (the affective)
- the ability to then choose between alternative courses of action and to act accordingly (the conative).

The main obstruction to sound ethical behaviour lies within the cognitive: to bring standard worldviews about issues in line with the reality shaping the issues. The most obvious explanation of a perceived issue is often not an explanation of the real issue.

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Take, for example, the case of corruption and the gang phenomenon in South Africa, which can easily conjecture to be just simply an ethical, legal or policing problem. However, corruption and gang formation are more than likely emergences out of a much broader, deeper and multidimensional systemic process. The systems thinkers RL Ackoff and Gharajedaghi identified five universal human aspirations, namely a quest for personal sufficiency, a quest for skills for self-sufficiency, a quest for freedom from oppression, a quest for human respect and a quest for beauty (Ackoff 1994; Gharajedaghi 1999). They identified three conditions that may obstruct sustainability because of a breakdown in social cohesion, namely the non-achievement of a quest, inequality between people and fear of dispossession after achieving a quest. They argue that if these obstructions should persist it will create alienation between members of a society, which can then evolve into social polarisation (of which the criminal gang phenomenon is one example), ending with nation-wide systemic corruption, which is then almost impossible to contain through better policing and more legal controls.

The study of morality and ethics is an important facet of future studies. Moreover, systems thinking (or relational

thinking) and multiple perspectives are essential for building insight, understanding and consciousness of how the world works and how our behaviour may have an impact on the welfare of future generations. A study of morals and ethics should aim to define the high ground for finding enduring solutions to the vexed problems that are threatening our survival on earth: they should be approached as practical and not just esoteric subjects of study.

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