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Ethics: A Mini-Literature Review

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Abstract

Public and private institutions across the world are confronted with the subject of ethics. There is a greater expectation on both individuals, institutions, and society, in general, to conduct themselves according to the adopted set of rules which govern their behavior. Ethics is a philosophical matter and in many instances a subject of choice. There are different ethics or ethical theories governing different environments presented by literature. This paper reviews different literature sources on the subject ethics, defines ethics and outlines the importance of ethics.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, Ethical conduct, Leadership

1. Introduction

Ethics occupies the highest levels of leadership in the present-day public and private sector. Ethical leadership has become a standard expectation from any present day manager. This suggest that managers and their organizations are expected to behave ethically in the execution of their duties.

In this regard Ethical behaviour and Ethical standards are linked to a conduct that demonstrates honesty, integrity, morality and good management practices (Paliwal, 2006). As a result individuals and organizations are required to maintain ethical standards adopted by their business environment and moral standards adopted by both the society or those regulated in the country.

Despite the popularity of the subject ethics in both the public and private sectors of the world, there is greater need to know and educate the people about the subject and its values. Furthermore, people are confronted by ethical dilemmas and choices every day.

Societal values and business environment changes frequently. The people are thus required to continuosly adapt and seek to comply with the ethical standards. The challenge to build an ethical society or to transform institutions to become ethical is every modern day CEO, Board Chairperson and political leaders nightmare. Indeed ethics is a highly debated subject in today's corporate and business world, as well as in educational

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and academic circles (Grigoropoulos, 2019) this has also extended to the public sector environment and the non-governmental organizations.

This literature review is focusing on ethics in both the public sector and private sector environments. The primary question that it seeks to answer is about defining ethics and its fundamental values. The study will review eight publications on ethics and outline what literature presents on ethics. The key questions that underpins this literature review are structured as follows: *(i) What are ethics? (ii) What is the importance of ethics? (iii) Is there a relation between the ethics? (iv) and What are major observations from the study of each publication?*

2. Method

I read different articles related to ethics including journal articles and reports. Most of these publications were primarily used as reference material in the whole paper. Whilst this is a mini review the timeline of the resources between 1998 and 2021 has enabled for a 23 year long review. There are many publications available during this period. However time limitation did not enable the author to sufficiently review more texts. The searches were conducted on research gate and google scholar for electronic articles related to ethics. A thorough reading of the abstract and key words (ethics and morality) of each article. The primary aim was to find the definition of ethics, the type of ethics and the importance of ethics in both business and public sector environment.

3. What are Ethics?

In the Journal article on introduction to ethics Prabhakar (2011) defines ethics as the ability to learn to differentiate between the wrong and right, and then opting to choose to do what is right. According to Robinson and Dowson (2012) see ethics a subject related to good behavior and making a choice on what is right when confronted by a situation to choose between what is wrong and the former. Ethics therefore arise when humankind is accorded a thought based decision making process to do what is right which is or what is wrong which is also known.

According to Deigh (2010) ethics is branch of philosophy where the mind or individual is accorded an opportunity to justify his actions or decision. In this regard there is a need balance decision and rationale. In this regard an individual honest action may still be unethical or ethical similarly with a dishonest action. A common example is the doctor patient confidentiality rule.

In this regard, a doctor who is aware on the HIV status of one the partners would be behaving unethical in telling the partner without the consent of the infected partner yet he might be honest in alerting the partner about the risk of exposure to the virus from the infected partner.

According to Bartneck *et al.* (2021) ethics is the analysis of human actions from the perspective of "good" and "evil," or of "morally correct" and "morally wrong. This represents the humanitarian aspect of ethics and the moral aspect. Ethics and choice cannot be divorced, Human beings possess the ability to make an ethical decision. This has brought about the concept of the ethical dilemma. The emphasis is whatever choice is made must be a right decision. So, ethics is not only about doing what is right. It is about doing what is right in the right way. On above example, the Doctor is bound to adhere to the regulations of his profession. Thus his behavior would be deemed ethical. So, does this mean his actions would be moral? Is another question to be answered in the study of literature on ethics?

The study of literature reveals that there different form ethics identified from different authors as follows:

- Driver (2007) and Timmons (2018): Normative ethics

- Sen and Williams (1982), Van Staveren (2007) and Dimock and Fisher (2017): Utilitarianism

- Benn (1998), Driver (2011) and Wood (2020): Consequentialism

- Benn (1998), Southwood (2010) and Suikkanen (2020): Contractualism

- Van Staveren (2007) and Wood (2020): Deontology

- Benn (1998) and Dimock and Fisher (2017): Kant's Ethics

- Bartneck *et al.* (2021): Machine Ethics

Ethics has in the late nineties gained more ground and drew more interest from academic philosophy and public affairs (Benn, 1998). Despite the perceived popularity of the subject ethics in academia, business, public and non governmental affairs there is a greater need to educate meaningfully about what ethics are and its objectives. In addition, Paliwal (2006) argues that ethical behavior is related to actions, which includes honesty, integrity, morality and good management practices. As a result organizations are seen to be putting in place ethical procedures and policies that each component of the institution must adhere to.

The adopted ethical codes become part of the organizational policy and it is communicated through training and procedure manuals. Grigoropoulos (2019) also suggests that ethics should be made a crosscutting responsibility to all elements of the organization. However, Musek (2015) observes that the modern man neglected the concern for the values, ethics, and morality. This resulted in increased unethical behavior across all the sectors of society.

Musek (2015) also raises a concern about the increased risk and declined safety of the future of the human society arising out a behavior that is outside the ethical standards. This implies that the decline in ethical standards have a detrimental effect to the future of the society. Managers in organizations face ethical issues every day of their working lives.

4. The Importance of Ethics

There are numerous facts that justify the importance of ethics. In the below subsections the I reflect on four key essential of ethics.

4.1. Ensures Good Conduct

Ethical conduct is according to Grigoropoulos (2019) one of the most powerful and important aspects of human activities in organizations. Its importance arises from its ability and assurance that all the elements within the organization are doing things in the right way. It is now not just about performing one's responsibilities but it is about doing thing in the right way.

Doing things the right way implies amongst others being procedural and compliant in your work action and operations. Ethics therefore provides the rules and standards of doing things the way in both institution and society.

4.2. Sense of Responsibility and Accountability

Once procedures and standards that measure ethical conduct are put in place in an institution, it creates a sense of responsibility and enables accountability (Gabler, 2006). Ethics ensures that people act responsible and they are held accountable for their actions and decisions. It also ensures that institutions take responsible and ethical decisions that they know they will be accountable for. A company is expected to ensure that it does not dump hazardous waste or chemicals that can harm citizens living around its operational area. An action contrary to the above becomes unethical.

4.3. Prevents Reputational Damage

Violation of ethics or unethical conduct can cause serious reputational harm to the business. A doctor who become popular for unethical conduct that causes harm to his patients loses trust of the people. A constant ethical behavior ensure that an institution maintains a sound reputation. One of the popular scandal in South Africa is the Life Esidimeni Mental Patients scandal.

In the Life Esidimeni scandal, the Department of Health in Gauteng terminated the contract between the departments and placed 2000 high mental care patients at unlicensed mental care centres. As a result, 94 patients were reported dead in 2016 due to poor treatment including dehydration. It was reported that the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Health in Gauteng had insisted on cost curtailment as primary factor behind the termination of the contract (Makgoba, 2016).

The Gauteng Government and the Republic of South Africa suffered reputational damage due to the Life Esidimeni tragedy. The then MEC was eventually removed from her position by the Premier of Gauteng Province and she had to resign from the Gauteng Provincial Legislature. The department intended to cut costs

but in the process of cutting costs did not do thing the right way. It placed high care mental patients in unlicensed mental care centre where the patients were not accorded good treatment. The decision was damaging to both the MEC as an individual and the department.

4.4. Prevents Financial Loss Due to Avoidable Litigations

Most of the decision taken by organizations presents an ethical risk (Saremi and Nezhad, 2014). Ethical behavior becomes a matter of choice for organizations. Yet if not adhered to an institution or individual can incur legal fees due to litigations against the harm or violation caused by the unethical conduct.

In South Africa, the Ministries of policies and health are paying a thousands of settlement fees from litigations against unacceptable conduct by either police or nurses. It was reported that Steve Biko Academic Hospital (Gauteng Province) alone paid R15.1 Million rand in litigations for 14 cases by year 2015 (News24, 2017).

5. Literature Review

A study on, the Role of ethics in 21st century organizations by Jenny E Grigoropoulos from the American Community Schools of Athens in 2019. This journal paper outlines the significance of ethics in the business environment in the 21st century. It demonstrates the centrality of ethics within the management function. The paper put emphasis on aligning ethics with organizational culture and social relations.

Grigoropoulos presents the consequence of absence of ethics within the organization and outline the key elements of ethical leadership. Ethics are thus essential for business and public institutions. The influence the results of the organization and set high standard of excellence. The article also depict ethics beyond the business environment but as a social responsibility. Hence ethics are now popular across all the sectors.

An Introduction to ethics by John Deigh (2012). This book introduces the subject ethics. It start by explaining the problem of ethics, outlines the philosophical aspect of ethics and history. The author emphasizes the philosophical side of ethics and introduces critical dialogues on rationalism and naturalism. The book give explain role of choice in ethics to unpack the issue of ethical dilemma. Deigh unpacks Egoism drawing reference from ancient philosopher called Aristotle and places the thought of pursuit of happiness and egoism at pinnacle of human decision and behavior.

Deigh also presents the different types of ethical theories and outlines the challenges deontology as an element of ethics. In essence human kind has a choice to behave ethically or unethically. The rationale for individual is driven by individual or group interest. It also introduces the subject of morality and present the idea of the moral community.

Piers Benn of the University Leeds, 1998 publication entitled "ethics" focuses on authority and relativism unpacks the idea of authority and questions the essence of relativism. It introduces the subject morality and brings back an ancient debate from Plato's dialogue about the possibly of morality being taught.

Benn questions the existence of the so called moral authorities and expertise in the world but also posit their absence as another challenge to society. The people need some form of authority to advocate for the truth and what is right. This however does not make them superior moral experts since every human being is fallible and can possible make incorrect or unethical decisions.

The publication by Haiming (2020) entitled the Principles of new ethics volume 3, Normative ethics 2. This book places humanity as the ultimate ethical standards and argues that humanity is comprised of all ethical standards. South Africa has adopted humanity as value and it is called "Ubuntu". Humanity in the South African context emphasise on the relationship between humankind.

The concept of Ubuntu means that the humanity of people is tied to one another. This means that we are an interdependent society and we should care for each and thus places such moral obligation at the shoulders of all citizens. In essence humanistic theory should not be a matter of law or regulation but a moral and value issue. The book also draws comparison between humanity and liberty. It says liberty is different from humanity because liberty is not pure.

Humanity on the other hand is characterized by pure justice and benevolence. The truth is liberties may mean different things to society and at times overlooks the element of justice. The book unpacks the intrinsic and extrinsic values of liberty. The emphasis here is that liberty is appreciated by what it brings to the people. A liberty that does not provides a form of benefit to the people loses meaning.

The publication by Robinson and Dowson (2012) on Business Ethics in Practice which provides an introduction to the subject ethics in business by providing a definition of ethics and dealing with both the positive and negative view to ethics. In all instances the author uses relevant case studies like the Colombian rain forest and the Everest ethics amongst others.

Robinson and Dowson further unpacks the ethical theories and critically engage on the pros and cons of each. The author engages on the aspect of ethical decision making. The authors also explore the issue of leadership and governance. It defines an ethical leaders and the importance ethics in leadership and managing ethically.

An article by Iqbal *et al.* (2013) on corporate ethical values, group relativity, job commitment and performance. Iqbal *et al.* (2013) evaluates the effects of the work environment on the performance. It identifies relationship between commitment and performance. In the main, uncommitted employees are potential candidate for the unethical conduct and they at times do not care whether organizational objectives are achieved, nor do they mind complying with regulations.

Iqbal *et al.* put an emphasis on the centrality of ethics in the creation of an excellent workforce. In essence, ethics introduces superior standards and if adopted all the organizational teams will strive to be the best team players and do things the right. This may not always be the case. An organization may set the best ethical code but the choice to comply remains with the individual.

Dimmock and Fisher (2017), Ethics for A-Level. This book focuses on ethics a matter of mind. The authors raises the question of choice between legality and morality. It presents the subject of doing ethics in a right way for instance the choice between legality and morality or prudential justification against moral rationale. The matter of choice in ethics come to fore at this stage.

Dimmock and Fisher (2007) also unpacks the normative ethics and Kant's ethic. It defines Utilitarianism (normative) as a theory of choice between what is morally right or wrong and Hedonism (normative) as a theory of well-being. Kant theory represent a list of moral actions and emphasises on superior moral logic.

Haryr (2020) published an article entitled "Just better utilitarianism". This paper presents the value of utilitarianism as a source of moral and political choices. It places utilitarianism at the center of decision making. The paper unpacks the theories of justice and compare justice with morals. The application of utilitarian tenets like hard-core impartiality is according to the journal demanding that a choice is made not in favor of those closer to you but in the public interest. This is an important aspect especially for the public sector employees and elected public representatives.

von der Pfordern (2012), five elements of normative ethics. This paper proposes five elements of the normative ethics theory of references including; *(i) normative individualism (places the responsibility of ethical behaviour at the shoulder of individuals), (ii) consideration of individuals interest and concerns, (iii) Pluralism of references of individual concerns, (iv) principle of weighing and aggregating individual concerns, and central principle of referencing (v) and weighing individual's concerns against self-concerns. This necessitate a balance between the needs and concerns of others and one self.*

The publication by Bartneck *et al.* (2021) entitled as an introduction to ethics in robotics and Artificial Intelligence (AI).The authors deals with ethics in relation to artificial intelligence. It primarily engages on artificial intelligence and defines ethics and its element covering descriptive ethics, normative ethics, meta-ethics, applied ethics and machine ethics. There is a greater relationship between law and ethics.

Bartneck *et al.* (2021) uniquely focuses on the relationship between the machines and robots. This is important as it reflect on the relationship between human behavior and the application of machines and robots. If not used ethically machine and robots may also result in harm and reputational damage. AI does not absolve the operators from of doing thigs the right way.

6. Conclusion

Through this mini-literature review on the eleven publications including books and journal publications it has been found that ethics is a broad philosophical subject. Ethics are classified into normative and Kant's ethics. Ethics has become a norm across the business, public and social sectors. It is important for all institution to adopt ethics a measure of performance and inculcate it within the organizational culture.

It is believed that an introduction of ethics as both a professional and social culture of the institution may inspire role players to deliver excellent outcomes. Ethics have an important role in the management of the performance of individuals and the organization as whole. It has been found that unethical conduct may harm an institution financial and reputational. In many instances it is clear that beside the regulated environment, ethics is always a matter of choice. It is therefore important for ethics to be made a crosscutting responsibility for all elements within an institution.

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