

Urgent Imperative for a Rational, Secular, Humanist and Rights-Based Approach to Global Ethics

By [Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu](#)

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Ethics is very relevant and crucial in our individual and societal lives as human existents interacting with fellow humans and other sentient and non-sentient beings in this Circle-of-Life-and-Existence. As per Immanuel Kant who was the veritable spokesperson and exemplar of Ethical principles and Ethical life, Ethics is both normative and regulative. This means that Ethics is about self-regulation and rule-orientation so that we will be able to navigate our lives in freedom, equity and justice with ourselves, with others, with our society and with our fellow animate and inanimate existents in our ecosystem. For Kant, to ground Ethics in terms of religion & cultural conditioning would make Ethics particular and relative instead of universalizable and objective. This means that using creedal, sectarian, cultural, ethnic and racial norms as basis of Ethics instead of grounding Ethics in our shared Rationality as human beings is divisive and will never be able to unite us as rational and holistic humanity.

Kant insisted on a purely rational and secularized global or universal ethics since he was keenly aware of the divisive nature of religion in the history of Europe during the Medieval Era, the Reformation Period, and even in his day and age. One can see through by a cursory reading of history that religion and so-called moral guidance coming from Scriptures are often utilized by dogmatic religionists to justify vested interest of both repressive governments and exploitative financial elites (bourgeoisie).

Various liturgies and religious rituals are nothing but ways to cover-up injustice in society. Religion is used to exploit the credulity and gullibility of the ordinary people and is oftentimes used to oppress, suppress, marginalize and exploit the suffering masses.

Moreover, one cannot build a Global Ethics utilizing religion since by simply looking at the state of the different religions of the world, one can notice that religions are hopelessly divided into various sects, denominations and dogmatic groupings which makes religion an insidious harbinger of communalism, sectarianism, divisiveness and extremism instead of being a messenger of unity and universal ethics.

Religion which is supposed to bring humans towards authentic existence becomes a denier of intellectual progress and a nemesis of genuine human freedom.

One can only glimpse at world history to see how religion treats those who are considered heretics, non-conformists, religious deviants and those who do not toe-the-line to the dogmas created by religion. These religious dissenters are isolated, maimed, murdered in the name of God, and their individual right to free conscience is being denied and taken away from them!

Therefore the only way for Ethics to be truly universal and global is through the inauguration of a purely rational, secular, humanist and rights-based approach to ethical valuation.

Immanuel Kant made a very clear distinction between Morality and Ethics.

Ethics for Kant must be solely grounded on human rationality that is commonly shared by all humans across culture, creeds, races, ethnicities, and nationalities. Cultural norms and moral values conditioned and imposed through social control by one's society and religion constitute what Kant termed as "Morality".

Morality is relative and thus particular from culture to culture. Morality is also particular and relative as it differs from time, climes, places, societies, and circumstances. An ethical valuation that is based on religion, society, and culture is indeed particular and applicable only to such culture and religion. A norm that is considered to be immoral in one culture may be moral in another. An act that is judged as right in one religion may be adjudged as wrong in another. Hence one must transcend cultural norms or religious valuations to be able to search for an objective Ethics that is universalizable to all rational human existents.

Kant was the first philosopher to develop a purely rational, secular, humanist and rights-based approach to Ethics since he insists that all human beings are endowed with rationality to be able to adjudge what is right and wrong and that all our ethical valuations must be determined solely within the confines of Reason to make it universalizable to one-and-all.

Therefore a logical, mathematical and postulative approach to Ethics is possible since all humans can utilize their rationality by appealing to our common endowments as humans: Rationality and Conscience. The maxims of Objective, Mathematically-Postulative and Universalizable Ethics is what Kant referred to as "The Categorical Imperative".

Although Kant was a devout Lutheran who was expected to believe in the classical Lutheran concepts of original sin and total depravity of humanity (after the Fall of Adam and Eve), Kant strongly subscribed to the optimist view that humans are by nature good and are capable of doing what is right.

For Kant, it is in not listening to our rational conscience and in not deliberating rationally our actions based on the rational and logical criteria of the Categorical Imperative that make us act in terms of particular conduct that carry wrong intentions which produce wrongful actions. Humans are also conditioned by society to act in terms of non-universalizable and wrongful norms that tend to exploit, commodify and objectify fellow humans.

It is in this vein that Kant formulated his most sublime maxim so that fellow humans will not commodify, deceive and coerce fellow humans since these unethical actions prevent fellow humans the unfettered exercise of their full freedom and autonomy to act as authentic

human beings. This most beautiful and very profound maxim is poignantly formulated by Kant in this way: “Act only in such a way that you always treat yourself and others as ends-in-itself and NEVER as means to your own end”.

Kant is an Ethical Objectivist but he based his objectivism solely through Reason or Rationality so as to steer away from dogmatic norms given by religion and to distinguish

Ethics from mere cultural conditioning and societal impositions given by a particular culture. It is Reason alone that provides the “Unforced Force” (to borrow another German philosopher in our contemporary era, Jurgen Habermas) and the Logical and Mathematical Imperative towards ethical compliance among reasonable persons. For Kant, as well as for Habermas, universalizability of Ethics simply means that Ethics must go beyond particularity and individual appropriation of what is right and wrong but must strive towards universalizable application for one-and-all.

Objective Reason and Communicative Consensus, not the strategic impositions of one or few hegemony and agenda setters or communication saboteurs, must be reached and arrived through an intersubjective agreement brought about by communication and argumentation of fellow humans. This point must be clearly understood when we hear this Habermasian adage: “Ethics is negotiated”. This means that we can talk about ethical norms and ethical valuation through our utilization of intersubjective consensus using our active and logical engagement of discursive and dialectical Reason (i.e. “The Unforced Force of the Better Argument”). This Kantian and Habermasian Ethics grounded in Rationality is secular and humanistic since it is not a product of an ossified, fossilized and dogmatic morality brought about by religious dogmatism and cultural conditioning but by an appeal to the universal human endowment of Reason and Communication, Rationality and Communicativity which are based on our intrasubjective consensus as human beings desiring justice, equity and freedom for one-and-all.

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Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu is Associate Professor-7 of Philosophy and Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines (UP), Cebu City, Philippines. He was Academic Coordinator of the Political Science Program at UP Cebu from 2011-2014, and Coordinator of Gender and Development (GAD) Office at UP Cebu from 2015-2019.

His research interests include Theoretical and Applied Ethics, Islamic Studies particularly Sunni jurisprudence, Islamic feminist discourses, Islam in interfaith dialogue initiatives, Islamic environmentalism, Classical Sunni Islamic pedagogy, the writings of Imam Al-Ghazali on pluralism and tolerance, Islam in the Indian Subcontinent, Turkish Sufism, Atatürk Studies, Ottoman Studies, Muslim-Christian Dialogue, Middle Eastern Affairs, Peace Studies and Public Theology.

He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG)

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