

# Case Study on the Application of Ethical Principles to Political Action

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# Information Ethics

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- The general domain of “information ethics” addresses ethical concerns in the sources, creation, organization, dissemination, transmission, packaging, use, and evaluation of information.
- It started as a concern in the field of library and information science. I taught one of the first courses nationally at Kent State in 1990. For a brief history, see "A Brief History of Information Ethics," found at: <http://bid.ub.edu/en/39/froehlich.htm> (2004). There has been significant evolution since then.
- It recently has been appropriated in the field of computer science (at least in the work of Luciano Floridi at the University of Oxford).
- There are related fields of media ethics and digital ethics that we will discuss later.

# Preface

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- Violations of ethical principles occur often in the course of arguments.
- While ethics are violated to some extent by most politicians and presidential administrations, the current administration overflows with outstanding and egregious assaults against ethical values: cases of corruption abound, e.g., when members of the cabinet abuse taxpayer money in their office (e.g., EPA Head, Scott Pruitt, or former Head of Health and Human Services, Tom Price, who resigned for abusing the expense account of his former Office). This is not to say that previous presidents and their administrations were not corrupt to some degree, but the current administration offers the freshest, multitudinous and verifiable examples.
- To make this issue manageable, I will use 5 common, generally held, ethical principle to address a specific ethical case to illustrate how a single theme, stance, action or posture violate ethical norms and values, especially through deceptive practices

# Objective

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- The case study will be on the ethical issue of “banning Muslims from entering the country from select Muslim countries, to protect the USA from terrorism”
- We will analyze this case based on the 5 commonly held ethical principles
  - Respect the moral autonomy of self and others
  - Seek justice or fairness
  - Seek social harmony
  - Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized (or better:) that existing functional relationships are maintained or promoted (feminist variation of “Do No Harm”)
  - Be faithful to organizational, professional or public trust

# Respect the moral autonomy of self and others

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- First of all, the ban assumes that Muslims have no individuality and that they can be clustered under a doubtful, single stereotype: that Muslims want to make their religion the singular, dominant religion; that all Muslims support sharia law for the world; that Muslims do not hold differing views about their religion; that Muslims are committed to the same degree to their religion; that they have no tolerance for other religions, to name a few mistaken assumptions. This list is not exhaustive. The one of the marks of a tyrant is to create a *we versus them* mentality, where “them” are all of one stripe, and so are “we” who are the true, the valiant, the righteous, the true defenders of the country, etc.
- The first principle states that we must respect the moral autonomy of each Muslim, that in fact, while Muslims identify with a religious practice, they have the right (and being understood as having the right) to express or practice to any level of commitment that they may or may not undertake to that religion.
- There is a limit: harm to others.

# Aspects of the First Principle of Moral Autonomy

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Let us look at each of these values in turn, derived from the first principle:

- freedom and self-determination (moral autonomy)
- protection from injury
- equality of opportunity
- privacy
- minimal well-being
- recognition for one's work

# Freedom and Self-Determination

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- Stereotypes deny any moral autonomy of individuals because they are all seen as adherents of group think. E.g., that they memorized the same tenets, follow the same rules, think the same way, and have the same general lives.
- It assumes that each Muslim cannot think for her/himself and are not able to choose his or her path in religious matters or practices or level of engagement in those religious practices or for that matter, the nature of their engagement in society or in politics
- Such stereotyping makes the uncritical incapable of coping with the complexities of persons belonging to a religious minority, or rather it enables them (in a motivated self-deceptive manner) to easily dismiss the lives of others

# Protection from Injury

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- Muslims, as American citizens, have a right to be free from discrimination and hostile action
- Even if they are not American citizens, while they are in this country (such as visitors), they deserve protection from injury
- Since the rise of the Trump presidency and complicit Republican support, and his mantras against Muslims and the Muslim ban, attacks on individuals (whether actual Muslim or not, but assumed to be) and mosques have risen dramatically
- Verbal attacks are common, telling American citizens to go back to their homeland, when in fact America is their homeland.
- Muslims fear verbal attacks, physical attacks, attacks on their families and attacks on their places of worship.



# Equality of Opportunity

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As American citizens, Muslims should have

- Equality of housing availability
- Equality of educational opportunities
- Equal access to social welfare programs
- Equal voting opportunities
  - There have been intimidation at polls for African Americans and to a lesser extent, Middle Eastern looking individuals
- Equality of ambitions for political office, such as Muslim Rep. Keith Ellison's (D-Minn) being elected to the House or striving to be Chair of the DNC (Democratic National Committee)
- Trump and white supremacists' supporters have difficulty accepting this ethical mandate

# Privacy

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- As American citizens, Muslims and their activities should not be scrutinized any more than other group or anyone else as potential terrorist threats
- The sad fact is the terrorist activities in the United States are by white Americans, especially nationalists, not Muslims

# Minimal Well Being

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This would include:

- Adequate housing/shelter
- Adequate food
- Minimal education
- Minimal access to information, e.g., through libraries
- While there may be few documented cases in discrimination in housing opportunities against Muslims (and other minorities), one can imagine that many Arab Americans have been rejected in housing applications, the rental agencies finding (manufacturing) reasons why a particular rental application is not acceptable

# Recognition of One's Work

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Whether in the corporate sphere, public sphere or personal sphere, Muslims should be acknowledged for their contributions. For example,

- In being appropriately rewarded for competent or superior job performance with organizational or public recognition or economic compensation
- Recognition of service to the community (e.g., Reps. Keith Ellison, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib )

## Seek justice or fairness

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- This principle is related to the first: to recognize one's value or worth is to see to be just or fair to them. Justice is often seen as fairness.
- Wholesale attacks on Muslims locally, regionally, nationally or internationally violate this principle
- So does stereotyping groups or individuals
- Discrimination in housing, voting rights, rights of access to restaurants, are all forms of lacking fairness
- Also, rigged trials or evidence and baseless assertions are violations of civil rights

# Seek Social Harmony

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It is this principle that is often used to advocate discrimination against individuals, religious groups, and nations.

The principle seeks to justify action by maximizing the greatest amount of happiness to the most number of people.

This principle often has positive aspects in political action, such as social welfare programs: social security, Medicare, unemployment insurance, etc., where the improvements for the many are balanced against the pain of the few: some businesses that cannot afford to pay, individuals who don't need it yet have to pay for it, etc.

In theory, rejecting the flow of immigrants, particularly Islamic immigrants or visitors (from particular Islamic countries) will make the country safer.

Evidence shows otherwise: the terrorists associated with 9/11 did not come from the excluded countries, but the non-excluded ones. The 9/11 attacks were carried out by men from Saudi Arabia (15), the United Arab Emirates (2), Egypt (1), and Lebanon (1), for a total of 19.

## Seek Social Harmony

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In an article from the *Atlantic Monthly*, the author, Uri Friedman, based on research of Alex Nowrasteh, an expert on immigration at the Cato Institute, asserts:

- That between 1975 and 2015 citizens of the seven countries singled out by Trump have killed NO people in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.
- “Six Iranians, six Sudanese, two Somalis, two Iraqis, and one Yemeni have been convicted of attempting or executing terrorist attacks on U.S. soil during that time period,” according to Nowrasteh.
- Uri Friedman, “Where America’s Terrorist Actually Come From,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January 30, 2017. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/trump-immigration-ban-terrorism/514361/>

# Seek Social Harmony

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- In the case of this principle, it is useful to think of the stakeholders involved and some of the dilemmas of the utilitarian principle. How do we calculate the greatest amount of happiness for the most number of people?
- Utilitarianism argues that consequences count and seems to assert the position that only consequences count. There are several issues that must be considered:
- (1) Utility must be defined. The common definitions have included pleasure, happiness and preference satisfaction. For some, there is some advantage for a multiplicity of factors underlying utility.
- (2) Whatever the consequences are, the utilitarians must indicate how these consequences can be measured. If there are several measures, then there could be different yardsticks. Utilitarians sometimes refer to units of pleasure or happiness as hedons and units of displeasure or suffering as dolors. When utilitarians go about deciding moral worth, they must consider to the best of their ability the following:
  - (a) determine the consequences of the various courses of action open to the actors;
  - (b) determine the amount of hedons or dolors associated with the action; and then
  - (c) perform the course of action that generates the most amount of happiness (hedons less dolors).
- (3) Utilitarians must indicate how much utility we must strive for, in other words, how high their standards are. Is it always the greatest amount of happiness or can something like a minimum standard of living be suggested as a high enough standard? If we accept utilitarianism at face value, then supererogatory acts, acts above the call of duty, are not possible.



# Seek Social Harmony

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- In the case of Trump's Muslim ban, we can see that the issue becomes quite complicated
- If we are calculating hedons (pleasure units), do we include the presumed happiness of his supporters, even if those beliefs are mainly delusional?
- From that sum, how do we calculate the dolors of those opposed to Trump's unconstitutional ban and then their joy if he leaves office or is impeached, when his actions are overturned or deemed unconstitutional by the courts?
- When we calculate, do we only look at the present and the immediate consequences or of the anticipated future, when one does not know what will actually happen?
- Consider the attacks on health insurance, Obamacare, Medicare and Medicaid by the current administration and Republican Party. If they succeed in destroying social welfare programs, do we attempt to take the positive effects of such programs from the past and present and try to estimate the future effects (dolors) of their absence?

# Minimize or Do No Harm

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- The full statement is: Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized (or better:) that existing functional relationships are maintained or promoted
- While there may be potential harm to individuals in the United States in terms of attacks by Islamic terrorists, do these acts outweigh the upheaval of families by the deportation of family members by ICE, or by the refusal to allow scholars from selected Islamic countries to come and get an education in the United States?
- If we take seriously the proposed feminist idea that existing functional relationships should be nurtured and preserved, the attack on families is unconscionable in its deportation of major family members, especially DACA families.
- The Muslim ban and the massive reduction of immigrant migration from war-torn places, like Syria, also violates this principle.

# Be faithful to organizational, professional or public trust

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- The original lecture on this principle was oriented to organizational situations, like libraries, professional associations like American Library Association, or the public trust while working for those associations (e.g., spending taxpayer money wisely and frugally).
- Organizational trust – if we look at the U S Resettlement Program for refugees from asylum countries, like Syria, the Trump administration has reduced the number of refugees dramatically (to 45000 per year from over 200,000) and is trying to shut down its offices, by slashing its budget. The supporting programs that help resettlement have laid off workers because they do not have enough clients and because the cuts in the budget have caused their budgets to collapse as well. Observers indicate that the damage is structural, will be long-lasting and will take a lot of time to rebuild. [Deborah Amos, “The Year the US Resettlement Program Unraveled,” NPR, January 1, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/01/01/574658008/the-year-the-u-s-refugee-resettlement-program-unraveled> ]
- Professional trust – professionals in those organizations and the US Resettlement Program, enacting the good will of the majority of Americans, have had to betray that trust, not of their volition, but from the effects of the anti-American tactics of Trump and his administration
- Public trust -- in a similar manner, the longstanding welcome of refugees has been a trait of the majority of Americans, not only because of sympathy to peoples whose destinies were out of their control, but also because of their overwhelming contributions to America, ones that do in fact make America great.

# Conclusion

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With literacy in general ethics (and specifically in information ethics in information work, e.g., protecting the privacy of patrons in their borrowing habits), one can uncover problematic positions of political actors and media organizations (e.g., Fox News lying or withholding information about political candidates does not respect the autonomy of individuals to make their own assessments about political candidates, does not promote social harmony (by instilling divisiveness), produces harm (by inciting violence on minority populations), and does not gain any professional trust (by ignoring the principles of good journalism), to name a few violations.