A Short List of Universal Moral Values

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There may be virtual worldwide consensus on a few universal moral values like the Golden Rule. In this article, the authors argue that diversity and universality can coexist within the human community. Toward that goal, they construct a short list of universal moral values. Validation of these values is based on nomination by their frequent citation in previously published lists and endorsement by most of the major world religions and well-known secular organizations (i.e., the United Nations). Implications for counseling are discussed.

There is a universal moral law written on the human heart. (Pope John Paul II, as cited by Moody, 1995, p. 82)

Many clients seek help for resolving their values conflicts or moral dilemmas, hoping that counselors will offer them answers. But counselors are trained to refrain from giving answers to their clients. Instead, clients are encouraged to search for their own answers. The philosophies of values clarification (VC) and character education (CE) offer two approaches for helping adolescents formulate their values (see Kinnier, 1995). CE programs typically teach adolescents that certain values are better than others (Damon, 1988; Lickona, 1991). In contrast, VC proponents (e.g., Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1978) traditionally have encouraged adolescents to discover their own values. Raths et al. warned that the inherent danger of any values education program is that those in power may simply indoctrinate adolescents to adopt currently fashionable values. The resolution of this issue is not limited to choosing between relativism and absolutism (Kane, 1994).

Conflicted clients and adolescents may benefit from both nondirective assistance and some authoritative guidance. A short list of the most universally accepted values could serve as a frame of reference or general guide.

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for helping individuals grapple with their particular values conflicts and moral dilemmas. In this article, we attempt to create such a “short list” of universal moral values.

The call for a list of universal values has been heard many times before. As the introductory quote implies, Pope John Paul II would like all of humanity to recognize certain universal moral principles. Two modern religions (the Baha’i faith and the Unitarian Universalist Church) promote universality as a central tenet. History is replete with calls for universality. For example, Immanuel Kant believed that categorical imperatives were universal. Aldous Huxley (1969) argued that there is a “perennial philosophy” or a core of moral principles that exist in every time and place throughout history. Huston Smith, the renowned scholar of religious studies, used a similar term, the “primordial tradition” to refer to universal spiritual archetypes (Griffin & Smith, 1989). Smith believed that there were many differences between religions but also that a common core of spiritual principles existed in all of them. In his last public address, Paul Tillich called for a new universal orientation in theology (Krieger, 1991).

The call is sounding more urgent today. Many contemporary writers (e.g., Bell, 1994; Christians & Traber, 1997; Gert, 1970; Krieger, 1991; Patterson, 1996; Russell, 1984) have argued that the future survival of humanity may depend on the acceptance of a global ethic. A code of agreed-upon rules might serve to improve worldwide communication and cooperation.

Those who are calling for the recognition of universal values are not arguing for an end to individual or cultural diversity, rather they are asking for the acceptance of some limited common ground (Kane, 1994). Perhaps the most agreed-upon universal moral value is the Golden Rule. Several writers (e.g., Hick, 1992; Kane, 1994; Maciver, 1952) have identified the many (only slight) variations of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” found within all of the major religions. The case for the universality of the Golden Rule is most impressive.

In this project, we attempt to construct a short list of universal moral values. In the following literature review, we first consider the position that there are no universal moral values. Then, we present an argument that there should be such a list. Next, we review previous attempts to identify universal values. After describing the method and presenting the results of our attempt to construct a list, we discuss implications for values education and counseling.

THE CASE AGAINST UNIVERSAL VALUES

Throughout the twentieth century, Western anthropologists have generally taken an antiuniversalist position (Linton, 1954). From their perspective, the promotion of certain values as universal too often is really the disguised promotion of the dominant culture’s values. Fowers and Richardson (1996) suggested that universalism might even be viewed as “oppressive cultural imperialism” (p. 610). For example, Hick (1992) pointed out that slavery
was once accepted as natural or even divinely ordained throughout much of history—as long as the dominant culture accepted it as such.

In another criticism of the endeavor to identify universal values, Linton (1954) argued that a value could only become universal when it becomes so abstract or general as to be essentially meaningless. Linton used the value of modesty as an example. The abstract concept of modesty may be somewhat universally accepted, but the specific prescriptions for modesty vary widely. Thus the general directive to be modest tells us little or nothing about how one specifically should behave.

The existential philosophers, starting with Nietzsche, believed that values were relative and subjective (Castell, 1972). That stance has been adopted by several influential philosophies of the twentieth century including humanistic psychology, phenomenology, and constructivism.

The currently popular postpositivistic philosophies of science imply that the human ideals of objectivity and universalism are fantasies (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Finally, the multicultural movement that has so dominated the last half of the twentieth century is essentially antiuniversalist by virtue of its idealization of diversity (Fowers & Richardson, 1996).

It is clear there have been and are strong antiuniversalist forces within the twentieth century disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. The main argument against universalism is that no individual or group of individuals is qualified for promulgating what is good or correct for all people.

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL VALUES

We have lost our will to aspire to objective truth and worth in the face of uncertainty and without assurances that they exist. (Kane, 1994, p. 97)

Perhaps the most common criticism leveled at those who take the antiuniversalist stance is that they lack courage to do the right, albeit risky, thing (e.g., see Bell, 1994; Bennett, 1993; Bloom, 1987; Hick, 1992; Kane, 1994). The critics typically acknowledge the difficulty and risk inherent in proclaiming any value to be universal but then argue that it is the right thing to do for the betterment or even survival of humankind. For example, Paul Tillich concluded late in his career that humanity might be doomed if we could not find a unity of purpose (Krieger, 1991). Bell argued that without some universal standards, “we are left with no way to condemn cannibalism, physical torture, mutilation, wife beating, child abuse, slavery, murder, or genocide if they are part of the habitual practice and cultural traditions of a group” (p. 18).

Advocates for universal values point to highly appealing values, like the Golden Rule, or to repulsive groups, like the Nazis, or to abhorrent practices, like female genital mutilation and bride burning, with the plea that surely humankind can mostly agree to the acceptance or condemnation of at least a few values, groups, or practices.
Most anthropologists of the twentieth century have advocated respect for diversity and relativism within cultures, but, according to Brown (1991), new evidence has indicated that some scientific conclusions about the differences between cultures may have been exaggerated. For example, Brown claimed that the data reveal that Margaret Mead may have exaggerated the differences between Samoan and Western adolescents. Brown also pointed out that recent research has shown that facial expressions do seem more universal than once thought. The implication is that anthropologists found more relativism than actually existed because of their bias.

Although anthropology historically has taken more of a relativistic stance, Kluckholm (1955), one of the most eminent anthropologists of the twentieth century, believed that some universalism did exist and should be promoted. Modal current thinking within cross-cultural psychology is to reject the extremes of absolutism and cultural relativism and to appreciate that there are universals that manifest minor variations across cultures (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998). Lonner (as cited in Segall et al., 1998) labeled these “variform universals.” Finally, we consider the logical argument of Fower and Richardson (1996). They pointed out that those who attack objectivism/universalism and take the stand that all standards are ultimately arbitrary are making an absolutist claim themselves.

For this study, we take the following position: There may be a limited number of moral values that a large majority of people can accept. Acceptance of and respect for diversity and relativism can coexist within a framework of limited universalism.

PREVIOUS LISTS OF UNIVERSAL VALUES

Mohandas Gandhi promoted self-suffering, nonviolence, and the search for truth as universal values (Krieger, 1991). William James (as cited in Patterson, 1996) believed that love was the singular foundation principle of all ethics and morality. Darwin (1955) speculated that the desire for approval and sympathy was the primary root of morality. Contemporary evolutionary psychologists view altruism as universal and the most important survival mechanism for the human species (Williams, 1989).

Most of the aforementioned values are ingredients of the Golden Rule. In addition, the Golden Rule can be found within the laws or moral codes of all the major religions (see Hick, 1992; Kane, 1994; Maciver, 1952). The literature (both scientific and religious) relating to universal values clearly points to the Golden Rule as the most obvious candidate for any list of universal moral values.

A political version of the Golden Rule was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN). The UN (1948) document titled “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” affirmed the dignity, equality, and freedom (from tyranny, fear, and torture) of all people. In 1993, a world conference of 250 international religious leaders met in Chicago.
They produced a document titled “Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic” (Swidler, 1993). In it they reaffirmed the UN declaration and referred to the Golden Rule as the one fundamental overriding principle. They then developed a list of corollary principles that included not only the respect and concern for human life but other life forms as well and the environment. They extolled the virtues of honesty and the pursuit of truth and called for a nonviolent approach to world problems. They condemned aggression, hatred, injustice, and discrimination. They purposely avoided controversial (which by definition lack universal agreement) issues like abortion and euthanasia.

The International Religious Foundation published a book titled World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts (Wilson, 1991). In it the author reaffirmed the Golden Rule and also identified the major sins as murder, theft, dishonesty, and hypocrisy. It was concluded that the principles of justice, compassion, and forgiveness were universal.

At a more local level, a 21-member advisory council in New Jersey was charged with identifying core values that could be taught in the public schools. They identified four values: (a) respect for self, (b) respect for others, (c) civic responsibility, and (d) respect for the natural environment (Hanley, 1989). Educators can integrate these values into class curricula and counseling interventions.

Several writers have tried to identify core or universal values. Their lists are typically created through informal search for recurrent themes found within major sacred books like the Bible or the Koran. Among the most frequently occurring values found in these lists are the Golden Rule and its implications, like treating others with respect and compassion; and the virtues of truthfulness, justice, personal responsibility, self-discipline, courage, and faith (see Bell, 1994; Bennett, 1993; Christians & Traber, 1997; Gert, 1970; Harrelson, 1980; Hick, 1992; Kane, 1994; Kidder, 1994; Maciver, 1952). These values are mostly consistent with the previously mentioned universal values identified by religious and political organizations.

In this project, we construct a short list of universal moral values that was derived from the literature and “endorsed by” most (if not all) the major world religions and well-known secular organizations. We use the term short list to acknowledge that our list is not exhaustive. Our intention is to construct a preliminary list that may be added to or revised in the future. Such a “working list” could also be used as a stimulus or guide to help students and clients to clarify their own values.

METHOD

In the first phase of this project, we constructed a working list of universal moral values that is based on previous lists found in the literature (which we just reviewed). Then we began a search through well-known texts and documents of major world religions and secular organizations to discover
if those ideas or values were expressed there. Our list was revised and refined as we considered the relevant quotes.

The Major Religions and Secular Organizations

Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of religions, identified seven religions as the great world religions (H. Smith, 1994). We used those religions in this study. The religions and sacred texts that we consulted are as follows: Judaism (the Tanakh), Christianity (the New Testament), Islam (the Koran), Hinduism (the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita), Confucianism (the Analects of Confucius), Taoism (the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu), and Buddhism (the Dhammapada).

The secular organizations and documents we consulted are as follows: the American Atheists Inc. (Atheist Aims and Purpose, Atheism Teaches That, and Introduction to American Atheists, which are the official pamphlets of the American Atheists Inc.), the American Humanist Association (Humanist Manifesto I, 1933, and Humanist Manifesto II, 1973), and the United Nations (The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Procedure

We (i.e., the authors and the volunteers we recruited) searched through the religious texts and secular documents looking for statements that were relevant to the values on our working list. Using procedures prescribed in ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Glaser, 1978; M. L. Smith, 1987), we used the quotes to refine our list and the list to guide our search for quotes. Quotes were added or deleted, and the list was revised only after consensus of the coauthors. Quotes were deleted primarily to eliminate redundancy. Our intention was not to list every supporting quote that we found. Rather, our goal was to list only the best (most clearly and simply stated) one to four supporting quotes for each value representing each religion and secular organization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Short List of Universal Moral Values

Our analyses yielded the following four major categories and more specific values:

1. Commitment to something greater than oneself
   • To recognize the existence of and be committed to a Supreme Being, higher principle, transcendent purpose or meaning to one’s existence
   • To seek the Truth (or truths)
   • To seek Justice
2. Self-respect, but with humility, self-discipline, and acceptance of personal responsibility
   • To respect and care for oneself
   • To not exalt oneself or overindulge—to show humility and avoid gluttony, greed, or other forms of selfishness or self-centeredness
   • To act in accordance with one's conscience and to accept responsibility for one's behavior
3. Respect and caring for others (i.e., the Golden Rule)
   • To recognize the connectedness between all people
   • To serve humankind and to be helpful to individuals
   • To be caring, respectful, compassionate, tolerant, and forgiving of others
   • To not hurt others (e.g., do not murder, abuse, steal from, cheat, or lie to others)
4. Caring for other living things and the environment

The Appendix displays the endorsing or supporting quotes from the documents of the religions and secular organizations.

Although we did not find supporting quotes for all listed values from every religion and secular organization, each value on the list is supported or endorsed by most (in some cases all) of the religions or secular organizations we consulted. Therefore, we argue that the list could be considered universal, with the following caveats.

First, we reiterate that the list is not exhaustive. There are probably more universal moral values. We hope that the search will continue and that the list will be expanded or refined as the data warrant. Second, a limitation of the present study is that we only considered seven religions and three secular organizations. Although we believe that the three secular organizations are impressive ones, and we find compelling H. Smith’s (1994) rationale for calling the seven religions we included the world’s great religions, we recognize that we ignored many important religions and secular organizations in this study. For example, we used no indigenous local religions, such as, the religions of American Indians or Australian Aborigines. In addition, we did not consult great secular legal documents like the Magna Carta or governmental constitutions. Future searches might so expand the list of sources. The continuing questions remain as follows: Which moral values stand up to universal tests? Which values can most people accept and agree to try to live by?

Implications for Values Education and Counseling

Our position in the values education controversy is that we oppose the authoritarian promulgation of any one group’s values as being above all others, but we also oppose the presentation of all values as equally valid. A short list of universal moral values may offer a bridge between the absolutist and relativistic positions, as well as between the character education and values clarification perspectives. Diversity and universality can coexist.
Similarly, this short list or future more refined versions could be used in counseling. Clients could be encouraged to consider implications of the universal values as they pertain to their particular values conflicts or moral dilemmas (see Kinnier, 1995). For example, one test of potential resolutions could be the extent to which they violate or support any of the universal values. Teachers could also use the list as a frame of reference or guide when facilitating student discussions on values issues.

Of course, any list of presumed universal values is subject to question and criticism. But values that consistently appear throughout history and across many of the major religions and secular organizations cannot be dismissed as just another perspective among many. Such a list offers a compelling framework to build on and refine. Perhaps most important, it can serve as a starting point for communication between divergent groups and as a focal point for contemplation within conflicted individuals.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

Sources for Short List Inclusion

I. Commitment to something greater than oneself

*From Judaism*

[1] To love the Lord your God and to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments, and to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and soul. Joshua 22:5

Lord who may sojourn in Your tent, who may dwell on Your holy mountain? He who lives without blame, who does what is right, and in his heart acknowledges the truth. Psalm 15:1-2

Happy are those who act justly, who do right at all times. Psalm 106:3

*From Christianity*

You will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free. John 8:32

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Matthew 22:37
From Islam
Adore your Lord who created you, as He did those before you. Koran 2:21
Do not confuse the truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth knowingly. Koran 2:42
Oh, you who believe, be custodians of justice. Koran 4:135

From Hinduism
Truth alone prevails. The way of the Gods, . . . proceed to the Highest Abode of the True. Mundaka Upanishad, III.i.5
Eternal peace belongs to the wise who perceive Him within themselves. Katha Upanishad, II.i.13
For He, the Supreme Self, is not born; nor having come into phenomenal existence, will He ever cease to exist. Bhagavad Gita 2.20

From Taoism
Hold to the truth. Tao Te Ching 8
Justice is the expression of divinity. Tao Te Ching 16

From Confucianism
Gentlemen set their hearts on moral force. Analects IV.11
Be ready to die for the Good Way. Analects VIII.13

From Buddhism
And should one live a hundred years not seeing the immortal state; better still is one day lived of one who sees the immortal state. Dhammapada 8:16

From Humanism
The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanist Manifesto I, p. 3
Each person’s future is in some way linked to all. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 6

From Atheism
The goal of atheism is freedom of the mind. Introduction American Athiests, p. 2
There is no divine guardian of truth, goodness . . . man must defend them or they will perish from the earth. Atheism Teaches That, p. 1

From the United Nations
Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. U.N. Declaration of Human Rights Preamble, p. 1

II. Self-respect, humility, self-discipline, and acceptance of personal responsibility
From Judaism
Yea, man is bowed, and mortal brought low; brought low is the pride of the haughty. Isaiah 5:15
Pride goes before ruin, arrogance before failure. Better to be humble and among the lowly than to share spoils with the proud. Proverbs 16:18
From Christianity
From inside, from the human heart, come evil thoughts, acts of fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, and malice; fraud, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly; all these evil things come from within, and they are what defile a person. Mark 7: 22-23

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Matthew 23:12

From Islam
If you give alms openly, it is well, but if you do it secretly and give it to the poor, that is better. Koran 2:271

And those who fulfill their trusts and covenants, who uphold their testimonies, and those who are mindful of their moral obligations; they will live in gardens of honor. Koran 70:32-35

From Hinduism
Whoever, giving up all selfish desires, goes free from craving, he is free of egotism and self interest, and he attains true peace. Bhagavad Gita 2.71

Hypocrisy, arrogance, egotistical pride, anger, violence of speech, and ignorance—these are the characteristics of one who is born to the demonic way of life. Bhagavad Gita 16.4

The immature run after pleasures. Katha Upanishad II.2

From Taoism
Live for your center, not your senses. Tao Te Ching 12

The sage remains sensitive, avoiding extremes, avoiding extravagance, avoiding excess. Tao Te Ching 29

A man who boasts of his achievements has no merit. A man who brags will not endure. Tao Te Ching 24

From Confucianism
A gentleman . . . must remove all trace of violence or arrogance. Analects VIII.4

The gentleman is dignified, but never haughty. Analects VIII.26

From Buddhism
Themselves the wise does tame. Dhammapada 6:5

Whoever dwells seeing the pleasurable, in senses unrestrained, immoderate in food, indolent, inferior of enterprise, over him, indeed, Mara prevails, like the wind over a weak tree. Dhammapada 1:7

From Humanism
The preciousness and dignity of the individual person is a central humanist value. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 4

Individuals should be encouraged to contribute to their own betterment. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 5

From Atheism
Man can and must create his own destiny. Atheist Aims and Purpose, p. 1

We must face the consequences of our acts. Atheism Teaches That, p. 1

There is no chance after death to ‘do our bits.’ We must do it now or never. Atheism Teaches That, p. 1
III. Respect and caring for other individuals (i.e., the Golden Rule)

*From Judaism*
- Love your fellow as yourself. Leviticus 19:18
- Thou shall not murder. Exodus 20:1
- Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Exodus 20:16
- You shall not steal. Exodus 20:15

*From Christianity*
- Always treat others as you would have them to treat you. Matthew 7:12
- Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not give false evidence; honour your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 19:18
- If someone asks you to go a mile with him, go two. Matthew 5:41

*From Islam*
- Do not take a life, which God has forbidden, except in a just cause. Koran 17:33
- As for the thief, whether woman or man, cut his hand as punishment from God. Koran 5:38
- He who fabricates lies is doomed to failure. Koran 20:61

*From Hinduism*
- Do not kill. Bhagavad Gita 16:2
- Do not lie. Bhagavad Gita 16:2

*From Taoism*
- In dealing with others, be gentle and kind in speech, be true in ruling, be just. Tao Te Ching 8
- The sage takes care of all men and abandons no one. Tao Te Ching 27

*From Confucianism*
- Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you. Analects 15.23
- Keep promises. Analects 1.8

*From Buddhism*
- What are the four vices of action that he gives up? They are injury to life, taking what is not given, base conduct in sexual matters, and false speech. Digha Nikaya

*From Humanism*
- The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanist Manifesto I, p. 2
- We are concerned for the welfare of the aged, the infirmed, the disadvantaged, and also for the outcasts—the mentally retarded, abandoned, or abused children, the handicapped, prisoners, and addicts—for all who are neglected or ignored by society. Practicing humanists should make it their vocation to humanize personal relations. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 5

*From Atheism*
- To encourage the development and public acceptance of a humane ethical system, stressing the mutual sympathy, understanding, and interdependence of all people. Aims and Purposes, Point 5
- The cooperation of man is the only hope of the world. Atheism Teaches That, p. 1
From the United Nations
All human beings... should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. U.N. Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble, p. 1

IV. Caring for other living things and the environment
From Judaism
The Lord God took the man, and placed him into the Garden of Eden to till it and tend it. Genesis 2:15
A righteous man knows the needs of his beasts. Proverbs 12:10

From Christianity
What man shall there be among you, that have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath day, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Matthew 12:11

From Islam
His knowledge extends over the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of them both tires Him not. Koran 2.255

From Hinduism
Not rejecting any creature, always friendly and compassionate. (Characterization of the Yogi) Bhagavad Gita 12.13

From Taoism
Love the world as yourself, and you'll be able to care for it properly. Tao Te Ching, 13

From Buddhism
One who is harmless to all living beings is called noble. Dhammapada 19:15

From Humanism
The planet earth must be considered a single ecosystem... The cultivation and conservation of nature is a moral value, we should perceive ourselves as integral to the sources of our being in nature. Humanist Manifesto II, p. 6

From Atheism
We... affirm that life is precious and that the ecological balance of our planet must be conserved. Atheist Manifesto, p. 1

From the United Nations
Peace, development, and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible. U.N. Conference on Environment and Development. Principle 25, p. 5

States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the earth's ecosystem. U.N. Conference on Environment and Development. Principle 25, p. 5