**Ethical Behavior Toolkit: Towards the development of a framework applicable to cultures**

**Mohsen Farhadinejad [[1]](#footnote-1)**

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Economics, Management and Administrative Sciences, Semnan University, Iran

E- mail: farhadi@semnan.ac.ir

**Mohammad Reza Sotoudeh**

M.Sc in Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Economics & Management, Semnan University, Iran

E- mail: mrsotoudeh2015@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Ethics has always been considered a permanent concern in human life since the creation. Although sometimes ethics may have been marginalized, indeed, it has always been present in the individual and social aspects of life whether in a prominent or obscure manner. It has been recognized since the beginning of human life that people expect themselves or others to live ethically and to comply with ethical frameworks. In fact, all prophets and reformers of the world have come to fulfill this expectation. However, this question has always been raised how individuals of unique entities consisting of complicated and countless number of factors affecting their behavior can be unified under a unanimous framework of ethical rules to get them to behave in a harmonious and predictable manner. This study aimed to address the above question and analyze the existing literatures, each of which has tried to deal with the same subject differently. Finally, 14 rules were identified. Thus, people of different notions, cultural backgrounds, and demographics can adopt at least one rule by which they can adjust their behavior and choices if they intend to improve the quality of their ethical lives. Meanwhile, these rules introduced as the ethical behavior toolkit can be employed by ethics educators and propagators to promote ethical behavior.

**Keywords:** ethical behavior, unethical behavior, behavior control, individual behavior management

# Problem Statement

Man can achieve inner peace through the conscious cultivation of real human virtues. Regardless of any competition for values, ethics includes an integrated realm of ethical rules shared by all humans. This integrated realm, known as the spirit or the spiritual dimension of human, is both objective and pervasive. In other words, it incorporates all human activities. The development of ethics can help people of different cultures communicate with their spiritual dimensions (Ballot *et al.*, 2014: 7-8). Morality is essential for human life. Humans do need ethics to continue living together and to proceed with their social lives; otherwise, they would be degenerated. In different periods of human history, the most important crisis of social life has been pertained to ethics and how to behave towards other people (Khaghani Zadeh *et al.*, 2009). In fact, people have unlimited potential for the unethical behavior (Gellerman, 1986; Baker, 2017: 4). Since the 1960s, researchers have been studying the factors affecting ethical and unethical behavior, assuming that even ethical individuals sometimes take unethical actions (Bersoff, 1999). The question why ethical individuals take unethical actions has even been considered a research subject.

After all, ethics includes a set of rules distinguishing between the right and the wrong and prescribes a series of norms as to what individuals must do and what they must avoid (Aybaghi *et al.*, 2012). Considering the diversity of individuals and communities, it is essential to seek to codify and propose some rules for helping individuals of different backgrounds enhance their behavior. This dissertation was written to provide such rules.

# Introduction to Ethical Behavior Toolkit and Relevant Components

Since people can improve their quality of life through the self-awareness and self-control of their behavior (Murphy *et al.*, 2017), certain criteria and regulations are necessary for fulfilling this intention. Meanwhile, researchers have concluded that most humans are capable of showing very immoral behavior. Not only are they able to do such deeds, but they can also keep on doing them all the time without the realization (Kelaris *et al.*, 1999). When someone experiences such a mental state, they focus on immoral goals and forget totally about other goals (Spiegel, 2012). According to a study of ethical psychology, even decent people (for instance, those who are careful about ethics) can and may show unethical behavior (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Moore & Gino, 2013). Some factors such as personal traits, sociability manners, and ideologies play significant roles in the ethical systems of individuals and determine how they react to moral dilemmas (Burnett, 2017). Although there is no doubt about the different ethical systems of people and communities, these differences are inconspicuous in ethical rules. In fact, these differences are subtle and negligible (Buron & Goldsby, 2005). Many ethics scholars believe that the ethical diversity is merely apparent and that there are some norms which are valid for all mankind. For instance, all of the known human societies approve of parental responsibilities to children. The concept of a good mother exists in all cultures; however, the difference indicates what a good mother should do. Despite some disagreements in different cultures, the rules and norms are the same, and none of such disagreements denies the general responsibility for taking care of children (McNewon, 2016: 293-294). Thus, the global demand for moralization calls for taking more universal rules and regulations into account.

It is now necessary to address the key research question as what should be done to prevent people from doing immoral deeds. In fact, this study aimed to answer the question that whether it is possible to design a tool for everyone with different traits to make them avoid immoral behaviors with respect to the diverse differences of humans in demographics, values, notions, motives, and so on. For this purpose, various literatures suggesting some solutions were analyzed. Then, the solutions were divided into three categories of ethical action rules, namely silver, gold, and platinum rules. Although experts have come up with limited and scattered ideas, this paper tried to provide a coherent and unanimous account of different factors suggested by various literatures in order to cover a wider range of people.

According to a prominent professor of ethics, three paradigms of ethics have intellectually been emerged: duty-based paradigm, outcome-based paradigm, and virtue-based paradigm. In other words, every philosopher of ethics focuses on the duty, outcome, or virtue. All of these paradigms discuss that people need ethics for two purposes and that ethics should be applied to two areas, the first of which includes decision-making, and the second one is judgment. The first area focuses on what decision an individual makes to perform an action. In the second area, an action is done (whether by the same person or another) and then, the person wants to judge whether the action is morally defendable or unjustifiable. Therefore, a decision is made before an action, whereas a judgement is made after the action. Although the proposed ethical rules concern the both major functions of ethics, a special emphasis was laid on the ethical decision-making in this paper to help make human decisions more ethical. The rest of this section addresses the components of the proposed ethical behavior toolkit in three categories: silver rules, gold rules, and platinum rules.

1. Silver Rules: This category was named silver rules due to the fact that the habituation rate of these rules varies from one person to another. Therefore, some of them might be applicable to certain people and ineffective on the others. However, these conditions do not deprive silver rules of their universality. Instead, they can act as a diverse set to meet the needs of individuals and societies, despite the diversity and variety. These rules are mainly characterized by great simplicity and transparency. In fact, there is no need for specific knowledge, notions, values, and philosophies to perceive, accept, and comply with them.
   1. Rule of Personal Interests: Since people have different ethical capacities, they may experience different conditions for selecting ethical options and taking relevant actions (Hannah *et al.*, 2011). Certain rules should be developed so as to direct even the people without ethical capacity towards ethical behavior. Indeed, men and women are neither insane nor perfect. However, they are ambitious and self-interested; thus, they sacrifice a part of their personal interests for another part (Menzel, 2010: 1). Based on the rule of personal interests, every action that can jeopardize personal interests should be avoided. For instance, the actions such as drinking alcohol, showing dangerous behavior, smoking, backbiting, spreading rumors, and being inconsiderate should not be taken, because they harm the physical and mental health and social position. Hence, if people make decisions based on this rule, they will definitely avoid many of the unethical actions or will not even take those actions in order to avoid personal harms. Although the ethical action is based on personal interests in the short term, it can improve the ethical quality of society in the long term.
   2. Rule of Personal Virtues: Moral people can benefit better from this rule than those who lack such notion. According to this rule, no person is allowed to take any actions against the rules and values of individual ethics. Imam Ali (PBUH) said in the 69th letter of the Nahj al-Balagha, “Avoid any hidden actions which you are ashamed of revealing and avoid any action if you must apologize when it is inquired upon.” Given the fact that many of us have a mental image of these ethical rules, we will experience more ethical behavior with the least individual and social harms if we evaluate our decisions and actions based on these rules.
   3. Rule of Behavior Generalization:Another rule helping us avoid immoral behavior is that we should speculate on what the world will be like if others act like us. If this behavior becomes pervasive, then the world will become a better place to live; therefore, it is alright to show that kind of behavior. Otherwise, it will be an instance of incorrect behavior which should be avoided. Naturally, the answer to the question "how the quality of the world will be if such behavior becomes pervasive" depends largely on the dominant values and cultures of society.
   4. Rule of Becoming a Role Model: When we are thinking of how moral an action is, we can speculate that whether we will take such an action if we are supposed to be the behavioral role model for the others. Obviously, if the answer is no, that action is not ethical. In other words, if we consider ourselves a role model preventing us from putting a decision into an action, then that action is not ethical. This reason is rooted in the responsibilities shouldered by social role models; thus, they could not easily perform any actions. We may consider ourselves a role model for our children. The compliance with this rule could enhance accountable traits well. If a larger number of people comply with this rule, then the society will be more moral.
   5. Rule of Media:If we intend to do something about which we doubt, then what outcomes will our decision have? To evaluate our decision, we can speculate, “What impacts will the action have if it is published on the press or shared on the media?” As a few experts such as Gardner (2007) stated on a paper published titled *An Ethical Mind*, it is obvious that an immoral and incorrect deed should be avoided if the news about it makes us ashamed in the eye of friends and society. Since humans are social beings, they are careful about the impressions of other people. The secret to a decent and successful social life is to try to get others to have a positive impression. Although humans are ethical beings who perform decent and correct deeds only for the sake of goodness not for the attraction and admiration (Ahmadi & Asgari, 2014: 18), the impressions and judgments of other people can be considered a decisive leverage for the behavior management. The advantage of this rule is that the dominant set of ethical and cultural values in a society should be considered when a decision is made for a specific action; thus, it can be regarded as a very good criterion for the behavior evaluation.
   6. Mother Rule:Based on a global notion, mothers are known as the most unprejudiced judges and most benevolent advisors of their children (Gardner, 2007). Therefore, humans having sane mothers can speculate, “Will my mother be proud or ashamed if she knows about my decision or action?” before performing an action about which they doubt. This rule is very simple and useful in promoting ethical actions. It can greatly help us in moral dilemmas due to its ease of use.
   7. Rule of Sleep Test:An everlasting problem of ethics is that why decent people sometimes take indecent actions. The hidden idea is that decent people have a set of ethical rules with which they are unable to comply; thus, they get involved in unethical actions (Burnet, 2017). Such individuals can benefit from the sleep test to stay in their ethical frameworks. In fact, they strongly believe in the dependence on the ethical instincts to distinguish the right from the wrong, because they believe that such instincts are intrinsic. According to them, these intrinsic instincts are formed and established gradually through the family, religious notions, individual experiences, and communications. Thus, they think they should rely on their intuitions, instincts, and feelings in moral dilemmas. That is why the sleep test ethics is also called the intuitive ethics. This test recommends us to listen to our heart when the brain is unable to help us in moral dilemmas (Badaraco, 1997: 45-47). Before people decide to take any action, they speculate whether they can easily sleep without stress once it was performed. The answers vary in how moral people are. Thus, this method can be more useful for those who have an acceptable level of ethics.
   8. Rule of Legality:Although behavior legality does not necessarily mean that an action is ethical, it can have the minimum ethics standards. Given the fact that laws exist in all communities and that compliance with laws is considered a citizenship rule, abiding by the current laws of a country can be regarded as an ethical criterion. Accordingly, people can pay attention to how much their decisions match the official laws of their countries when they doubt about the correctness of a decision. Naturally, if the decision is incompatible with the laws, it should be dismissed. There is still an unclear boundary between the law and ethics in some communities, and some citizens do not consider the compliance with governmental laws very unethical. If everyone pays attention to this rule, the ethics of society will be improved to a better level.
   9. Rule of Mirror: Ethical behavior is rooted in the values the people place on themselves. People who respect themselves and have good self-feelings are able to tolerate external pressures and do the right thing, and as a result, they do not compromise. Generally, such people do not get involved in unethical actions (Blanchard, 2006: 18). In this rule, the mirror plays the role of the conscience. When people have doubt about the correctness of their actions, they stand in front of the mirror and speculate whether the person inside the mirror approves of such actions. Thus, they can somehow clearly evaluate the ethics of their actions. Obviously, this rule depends on the ethical standards. The stronger the ethical limits, the more beneficial the rule of mirror in preventing or avoiding unethical actions. Using this rule, an individual can ask complimentary questions: What will my actions make me feel? Do I feel right about my actions? Am I proud or ashamed of my actions and decisions? (Blanchard, 2006). If people honestly answer these questions, they can make acceptable decisions on whether to continue or avoid certain actions.
   10. Rule of Belief in Continuous Monitoring:If it is assumed that we are being monitored everywhere all the time, we will definitely avoid certain actions. Likewise, the drivers comply with traffic rules on the roads and streets with traffic cameras better than the conditions with no camera or when they are unaware of cameras. This belief can serve as a control factor helping some people deciding to take or avoid some actions. According to the research results, ideology has a determinative role in people’s ethical judgments (Burnet, 2017). In some religions, the followers are advised to consider the presence of God everywhere. These religions try to put the followers in a constant surveillance framework to improve the ethical behavior. For instance, Imam Ali (PBUH) stated in the 91st script of Nahj al-Balagha, “The God is aware of people’s secrets, whispers, what goes on in minds through guesses, decisions becoming certain actions, and the secret glances taken through blinks.” The 157th scripts reads, “Beware the people that guardians of your type have been assigned serving as watchmen watching your bodies and as honest keepers keeping your actions and counting your breaths. Neither the dark of nights nor a strong door can conceal you from your guardians.” Such a belief can even prevent the mind from contemplating on unethical affairs to keep human on the right path all the time.
   11. Rule of Becoming an Example for Others:If humans concern about becoming an example for others, they avoid doing anything which might then be talked about to teach others. The Holy Quran has also advised humans to review the stories of their ancestors, think about them, and learn certain lessons from them. According to Gardner, people ask themselves, “Will this action, if known to people, make me be introduced as a lesson for others?” Obviously, if the answer to this question is yes, then people stop taking that action.
   12. Rule of Compliance with Religious Orders: A quick glance at the human history indicates the coordination of ethical norms with religious orders in many societies. Religion and ethics are integrated. In other words, there is a structural relationship between them. Religion is a series of beliefs, rules, and ethics. Thus, ethics contribute to religion as a component contributes to the whole. This relationship is like that of a head to the entire body. If religion is considered a tree, it has roots, trunk, and branches. Beliefs are the roots, and ethics can be considered the trunk. The leaves and fruits of the tree are the rules. The relationship between the trunk and the tree is not a two-object relationship. In fact, the trunk is part of the tree (Fatemi Tabar, 2008). Ethical rules need an execution guarantee for the realization in society. Psychologically speaking, humans like to rely on constant laws and regulations. If humans feel that rules are not constant and durable, they see no necessity of compliance. Therefore, abiding by the rules of divine religions (not merely being a Muslim, a Christian, etc. or not merely knowing all about religious lessons) can guarantee the morality of a significant part of human actions.
2. Golden Rule:This rule has been accepted in the majority of religions and cultures. It states: “Treat others in the way that you would like to be treated.” There are similar sets of ethics in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jewism, and Zoroastrianism. Therefore, this rule is known as a universal rule (Tullberg, 2015; Singer, 1963; Gould, 1983; Rakhshani, 2017; Karimi & Gharamaleki, 2015). This rule is usually employed to distinguish between the right and the wrong (Cunnigham, 1998). The universality of this rule is supported by the fact that the intellectual leaders of different communities have separately come to a unanimous conclusion in different periods of history across different geographical areas. Nowadays, many intelligent people have taken actions based on the gold rule of ethics all over the world, although they might be totally unaware of such a concept in the ethics and philosophy. The gold rule of ethics is considered the most pragmatic rule which can direct an ethical thought (Anderson, 2009). It can also provide a good criterion for interpersonal communications. Since almost everyone can realize what is right, what is wrong, and what may harm himself/herself and others, this rule is very efficient, because it can help others modify their behavior (Rakhshani, 2017). In the 31st letter of Nahj al-Balagha, Imam Ali (PBUH) wrote to his son, “Want for others that which you want for yourself and don’t want for others that which you don’t want for yourself. Don’t be cruel to anyone if you don’t want to be subject to cruelty. Be benevolent if you would like to be treated kindly. Don’t let ugliness happen to others if you detest ugliness, and want for others that which you want for yourself.”
3. Platinum Rule:The platinum rule was introduced and promoted by Alessandra and Maxwell. It has a different and more sophisticated look at the gold rule of ethics. In the gold rule, people focus their intentions and preferences on ethical actions and try to treat others the way they would like to be treated. However, the platinum framework states that people should treat others in the way that they others would like to be treated. In other words, we should first know the preferences of others, and then adjust our actions accordingly (Alessandra, 2011). In fact, the basis of treating others changes from self-orientation to other people. According to Maxwell, we always try to treat others better than the way they treat us (Maxwell, 2015: 121). It appears that the platinum rule can be based on the idea that we should treat others better than what they deserve. This approach seems to be very altruistic. Since it is considered a new concept in ethics, it requires more analyses. However, it can be used as a rule of ethics.

# Conclusion

Some thinkers such as Socrates believed that there is no gap between awareness and ethical actions and that human awareness results in the realization of their actions (Taghvaee & Mollayousefi, 2016). However, it has practically been observed that people taking unethical actions are totally aware of unethicality of their actions and norms. This is a fact that drives researchers to codify universal rules in order to direct ethical behavior and avoid unethical behavior. Others believe that ethics depend on the people personality, which evolves very gradually. The evolution results from nurturing and aggregating the values which are conveyed to individuals through the environment. Such values are then hard to change. Therefore, they believe that it is fruitless to teach adults ethics. However, it is true that ethical behavior is based on a factor beyond a decent personality and character. Although the decent nurture may result in a series of ethical traits, it cannot form ethical behavior by itself. In the complicated conditions of the modern world, people need more guidance. Therefore, they should be instructed to perceive ethical issues, norms, and strategies employed to make ethical decisions (Ahmadi & Asgari, 2014: 33-37). If ethical models and theories are intended to be effective, they must be acceptable, appropriate, and applicable. Acceptability means meeting the needs of applications and audiences. Appropriateness means matching different situations, and the applicability means that there are sufficient resources, supplies, and skills for implementation. Therefore, the ethical behavior toolkit was supposed to cover these features so that the proposed rules would be acceptable by most of the audiences. They should also be feasible, understandable, and applicable in different situations for everyone with different backgrounds. Finally, it should be mentioned that the importance of ethical behavior is on the rise in the societies and workplaces. It has become one of the most challenging issues of societies and organizations (Stead *et al.*, 1990). Thus, there should be certain regulations which can help individuals who would like to improve their quality of life. Such regulations should be used as tangible tools by the individuals and institutions working on the propagation of ethical attitudes and behavior. This paper sought to thoroughly analyze the domestic and foreign literatures to codify and propose an acceptable series of criteria and regulations for ethical actions with an approach to helping improve the quality of ethical life in the society.

**Ethics considerations**

In conducting this review research, the rights of the authors have been observed by referring to all sources. Given that it was not a field study, it had no participants, no environmental considerations were required and the ethics of research have been observed. The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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1. Assistant Professor, Faculty of Economics, Management and Administrative Sciences, Semnan University

   ; Corresponding Author: [farhadi@semnan.ac.ir](mailto:farhadi@semnan.aci.ir); Tel No: +989151572357 & 023-33654100; Orcid: 0000-0002-7990-1519;

   Zip Code: 19111-35131; Fax: 023-33321005 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)