**Are there any ethical rules for which there are no exceptions and, if so, why? If not, why not?**

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To begin discussing the exceptions, or lack of, in regard to ethical rules, it is vital to first define the term “ethical rules”. The Farlex dictionary states that ethical codes are “system(s) of principles governing morality and acceptable conduct.” At first glance, this appears to be a moderately simple statement to investigate, but, with closer examination, it becomes clear that for every ethical rule, principle or statement, there seems to be an exception.

Some philosophers, such as Marx and Engels, claimed it was impossible for a universal code of ethics with no exceptions to exist. Marx believed in an ethical ideology which focused on the inevitability of evolution of morals, leaving him free to abandon moral standards generally accepted by most cultures [1). He stated that all ethical rules are relative to each individual society, and so each society would form its own system of ethics; the current system soon being replaced with a new one, meaning exceptions were constantly being developed. [2]

Max Stirner argued for ethical egoism, maintaining that love of one’s fellow man is simply an illusion. In his book, The Unique and His Property, he says, “You are your own masters; work for your own interests. Respect no ideal; do not make your actions conform to any moral standard. Scorn custom, duty, morality, justice, law.” He believed that men, who were exceptional in some way, whether this was intelligence or rank, were always the exception to moral standards.

Aside from these philosophers’ opinions, there are some ethical statements which appear to apply across most cultures. For example, parental duty and responsibility to offspring seems to be a generally accepted principle across most parts of the world. In addition to this, another, arguably stronger example, is not killing useful members of society. Furthermore, an aversion to incest seems to be accepted. These examples all seem to tie into the animal kingdom, representing the primal part of every human, and suggesting that some ethical codes are innate. Parents rearing their children gives them a higher chance of survival, and thus passing on genes to future generations. The murder of useful members of society weakens that society. Incest decreases the chance of reproductive success, and therefore is not beneficial for passing on genes or strengthening the society. Most cultures have a version of the principle: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” [3]

Whilst discussing cultures, it is critical to mention that different cultures have different moral and ethical rules. Cultural relativism believes that morality “finds its genesis in the subjective conventions of culture” (Beckwith and Koukl 43). Cultural anthropologist William Graham Sumner states that each cultural group thinks its moral values are right and the others are wrong (qtd. in Beckwith and Koukl 43). [4] Two completely contradicting moral rules cannot both be right. For example, rape within marriage is still classes as legal in some countries, who argue that consent to marriage is automatically giving consent to sex, whereas countries such as Malaysia offer a maximum five year imprisonment for those who are persecuted. This therefore raises the question, are countries such as India wrong for not making marital sex illegal, despite it being part of their cultural ethics? Or are countries such as Malaysia wrong for persecuting these spousal rapists? So, are countries as a whole exceptions to some rules?

For theists, the commandments of their religion should be without exceptions. For Christians and Jews, the 10 commandments are a perfect example to illustrate this; ‘Do not lie’, as a more specific example. The belief that God is perfect and all powerful means that theist should follow His every word without command. The 10 commandments are practical ways to ensure social justice is brought through, something the Judeo-Christian faiths are very keen on, on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, it is extremely rare to find someone who follows everything their religion, and God, teaches, in the finest detail. At least once if their lifetimes, every person has lied. Whether that was to produce the best consequences for themselves, or others, in the eyes of their religion, it is still wrong.

Aside from personal beliefs, there are also ethical rules in the professional world. For example, confidentiality is applied in almost all aspects of the working sector. Doctors, lawyers, and counsellors – just to name a few – all have to sign an oath of confidentiality. This idea dates back to the fifth century BC, to the Hippocratic Oath: “What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account one must spread abroad, I will keep to myself holding such things shameful to be spoken about.” Confidentiality appears to be a universally acknowledged principle, but what is also acknowledged is the need to breach it at some points. For example, counsellors must breach this oath if: they suspect abuse or neglect of children, older people, or other persons presumed to have limited ability to care for themselves; to protect clients who pose a danger to themselves; if a client poses a danger to others; when a client has a fatal, communicable disease and the client’s behaviour is putting others at risk. [5] Court orders often require doctors or counsellors to break their confidentiality, for example, “in Sanchez v. USAir, U.S. District Judge Clifford Scott Green ruled that a plaintiff's psychotherapy records must be turned over to the defence whenever the plaintiff is pressing a claim for emotional distress -- even when the plaintiff insists that the therapy was totally unrelated to his or her lawsuit and that the therapist will not be called as a witness.” [6]

A slightly more controversial idea is that survival itself, and the will to survive, is an ethical rule. It governs the decisions human beings make, and is the only reason that human evolution has come so far. Every day, many of us break what we consider to be un-exceptionable rules. Ever since the start of human kind, we have been breaking the one of the 10 Commandments – ‘do not kill’ – by killing animals for food and for clothes. We have been lying in order to keep us from being hurt, or killed. It has become an innate moral code within each of us. Although frowned upon in some ways, killing and lying have become acceptable conduct. An ethical rule is defined as a principle which governs acceptable conduct, and, especially in a less modern world, surely any principle that keeps us, and our loved ones alive, is acceptable conduct? A modern example of this is the Holocaust. Several accounts have been told from survivors; they only survived because they took from others, or took from the dead. They stole. Regardless of whether they were religious and believed in the 10 commandments or not, they broke at least one, in order to survive. Fackenheim once said, “Survival is the 614th Mitzvot” (there are 613 Jewish laws). Each of us live our daily lives to survive; it is why we look both ways when we cross the road or we instinctively pull our hands away from a hot iron. It is universally accepted that we live to survive, and so, it can be said that survival is an ethical rule, because it governs the decisions we make in order to survive, and surviving is acceptable conduct.

However, like all of the latter points, there are exceptions. The most obvious being that there are some people who want to die. In 2011, the average number of suicide deaths in the UK was 1180000 [7). It seems clear that this in an obvious exception, but it could be argued that an event has to happen for a person to wish to commit suicide. By ‘event’, it must be clarified that this can mean one incident – emotional or physical, or a long running serious of emotional abuse. This is a very brief explanation, and it is recognised that there can be other causes of suicidal behaviour. However, no body is born wanting to die. Death, unlike survival, is not an innate, primal moral rule within each and every person. People wish to die because they do not want to live the life they are living; given another situation, they would want to survive.

In conclusion, it is extremely difficult to find ethical rules that have no exceptions. There are rules which seem common amongst different cultures, such as rearing children and an aversion to incest. The differences within cultures, on the other hand, produce more ethical questions, regarding the fact that what is accepted to be right in one culture is considered wrong in another. Do we, as human beings and equals, have the right to brand an entire culture wrong simply because our opinions differ? There is also the issue with theists and how it is claimed in some religions – Judaism for example – that scriptures are direct divine revelation and considered to be incredibly holy, yet the 10 commandments are broken often. Professional oaths, which are taken incredibly seriously and are sworn upon, must be broken in extreme situations. Finally, the idea of survival being a primal, innate moral code within us, that drives us to make the smallest decisions in our lives, is very important. Although there are exceptions to this – some people do not wish to live their lives anymore – we must look at the difference between not wanting/being able to cope with living their lives, and not wanting to survive. I believe that survival is the closest thing that mankind will get to an ethical rule with no exception.

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