

# The Significance of Martial Ethics in Bioethics: An Alternative Ethical Theory

## BİYOETİKTE SAVUNMA SPORLARI ETİĞİNİN ÖNEMİ: ALTERNATİF BİR ETİK TEORİSİ

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### Summary

A persistent problem in ethics has always been the concern with bridging the gap between theory and practice. It appears that knowledge of and familiarity with ethical theory is not a guarantee that an individual will live more ethically and morally than s/he currently does. In and of itself, conventional ethical theories are not coercive enough to force an individual to live ethically, or to make the correct moral decisions. Hence, there is a need to pass such ethical principles in the form of laws. However, while such a move is in fact necessary, I believe that ethical living has to come from within, imposed as it were, by the individual upon the himself. This is possible through actual training in ethical living, and one way to do this is through martial arts training.

The main purpose of this article is to explore martial ethical principles, and to offer a perspective of the martial arts as a practical and viable alternative to conventional ethical theories. The article takes a look at the significance of martial ethics in bioethics.

**Key Words :** Mastery of the self, Ethical training, Self-governance, Ethics of care

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### Özet

Etikte her zaman sürüp giden sorun, teori ve pratik arasındaki boşluğu doldurmakla ilgili olmuştur. Görünen o ki, etik teori bilgisi ve etik teoriye aşinalık, bireyin şimdi olduğundan daha etik ve ahlaki yaşayacağını teminatı değildir. Geleneksel etik teoriler bireyin etik yaşamasında ya da doğru ahlaki kararlar vermesinde yeterince zorlayıcı değildir. Bu nedenle bu etik ilkelerin yasa biçimini almasına ihtiyaç vardır. Bununla birlikte, böyle bir hareket gerçekte gerekliyken, etik yaşamının bireye empoze edilerek değil kişinin içinden gelecek olacağına inanmaktayım. Bu etik yaşamda güncel eğitim aracılığı ile olabilir ve bunu yapmanın diğer bir yolu da savunma sporları etiğidir.

Bu makalenin ana amacı, martial etik ilkelerini incelemek ve geleneksel etik teorilerine karşı pratik ve yaşama geçirilebilen alternatif savunma sporları sanatlarının bakış açısını sunmaktır. Makale, biyoetikte savunma sporları etiğinin önemine gözetmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler :** Kişilik hakimiyeti, Etik eğitimi, Özerklik, Bakım etiği

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### Martial Ethics

Traditional martial arts training involves the cultivation not just of the body, but the mind and spirit as well. The “body” refers to the physical self, the “mind” is the intellectual center, and the “spirit” can be understood to refer to an individual’s will. Hence, martial training seeks to develop an individual of good moral character, but with the will that is strong enough to force the body to follow. This is done through daily practice, as the practitioner interacts with other practitioners. There is an “ethical interaction” in a controlled environment. While the ethical norms

are set down as the *dojo* (training hall) rules and regulations, these are constantly challenged and put to the test because of the nature of martial arts practice. It is a place where hurting someone and getting hurt as a result of “care-lessness” is a very real possibility, thus, the equally real need for ethical action.

Martial ethical principles are manifested in two general ways: 1) in an explicit manner, through the enforcement of the rules and regulations, and; 2) in an implicit way, in the form of the techniques of the art itself.

### The Rules and Regulations as Ethical Mechanisms

The *dojo's* rules and regulations set a prescribed norm, and an exemplary mode of conduct is expected of the practitioners. It is noticeable from a careful examination of the rules and regulations (Table 1) that the fundamental essence of the latter is simply the mindful consideration not just of the self, but more importantly, of others. In fact, it can be argued that a good majority of the rules are meant to mirror one's respect and consideration for the other practitioners. The regulations are enforced through a hierarchical system: from the teacher, to the senior students, down to the junior students and beginners. It is expected that the longer one has stayed and practised in the *dojo*, the more familiar s/he is with the rules. Consequently, s/he is expected to practice right conduct, as well as

**Table 1. Aikido Dojo Rules and Regulations**

1. Be punctual in all your scheduled classes.
2. Be presentable and keep yourself as well as your uniform(s) clean.
3. Keep your nails and toenails short. Remove all jewelry, pins, clips, or any hard/pointed objects before entering the mat area to avoid injury.
4. Bow before entering and leaving the mat area. If the training is in session, ask permission from your instructor(s) in order to be excused.
5. The martial arts training hall (*dojo*) mirrors the spirit of all the practitioners. Therefore, always keep the *dojo* clean and respectable. Do not loiter in the mat area without your uniforms on.
6. Always address persons of higher ranks as "Sensei", "Sir", "Ma'am" or "Madam".
7. Be mindful of your actions. Keep in mind the safety of your practice partners. You are responsible for each other's safety and development.
8. Practice seriously with the intent to learn, but practice with humility, patience, love, and respect for others.
9. Learning needs an open mind. A tea cup that is already full can no longer hold more tea. You should therefore, "empty your cup" in order to learn. If you only seek to assert your own way of thinking, you will learn nothing and thus remain ignorant of the wisdom that others might offer.
10. (Note: The set of rules and regulations indicated here is the set used by the author when he taught the martial art *aikido* at a local *dojo*.)

**Table 2. Lapunti Arnis de Abanico International's Regulations on Infractions and Penalties**

Offenses warranting a 3-month suspension:

1. Disobedience
2. Drunkenness
3. Untidiness
4. Mischief

Offenses warranting a 6-month suspension:

- |                   |                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Arrogance      | 5. Denial             |
| 2. Disorderliness | 6. Deceitfulness      |
| 3. Negligence     | 7. Rumour mongering   |
| 4. Libel          | 8. Lack of discipline |

Offenses warranting a 1-year suspension:

- |                        |                                      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Oral defamation     | 5. Uncontrolled temper               |
| 2. Abuse of authority  | 6. Destructive criticism             |
| 3. Discourtesy         | 7. Destruction or Damage to property |
| 4. Physical infliction | 8. Grave misconduct                  |

Offenses warranting expulsion from the school:

- |                            |                  |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Threat                  | 6. Uncooperative |
| 2. Conspiracy              | 7. Extortion     |
| 3. Intentional Provocation | 8. Swindling     |
| 4. Insubordination         |                  |
| 5. Inappropriate assembly  |                  |

enforce the latter. Failure to comply with the prescribed code of conduct entails a certain degree of punishment (Table 2). From this rather simple structure of training, it can be seen how discipline is sought to be internalized and manifested by the individual. To a certain degree, it could be argued that it is a simple matter of conditioning. However, the *dojo's* enforcement of the rules is not ignorant of the fact that we are thinking beings, capable of reasoning out our actions. What coerces an individual to behave properly while in training (aside from the hierarchical structure of discipline) is the fact that the prospect of hurting someone as well as getting hurt is very real. This reality is brought home by the fact that most of the techniques being learned and studied are potentially lethal. The repercussions of careless practice are therefore serious, necessitating the discouragement of needless horseplay or roughhousing. More significantly, this is the primary reason why petty displays of arrogance and pride have no place in the *dojo*: these types of behaviour are precursors to serious injuries. A conscientious practice of the arts is not for the sake of plain aesthetic enjoyment, but for a responsible

fulfilment of one's ethical duty to another individual.

Beginners are watched over and led carefully, as they are initiated into the school's training. Not only are they being watched for the proper techniques, but they are also being taught to gain control of the way they execute techniques. They are in essence, being taught to govern themselves. This self-governance is always the prerequisite to ethical conduct. A practitioner who is unable to control his/her technique is seen as an inferior practitioner, because the lack of control only shows the practitioner to be lacking in self-mastery. A superior practitioner is one who can control even the degree of pain s/he wants to inflict on another individual. The latter shows and necessitates a high level of skill, and one who is able to do so manifests an equally high level of self-mastery.

### **Martial Arts Techniques as Ethical Expressions**

Martial arts are characterised by body movements that are specifically designed for physical combat, either with the use of weapons or with bare hands and feet. The noteworthy point though, is the fact that the traditional martial arts systems literally contain their own distinct philosophies. The system follows a logic that reflects its own philosophy, and the actual ethical content is embodied in the movements themselves. The philosophical and ethical content of the art has physical expressions and manifestations. Thus, the practice of the martial arts paves the way for a particular ethos. In this sense, virtue is neither inborn nor simply acquired through influence; it is gained by hard and strict training, imposed as it were, by the institution that is the *dojo*. It should be noted that the virtuous men in ancient Japan were supposed to be the warriors, the *samurai*. They conducted their lives according to the harsh code of ethics, the *Bushido*. Even more noticeable is the fact that in their history, the men who were most concerned with peace and harmony were the old master swordsmen. It is based on the experiential premise that he who has been constantly looking death in the eye is the one who has the capacity to

appreciate life. Thus was born an ethos that shaped the martial arts.

Traditional martial arts, as opposed to modern martial arts, are least concerned with competition. "Traditional" in this sense does not refer to the *koryu*, the more ancient martial systems in Japan studied solely for combat. These arts were later modified to focus less on war and more on self-development. These are what the author refers to as "traditional martial arts" in contrast to modern, sport-oriented disciplines. At its base, the former concerns itself with the knowledge and mastery of the self through practice. This can be seen as the ultimate goal of martial arts. The actual practice appears to be a strictly physical enterprise, but behind the physicality lies the mental and spiritual aspect of the art. The simple practice of bowing upon entering the mat area is already laden with ethical meaning. Signifying respect, it instils in the practitioner the virtue of humility as well as promoting the proper frame of mind, one which emphasises a focus on the practice at hand. Engaging others in potentially dangerous practice without a conscious awareness of what one is doing is morally irresponsible, to say the least. Thus, right from the beginning of training, the practitioner is expected to consciously adopt an ethical frame of mind.

In terms of teaching methods, some of the highly traditional approaches are characterised by the withholding of techniques until after countless repetitions of just a single lesson. To most practitioners, such an approach is unsatisfactory because there seems to be no progression. Admittedly, the latter method of teaching has been used by the unscrupulous as an excuse to raise unnecessary financial demands on unwitting students. But for the honest teacher, holding out on techniques is a very effective way of forcing the student not only to focus on perfecting one's skills, but also in developing virtues such as patience, humility, and perseverance. Such virtues are expected of someone with a high level of control over oneself.

Certain techniques, especially those focusing on joint-manipulations, manifest a reliance not on

sheer physical strength but on harmonious movements for the techniques to work. The old *judo* saying “push when pulled, and pull when pushed” is not a mere romantic image being used to offer a degree of profundity to the martial arts. It is a very practical martial concept which simply subscribes to the principle of non-resistance. It is non-confrontational, as it seeks a constructive resolution of conflict. Understanding the attacker and the attack is central in the principle of non-resistance. The latter point is laden with important ethical content, one which will be taken up later.

The practice of sitting in *seiza*, that is, sitting on the ground with both legs tucked beneath the buttocks, is an uncomfortable position if held for long periods of time. Seated meditations are done in this position, and this teaches a certain type of endurance, not kinetic but rather, placid endurance (1).

Some martial arts teach *ukemi*, or the art of falling. This is necessary for the student or practitioner to protect oneself from injury resulting from a throw. In order to execute a proper *ukemi*, the body must be relaxed, supple, and sensitive to the throw itself. A tense and unyielding response from a throw often results in injury, but a response that is too soft results in total collapse. Hence, a conscientious practice of *ukemi* conditions a practitioner to respond to any such situation in the proper manner: sensitive and yielding, without mental and physical collapse (2).

In consonance with learning and performing *ukemi* is the learning of proper techniques. A technique cannot be learned properly without a sound knowledge and capacity for *ukemi*. This is because a practitioner cannot execute any technique the way a technique should be executed if his/her partner does not know how to “receive” the technique. If one component does not know how to fall, then either s/he will be injured, or one’s partner will not learn properly. Thus, it can be seen that for any two practitioners, both are studying and learning even if on the surface it appears that only one is practicing a technique and the other serves simply as a dummy on whom the technique can be tried out. This dynamic nature of

martial arts practice (the necessary interaction of both practitioners, given very specific roles) manifests the ethical consideration of every element as a necessary part of a larger whole.

When engaging in actual practice, the practitioner of the martial arts is constantly confronted with the demand to look at oneself and examine the way s/he engages others during practice, notwithstanding the fact that the practice hall or *dojo* observes very specific and strict rules on etiquette. This self-directed observation results from the realization that one’s development in the art is rooted in the development of others. In knowing oneself, the practitioner is given insight into knowing others.

Knowledge of the self has, as its consequence, the knowledge of proper relations with others. These two facets are practiced simultaneously during the actual practice of the martial arts. Thus, the latter is itself an exercise of moral and ethical living or conduct towards others.

### **Ethics and Combat**

A valid question concerning the martial arts is the seeming paradox between the ultimate goal of martial training as producing practitioners of high moral fiber, and the nature of the disciplines they engage in. To actually engage in physical combat is, from the perspective of martial arts, degrading because it indicates a failure of attempts at avoidance. However, assuming that a physical confrontation is inevitable, a martial artist is expected to always maintain a high ethical level in fighting, which in turn manifests the supreme ethical ideal of martial arts in general. The following scenarios can be seen as illustrative of the various ethical levels of combat (3,4):

A. A martial artist, without provocation and on his own initiative, attacks and kills another man. Ethically, this is the lowest level of combat. There is unprovoked aggression resulting in death.

B. A martial artist engages another individual and provokes the latter to attack. Upon the attack, the former retaliates and kills the other. While the martial artist involved does not directly launch the attack, he is nevertheless responsible because of

the incitement to attack. This is only slightly higher than level A in terms of ethical worth, but is nevertheless just as morally reprehensible.

C. A martial artist is confronted by a man and without provocation or incitement, is attacked by the latter. He defends himself well, perhaps too well, and succeeds in killing the attacker. While his act seems ethically justifiable, the result is no different than the first two levels. As such, from the perspective of martial ethics, this level of combat is also not ethically recommended.

D. A martial artist is attacked by a man without provocation or incitement, and he is forced to defend himself. However, he defends himself in a way that ends the confrontation without inflicting injury or damage to his attacker. Both are able to walk away from the encounter with their lives. This is the highest ethical level of combat, and this represents the ideal which martial artists strive to attain.

The seemingly lofty admonition to “lovingly protect all things” is an ideal that reflects the ethical import of martial arts. The essence of the martial arts is precisely to end conflict in as efficient a way as possible, not to use it for the escalation and promotion of violence.

### **Martial Ethics and Bioethics**

The value of martial arts training lies in its capacity to form an individual who is capable of governing oneself. The idea of self-mastery has been present since the time of the Greeks, when self-discipline was seen as a prerequisite to proper relations with others. In putting one’s interests aside in favour of others’, an ethics of care can be made viable even in medical practice. The fundamental concern of bioethics with the principles of justice, beneficence, and respect for autonomy find an explicit expression in martial arts training, and can be thus made viable through a direct system of moral training and exercise. Again, this happens in most traditional *dojos*.

Taking the “path” of least resistance is a viable ethical principle if understood properly. To

take or follow the path of least resistance does not promote mindless subordination, indecision, or spineless character. Rather, it describes an approach that is characterised by the use of peaceful and non-confrontational methods of resolution. Understanding the “other” is the key element in taking such a path.

Feminist concerns in bioethics can be likewise addressed differently. If feminism is understood generally as a concern for the genuine treatment of women as human beings with equal rights as any other individual, then martial ethical practice is able to approach the issue appropriately. In martial arts training, men and women engage in practice with no sexual distinction and discrimination. There are no special considerations for women: women are thrown, punched, and kicked just as hard as any other practitioner, precisely because any form of inequality and discrimination based on sex or gender has no place in the “place of the Way”. To act as if women are inferior in any way is insulting not only to women practitioners, but to male practitioners as well because it assumes a low-minded attitude on their part.

### **Proposal and Conclusion**

Traditional martial arts training can be instituted through physical education courses in schools. Emphasis should be made on the wholistic (i.e. mind, body, spirit) development of the students. Strictly speaking, since sports and traditional martial arts are different, the concerns of the respective disciplines are also different. Given the primary goal of the martial arts as developing a moral individual, issues pertaining to ethics are better addressed through martial arts.

This article has not mentioned any particular martial art that is to be favoured over another in the quest for a viable martial ethics. For one thing, there is no such thing as a superior martial art. Further, it is enough at this point to note that the focus of traditional martial arts on character development is sufficient to argue for the institutionalisation of any traditional martial art in general. Again, the important point is the balanced development of the individual. With the proper

instruction and guidance, martial arts training can pave the way for actual ethical living, truly making the *dojo* the “place of the Way” (5,6).

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