



Professional Ethics Panel

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Philosophy and Professional Ethics

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Why take a philosophical approach to professional ethics?

- Provides a ground-level justification for a code of professional ethics.
- May improve general moral reasoning for situations where the code is incomplete.
- May demonstrate problems and gaps in a code so it can be improved.

Limitations of a philosophical approach

- Philosophy alone cannot sort out difficult issues within a profession.
 - One needs concrete experience in the profession.
- Thus, collaborations between philosophers and professionals are most helpful for developing and teaching professional codes.

Case study: philosophy's role in a research ethics class in physics

- Three theories are covered: Consequentialism, Deontology, and Virtue Theory (Natural Law Theory).
- These theories are applied to the APS guidelines for professional conduct and to real and hypothetical case studies in physics.
- The justification for the theories, and discussion of relativism vs. objectivism in ethics is also included.

Consequentialism

- The moral status of our actions is determined by their consequences. No actions are right or wrong in themselves.
- Most popular version is Utilitarianism: the right action is the one that maximizes general happiness.
- One variation is Rule Utilitarianism: the right action is the one that accords with rules that would maximize happiness if generally followed.

Example from APS guidelines:

“Science is best advanced when there is mutual trust, based upon honest behavior, throughout the community... Professional integrity in the formulation, conduct, and reporting of physics activities reflects not only on the reputations of individual physicists and their organizations, but also on the image and credibility of the physics profession...”

Deontology

- “Deontos” = “binding”, “obligation”
- The moral status of our actions is determined by their internal character, not their consequences.
- Some actions are right or wrong in themselves because they fulfill obligations or violate rights.
- Kantianism: we ought always to treat others as ends in themselves, never solely as means. We ought only to act on principles that we could will to be universal laws.

Example from APS guidelines:

“All those who have made significant contributions should be offered the opportunity to be listed as authors....All collaborators share some degree of responsibility for any paper they coauthor.”

Virtue Theory (Natural Law Theory)

- Actions are right if they are what a good person, with the virtues, would do.
- Rules of action must be interpreted by a well-intentioned person. Any rule can be followed in letter but not in spirit, so codes are inadequate to ensure moral action.

Example from APS

- The original APS code did not include any rules about how to treat subordinates.
- A 2003 survey revealed much concern among younger members about how graduate students and postdocs are treated, even by people who conduct science in an ethical way.
- There is a new call for developing a more ethical culture within departments and research groups.

Philosophy can improve discussion

- These theoretical tools make it easier to pick up on morally relevant features of a situation (consequences, rights, duties, intentions).
- We can understand the source of dilemmas (e.g., consequences and rights sometimes pull against each other).
- We can move beyond a simple exchange of opinions, and toward ethical reasoning.



Useful resources

Ethics updates at University of San Diego: ethics.sandiego.edu

Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions at IIT: ethics.iit.edu

Case studies in research ethics:
www.aps.org/programs/education/ethics

Online ethics center at the National Academy of Engineering:
www.onlineethics.org

Research ethics modules at NC State:
www.ncsu.edu/grad/research-ethics/modules

Research ethics study modules at K-State: www-personal.ksu.edu/~alara/ResearchEthicsStudyModules.pdf