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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

What Job You Can Accept

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Description

Gerald Wahr has moral objections to the only job available to him.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

I. An Only Opportunity

Gerald Wahr was not prepared for such a sudden turn of events. He was scheduled to complete his degree in chemical engineering in June. He planned to return to help his parents run the family farm right after graduation. However, in early May his father, Hans Wahr, became seriously ill, and it was evident he would be hospitalized for an extended period of time. Gerald's mother and his older brother could continue to run the farm. But the medical bills would quickly mount. Without an additional

source of income, the family would soon begin defaulting on its mortgage payments. The best hope for saving the farm would be for Gerald to find employment as an engineer.

Since Gerald had expected to return to the farm, he already missed many opportunities for job interviews. He would have to work quickly. After an intensive search, only one solid opportunity surfaced. Pro-Growth Pesticides, Inc. would be on campus next week to interview candidates for a supervisory job requiring a degree in chemical engineering.

Gerald certainly seems well qualified for the job. However, there is a hitch. The Wahr farm uses strictly organic methods. Gerald's father had always opposed the use of pesticides on their farm. In fact, he was rather outspoken about this among the farmers in the area. Gerald admired this in his father. As a young child he often proudly announced that he wanted to grow up to be just like his father. Hans Wahr, however, had different ideas about this. A high school dropout, Hans advised young Gerald to further his education. "Without a college degree," he told Gerald, "you'll be as ineffective as I am. You have to fight fire with fire. If you really want to show those pesticide folks a thing or two, you've got to be able to talk their language." So, Gerald decided he would go to college and study chemical engineering.

Gerald's study of chemical engineering did nothing to shake his conviction that organic farming is best. Quite the contrary. He is now more convinced than ever that the pesticide industry is not only harming the environment generally, but farm products in particular.

Should Gerald go for the interview? Discuss.

II. Conversations With Friends

At first Gerald rejects the idea of going for the interview. He thinks of it as a matter of integrity. How could he work for a company that researches, produces, and markets the very products he and his family have so long opposed? However, his friends counsel him otherwise. Here are some of their arguments. How might Gerald respond to them?

Allen: Look, if you don't go for the job, someone else will. The job won't go away just because you stay away. So, the work's going to be done anyway. Your refusing the job won't change a thing.

Bob: Right! Furthermore, you need to look at this from a utilitarian point of view--the greatest good for the greatest number. If you don't go for the job, someone else who really believes in pesticides will--and that's going to make things even worse! If you take the job and aren't gung ho, that might just slow things down a little.

Don: Besides, you might be able to introduce a few reforms from the inside. That won't kill the pesticide industry, but it might make it a little bit better--certainly better than if some zealous pesticide nut takes the job.

Allen: So, it's pretty clear what to do. All things considered, you ought to go for the job. It's your only real chance to save the farm; and if someone else gets the job, Pro-Growth will cause even more harm. You can't be a purist about these things. It's not a perfect world, you know.

III. The Interview

Gerald Wahr is uncomfortable during the interview, but it seems to be going rather well. However, the interviewer then asks: "There are a lot of people who disapprove of the use of pesticides in farming. Of course, Pro-Growth disagrees. What are your thoughts about the use of pesticides?"

How should Gerald answer this question?

IV. Jobs

Gerald Wahr's situation may seem extreme. However, it does raise important questions about job choices. To what extent should one be concerned about whether there is a good match between one's basic ethical commitments and job selection? What kinds of engineering related jobs, if any, would you decline because of ethical concerns?

Notes

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