

Michael Rabins' Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

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What Job You Can Accept

Before commenting on Gerald Wahr's circumstances, it appears that a logical inconsistency in the presentation of the facts of the case need some attention. It is not convincing that Gerald must interview Pro-Growth Pesticides, Inc. in order to save the farm. In the second paragraph it is stated, "Since Gerald had expected to return to the farm, he already missed many opportunities for job interviews". Well, since Gerald had planned on returning to the farm anyway it is reasonable to suppose that the Wahr family anticipated additional income from his presence. With his father in the hospital the extra income would not materialize, but bills would. If the hospital stay will be for an "extended period of time," it is not clear why Gerald couldn't work on the farm, for at least a while, and wait for additional engineering employment opportunities to present themselves. There would have to be a breathing room period during which the medical bills and mortgage payments would not yet be overdue. Gerald's presence on the farm would maintain farm income at previous levels, and other engineering employment opportunities could possibly materialize.

To make the urgency of the Pro-Growth Pesticides interview more compelling and convincing, it might be advisable to restate some of the circumstances of the case. For example, Gerald might be in the middle of the first semester of his chemical engineering M.S. degree program when his father unexpectedly passes away after an expensive hospital stay during which the bills quickly mounted. Further, the economic times might be so bad that Gerald is lucky to have even just the one interview with Pro-Growth Pesticides. Grim circumstances, but realistic--and perhaps more convincing for the questions that follow.

Having said all of the above, let us now presume that Gerald is faced with the real quandary of whether or not to interview Pro-Growth Pesticides. It would almost appear that this situation raises questions of common sense as much as ethics,

although there are ethical dimensions to the situation that need to be discussed as well. Let us turn to Shakespeare for some guidance on the common sense issues. In "Hamlet", Polonius gives the following sage advice (in addition to quite a bit more) to his son Laertes who is about to travel abroad: "To thine own self be true, for it then follows as the night the day, that thou canst not then be false to any man." If Gerald interviews and subsequently accepts a job with Pro-Growth Pesticides, he clearly will not be true to his own or his father's views on pesticides. If he is truly convinced that pesticides are not only harming the environment generally, but farm products in particular, then there is no way that he will be able to honestly act as a faithful agent or trustee for his employer (NSPE Fundamental Canon #4). It does not take much imagination to envision situations in which, as a Pro-Growth Pesticide employee, he will have to act in violation of his own conscience (while being false to others) and probably of one or more strictures of the NSPE Code of Ethics.

Turning to Gerald's conversations with his friends (part II), several ethical issues do immediately arise. Allen's view that the work will be done even if Gerald refuses the interview ("Your refusing the job won't change a thing") is an age-old rationalization for doing something we know may be or is wrong. If enough people turn their backs on such a rationalization, maybe things will change. Change for the better, whether evolutionary or revolutionary, comes about because a critical mass of people do opt for the morally right path.

Bob's utilitarian argument is based on the premise that Gerald will slow things down a little by not being gung ho after he takes the pesticide job. This raises serious issues involving the means-end principle. Does the good end (organic farming eventually prevailing) justify the dubious means of Gerald dissembling on the job by being less than gung ho?

Don's advice to take the job and try to introduce a few reforms from the inside only makes sense if Gerald is up-front about that in his interview. If Pro-Growth Pesticides is willing to hire someone with Gerald's entrenched views on pesticide use, then maybe he could make a difference. But then Gerald better make sure there are mechanisms within the company to raise differing professional opinions. A number of companies have such mechanisms as company ombudsmen, ethical hotlines or reword procedures for productive disagreements with company policy. If it is Gerald's intent to change the company from within, he better make sure that the opportunities are there to do so.

However, from part III of the case (The Interview), it is made pretty clear that Pro-Growth Pesticides, Inc. does not agree that change is needed. Once Gerald is asked his views on pesticides, he pretty much has to have made a decision, in advance, to either have changed his mind or to prevaricate on the issue. If his family's welfare, and the farm are that important to him, Gerald must recognize that he must forego the luxury of his previous strong feelings about pesticides. Only if he can make that conscious decision is he justified in continuing the interview, once into it.

In part IV of the case (Jobs) the question is raised about what kinds of engineering related jobs might be declined because of ethical concerns. Many graduating engineers carefully limit the kinds of companies they interview to rule out (or in) companies involved in Defense Department weaponry contracts or environmentally impact-prone companies. Whatever the case, and whichever the concerns, it is wise for interviewee to think through these issues before even signing up for an interview.