

Author's Commentary on "Communism of Science"

Commentary On
The Communism of Science

This case appears to be simple at first. Students' natural reaction is to identify with Michael and Mary because we have all had arduous and difficult work, which we have spent our youth tirelessly pursuing. The overbearing nature of Dr. Well's directions leave little room for argument and presents an open-and-shut case.

In order for scientists (and for Michael) to do work, it must be "owned," in a sense. In this sense, Dr. Well's suggestion that Michael turn over his work to Mary is unethical. The primary complication of his suggestion in Well's lab is that the individual investment in projects will decline, perhaps even to the point that post-docs and students leave the lab.

Mary is hamstrung by Well's suggestion. She needs to graduate, but she has also personally invested her efforts into other projects, and she realizes that the transfer of work is unfair to Michael. It is also extremely difficult to feel accountable for data one has not accumulated. This response further militates against Mary's - and our - acquiescence. No one in real life would like to be in such a predicament.

The case presents several ethical dilemmas. The first is the issue of fairness and data ownership. Who owns and is accountable for the data? Certainly those who do the experiments. However, the idea of the communism of science also comes into play. Data in a sense belong to everyone. Science by its nature seeks to provide the good of knowledge that can be shared by all. That is one of its grandest aspects. In the microcosm of the Well's lab, communal ownership of data provides a justification for the transfer of Michael's data to Mary. Both students are shown to be capable, industrious scientists. Neither will be harmed by the transfer of data, for if the need arises, data for publication can be similarly transferred to Michael. In this light, the transfer might be undertaken to help Mary.

Another issue that might be identified by some perceptive students is the real problem of doing controversial and difficult work. Michael, Mary and Dr. Well are all engaged in a controversial area in a field that refuses to accept an alteration in its entrenched opinions. If it were not for the intransigence in opinion about the work in Dr. Well's lab, it might be easily surmised the ethical difficulties before Michael, Mary and Dr. Well would not exist. That is one of the problems of doing cutting-edge science in the real world. The question that might be asked in the final analysis is, "Should Dr. Well, Michael and Mary pursue less difficult experiments and hypotheses?"