



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Summary

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Description

Part 8: Summary of the Occidental Engineering Case Study and Commentary by Michael McFarland, S.J.

Body

Occidental Engineering Case Study: Part 8

When we are faced with an ethical issue, whether it is in the evaluation of a case, the choice of a course of action, or the formulation of a policy, there are a number of questions that we need to examine:

- What are the facts?
- Who are the stakeholders? That is, be aware of all the people involved in the issue in any way, whether they are responsible in some way for the decision or they have some interest in the outcome.
- What alternatives responses to the issue exist?

- What are the costs and benefits of each alternative? This examination should include all the stakeholders and be as comprehensive as possible.
- What rights are at stake? In particular what rights would be violated by each of the alternatives? Special attention should be given to the autonomy as well as the lives and well-being of all the stakeholders.
- How would the benefits and burdens be distributed for each alternative? What groups among the stakeholders would be favored and which would be disadvantaged under each of the alternatives?
- Are there any familiar analogies that would help us understand the issue better? Are these analogies legitimately applicable?
- What laws are applicable to this issue in these circumstances? Are the laws justifiable?
- Are there any professional standards or norms that apply here?
- What is the institutional and social context in which the issue is played out? How does this context constrain the alternatives? Does it make a satisfactory alternative impossible to find? If so how can the context be changed?
- What are the agents' responsibilities, individually and collectively, for the decisions that have been made or should be made, and for the context in which they are made?

Ethics is a practical science, as Aristotle pointed out. Its goal is action: a life well-lived. It is not enough to analyze a situation. One must come to a definite judgement on what ought to be done and then do it. Ethical analysis, therefore, should be directed toward judgement. That is not to say that there is one and only one right judgement in any situation or that there will never be legitimate disagreement. But there are good judgements and bad ones; and it is possible to tell the difference. Here are some of the qualities of a good ethical judgement:

- It is consistent with the facts.
- It has a reasonable and coherent justification.
- It is based on sound ethical principles.
- The benefits outweigh the costs.
- It respects the autonomy and basic human rights of all the stakeholders.
- It is fair to all. In particular it does no further harm to the disadvantaged.
- It is universalizable.
- It is consistent with existing laws and norms unless there is a very compelling reason to violate them.

- There are no better alternatives.

Of course it is not always possible to satisfy all these requirements simultaneously. It may be necessary to make compromises, to prioritize the demands and satisfy as many of the most important ones as possible. It is in such tragic situations, where there are competing interests, that the bitterest disagreements and the most difficult choices occur. It may be necessary simply to make the best choice possible, even when it does some harm. But there is also an obligation to look for alternatives that avoid the conflict. This may mean fostering negotiation and cooperation to bring competing interests into line. It may mean developing new capabilities, human and technological, that more adequately meet the demands of the situation. Or it may mean restructuring relationships and institutions to remove some of the conflicts and constraints that make ethical action impossible.

Notes

Author: Michael McFarland, S.J., was a visiting scholar at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics in 2012. He is the former president of College of the Holy Cross and previously served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Gonzaga University and as an associate professor of computer science at Boston College.

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Topics

Ethical Decision-Making

Employer/Employee Relationships

Safety

Social Responsibility

Product Liability

Discipline(s)

Engineering

Computer Sciences

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences