

Ethics in Life, Organizations and the Professions

As a grad student, you encounter ethical issues every day: in your classes, on the job, with your personal relationships with others. Ethics is the discipline that deals with what is right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, fair vs. unfair, standards vs. practice, knowing vs. doing. According to Archie Carroll, director of the nonprofit management and community service program in the Terry College of Business, it's often easier to agree on the ethical thing to do than it is to actually do it in a real situation.

Ethics Issues at Different Levels

Ethics is about setting standards for conduct, living up to them, and motivating others to do the same. Ethical issues arise in a variety of sizes. Some examples of "the little things" are deciding whether to tell little white lies, the way you treat friends and coworkers, the promises you make and don't keep, the credit you take or give to others, the personal business you conduct at work, or the pressure you put on others to do wrong. A more serious issue of relevance to graduate students would be fudging data for a lab experiment, or not citing all of your sources for a paper. Issues can arise at the personal, organizational, professional, societal, and even global levels.

Is Ethics Important Today?

Intense media coverage has shone a brighter spotlight on recent scandals involving compromised ethics in the fields of business, education, government, the military, and other diverse areas. If the stories are any indication, it seems like ethical standards have been deteriorating in recent years. In his 2004 book *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, David Callahan lists four key reasons why moral lapses are more prominent today. First of all, new pressures, such as global businesses, lead to more competition for the same markets. Second, there are bigger rewards for winning. CEOs, politicians, and star athletes make more money than ever before. Third, the deregulation of many industries leads to greater temptation. And last, there is the phenomenon of "trickle-down corruption": if executives can cut corners, then middle managers figure they can too, and so on. But beware of rationalizations: many people tell themselves that if an opportunity is out there, they should take advantage of it, because life is tough. That

can be used as a justification for immoral behavior.

So, are the media reporting more vigorously or is society changing? Ethical issues are certainly more in the news today, thanks to newsmagazine shows and other sources of information. But think of ethics issues like environmental issues: when the environment is stable, you don't think about it, but when problems arise, awareness is heightened. The same can be said of ethics. Society's actual ethics probably rose slightly over the past few decades—but society's expectations of those ethics have risen at a more rapid rate, due to awareness but also to increased affluence, education, and a greater entitlement mentality. Therefore, a problem now could be of a larger magnitude than it would have been several decades ago because expectations have outpaced the rate at which society has improved its ethics. No matter how much better you get, society's expectations of what you're doing are probably going to surpass your actions.

Ethics Versus Law

We have laws—isn't that enough? Actually, it isn't. Law can be seen as a set of "codified" ethics, but is not sufficient to serve alone as ethical guidelines because of some limitations:

- law cannot possibly address all topics and areas of life, and therefore cannot predict every ethical issue or violation;
- law often lags behind more recent standards of appropriate/ethical behavior, i.e., environmental protection;
- law is made by lawmakers and thus reflects political motivations rather than ethics/justice.
every course to be laid out explicitly early on.

Can Ethics Be Learned?

There are three basic philosophies regarding the teaching of ethics.

- 1. Indoctrination.** You are told what is right and what is

wrong. Your religious faith or the military are examples of groups in our society that might practice indoctrination. For personal growth, this philosophy is not recommended.

2. Values clarification. You decide for yourself what the right course of action is. It's probably a more realistic approach for adults to take, since children are not usually equipped to make such decisions for themselves. However, if everyone in a society practiced values clarification and dictated their own behavior, it would probably lead to chaos.

3. Cognitive-developmental: Moral education invites growth in principles reasoning, meaning you're getting better at basing what you're doing on principles rather than on a whim or personal preference. This is the advocated philosophy.

There are also three approaches to improving or modifying your personal set of ethics.

1. The conventional approach. Trying to align your behaviors/practices with the prevailing norms of our society. But this raises the question: Whose norms are we talking about? And whose norms take precedence over someone else's?

2. The principles approach. Trying to align practices with some great principles of moral philosophy, such as rights, justice, utilitarianism, or the Golden Rule.

3. The ethics-test approach. This is a series of short, practical questions you can ask yourself to reveal the most ethical course of action. For example, before you do something, ask yourself how you would feel if it were going to be on the evening news that night. Would you still continue? Another test might be to compare it to your "best self." Each of us has a concept of what we can be. Are your actions going to measure up to your perceived potential? The test of ventilation asks you to talk over your plans with a friend and get an external opinion on your actions. On the other hand, the test of the purified idea has you question whether you're justifying your actions because a person in authority told you it's okay to do something, while you still have doubts. Also, watch out for the four negative influences: greed (acting in excessive self-interest); speed (cutting corners to save time); laziness (taking the easy way); and haziness (acting without thinking) are all factors that may encourage you to take an ethical shortcut.

Each approach can be helpful in various circumstances. It's up to you to find the value in each one and apply them to your behavior where they are relevant. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Ethics in Life, Organizations, and the Professions" by Archie Carroll, Director of the Nonprofit Management and Community Service Program in the Terry College of Business. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Kinds of ethics: one more distinction

Descriptive ethics:

This describes what is actually occurring in an organization, a classroom, or any other environment.

Normative ethics:

What should or ought to be done.