

Michael S. Pritchard's Commentary on "Vote Early and Often"

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Susan Landers is asked to recommend the best site for a transportation facility, based on considerations of cost and public need. Then she is asked to reconsider her data and mathematical model because her initial results do not match the Mayor's wish to please a certain constituency. Lamont hopes that either the data or the model can be "adjusted" in a way that will make a credible case for favoring the Mayor's preferred site.

However minor the "adjustments" might turn out to be, it seems that Lamont is urging Landers to "do the math backwards." That is, she is encouraged to make either the numbers or the model work in favor of a desired conclusion. Landers worries that this action might compromise her commitment to the "health, safety, and welfare of the public." It might, but she should have another worry. Engineers are also supposed to be committed to honesty and impartiality in their work. This expectation requires Landers to do her calculations independently of the outcome she (or the Mayor) desires.

Lamont is trying to persuade her that it will be all right to let the desired conclusion guide her calculations to at least some degree. This attitude is evident in his suggestion that Landers take another look at the model: "Maybe there is a way to refine it a little more, or perhaps there are some assumptions or parameters that can be changed a little. A model is just that - a model. It's certainly not the same as reality. If there were just some way to keep the Mayor happy, I really think it would turn out well for our department in the long run." Lamont's first three sentences seem acceptable. However, his last sentence makes clear that, in this context, they are offered as part of a *rationalization* rather than a *justification*. What basis would Lamont suggest for altering the data or the model? The only reason he offers is that the changes might enable Landers to recommend the Belmont site, which would not only please the Mayor but might also bring more business to the department. This choice, it should be noted, has no special relevance to Landers's original objective

of determining, which site would be best, on the basis of cost and public need.

Philip is even less subtle than Lamont. He emphasizes Lander's advantage over the public. She can tinker with the data or the model in ways that will produce "a better result" without raising any suspicion of data manipulation. But "better result" here has no clear connection with the "health, safety, and welfare of the public," Landers's original concern. It does have a clear connection with honesty or impartiality, however - it is contrary to both.

It is possible that Landers could succeed in just the way Lamont and Philip suggest. This case illustrates why ethicist William F. May is so concerned about the moral character of professionals and experts. May says of experts, "Few may be in a position to discredit [them]. The knowledge explosion is also an ignorance explosion; if knowledge is power, then ignorance is powerlessness."[\(1\)](#) He continues: "One test of character and virtue is what a person does when no one is watching. A society that rests on expertise needs more people who can pass that test."[\(2\)](#) Philip is suggesting that no one is watching Landers, which is probably true. But May's point is that we are expected to *trust* the judgment of professionals and experts. Lamont and Philip are encouraging Landers to compromise that trust.

May is right to urge otherwise. It may be that even the Mayor would urge otherwise. Of course, the Mayor would be happy to bring forward an honest and impartial recommendation for the Belmont site. Would she also be happy to bring forward a dishonest recommendation, even one that could fool the public? Evidently, the Mayor asked for Landers's expert judgment. She might *hope* that Belmont would get the nod. But she might be very unhappy to learn that Landers rigged the results. The Mayor could hardly *publicly* acknowledge that she wants engineers to manipulate data or models in providing services to the city. We have been given no evidence that that is her *private* view either. So, if she does manipulate either the data or the mathematical model, Landers will violate professional standards, public standards, and quite possibly the standards of the Mayor.

There is one more important consideration. In deciding what to do, Landers may be tempted to think only of *this* case. However, from the standpoint of ethical justification, it is important for her to think of this case in conjunction with relevantly similar cases. If it is acceptable for her to manipulate the data or model in this case, then it is acceptable to act likewise in all relevantly similar cases - acceptable not only for Landers to do so, but for others as well.[\(3\)](#) If Landers thinks through the

implications of generalizing in this way, it is unlikely that she will be able, in good conscience, to follow Lamont and Philip's suggestions.

- [\(1\)](#)William F. May, "Professional Virtues and Self-Regulation" in Joan Callahan, ed., *Ethical Issues in Professional Life* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 408.
- [\(2\)](#)Ibid.
- [\(3\)](#)This requirement for justification is commonly endorsed, not only in everyday moral reasoning, but also in moral philosophy. See, e.g., the influential writings of Immanuel Kant, Henry Sidgwick, R. M. Hare, and Marcus G. Singer.