A Tutorial on Ethical Decision Making

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Description

Commentary and Part 2 of the Occidental Engineering case by Michael McFarland, S.J.

Body

Occidental Engineering Case Study: Part 2

This tutorial provides an analysis of Occidental Engineering: An Ethics Case Study

The story of Occidental Engineering, which is fictional but hardly implausible, illustrates several important points about ethics. First of all, ethics is normative. That is, it involves making judgements according to a standard for what is right and good. In the case of ethics, the judgements are about human behavior insofar as it affects human welfare. Deborah and Wayne are not simply trying to predict how long it will take to fix the program or what the risk of failure will be if they release the code as is, although these factors are relevant. They are rather trying to choose

the course of action that best satisfies their duty to do what is right in the given circumstances. Their judgements are based on certain standards or principles for evaluating behavior. For example, when Wayne says he cannot lie, he is applying a principle that it is wrong deliberately to make a statement that is untrue. Deborah, on the other hand, sees her primary obligation as acting for the good of her company and her employees, without harming anyone else.

The second point is that ethical judgement can involve uncertainty and conflict, even when there is substantial agreement about the principles involved. For example, Deborah and Wayne agree that there is an obligation to protect the safety of anyone using their software. Furthermore, Deborah implicitly acknowledges Wayne's claim that it would be wrong for him to lie about test results by formulating for him a statement he can assent to. Nevertheless they come to quite different conclusions about what should be done, though both are reasonable, unselfish and acting out of good will.

The third point illustrated by this story is that the possibilities for ethical action are always determined by the social structures and relations in which the agents find themselves. For example, Deborah and Wayne are forced into the unfortunate situation of having to choose between compromising their professional integrity by delivering a defective product and risking the loss of jobs of many of their coworkers. They are faced with this dilemma largely because of the policies of their company in bidding low on the project and not putting in the resources to do the job right. The company in turn might claim that they were forced to take this approach because they are trying to survive in such a competitive environment and because of the overly rigid expectations of the government.

Finally, the story shows that it is not enough to make the right ethical judgement. One must also act on it. Wayne may have been right, even noble, in refusing to falsify the test results. But in the end he does not act according to his best judgement. On the other hand, Deborah is very skillful, not only in getting her point across, but also in getting Wayne to follow her on it.

To be ethical, then, means to make correct ethical judgements and to translate them into effective action.

Notes

Author: Michael McFarland, S.J., a computer scientist, is the former president of College of the Holy Cross and was a visiting scholar at the Markkula Ethics Center. June 2012.

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Case Study / Scenario

Topics

Employer/Employee Relationships
Social Responsibility
Product Liability
Safety
Ethical Decision-Making

Discipline(s)

Computer Sciences
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Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences