Ethical Conflict

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Description

Commentary and Part 4 of the Occidental Engineering case by Michael McFarland, S.J.

Body

Occidental Engineering Case Study: Part 4

Why is there so much disagreement on ethical judgements, if we have these well-established ethical principles? How, for example, can Wayne and Deborah come to such different conclusions about reporting unfavorable test results in the case described earlier? Clearly the above principles do not always lead to clear and unambiguous solutions to ethical issues.

There are a number of reasons why reasonable people of good will can differ in their ethical judgements, even when they agree on the basic principles.(7) First of all, there can be empirical differences, that is, different readings of the facts of the

case. Sometimes they disagree about the facts themselves: who fired first in a confrontation, for example, or how many people were killed in a battle. Even more often, they differ on the implications, especially in predicting the consequences of certain policies or actions. In the Occidental case, Deborah believes that it is completely safe to release the flawed system because its flaws will never show up in the environment where it will be used. Wayne seems more skeptical. More aware, perhaps, of how often systems fail because of unanticipated circumstances, he does not see the operating environment as quite so benign as Deborah does.

Another problem is that the principles are very general, and therefore need a great deal of adaptation and interpretation when they are applied to individual acts and policies. For example, what does it mean to tell the truth? Does it mean always telling the all the facts exactly as they are, as Wayne insists, or just avoiding significant deceptions, as Deborah seems to imply? What does it mean to avoid harming someone? Does it refer only to bodily harm, or does it include intangibles such as freedom or privacy? Is it limited only to direct, immediate harm to a well-defined victim, or does it also include indirectly increasing the chance of harm to an unspecified population? In war, is bombing a city's water supply, which will lead to widespread disease and death, the same as machine-gunning civilians in the streets?

Other differences arise because the basic ethical duties sometimes conflict when applied to a particular situation. They cannot all be satisfied in all cases, so it is necessary to prioritize them and decide to what extent each one must be observed. In our example, Wayne insists strongly that the duty to tell the truth, which comes from the duty of fidelity, is paramount and must not be violated. Deborah puts much more emphasis on the duty to avoid harm to others, especially her employees who could lose their jobs if the full truth is disclosed. As another example, a government might adopt economic and social policies that bring prosperity to much of its population but leaves rural peasants largely impoverished and on the margins of society, thus putting the duty to do good to a large number of people before the duty to show justice by ensuring that all participate equally in the goods of the society. On the other hand, a rebel group might seize the land of wealthy landowners by violent means and redistribute it to the peasants, giving the demands of justice higher priority than the duty to do no harm. There can also be differences in the priorities given to different groups affected by a decision. For example, Deborah seems to put her company and her employees first, while Wayne

is more sensitive to the interests of their customers, including both the FAA and the ultimate users of the system.

Politicians often have to choose between the narrow interests of their constituents and the good of the country as a whole, or of the international community. This occurs, for example, when a member of Congress must decide whether to vote for a "pork barrel" project that will help the economy of his or her district but is a waste of the taxpayers' money from every other standpoint. Finally, legitimate disagreements can arise because of different modes of ethical reasoning. This refers to the methodology used to interpret and apply the fundamental ethical principles in particular circumstances, to reason from the general principles to specific ethical judgements.

A number of different systems have been proposed; and while these complement one another in some ways, they can lead to different conclusions in some cases. We will study these different methodologies in the next section.

Next "[Ethical Reasoning: Part 5](#)"

- [(7)](#)Ralph B. Potter, War and Moral Discourse, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969, pp. 23-24.

Notes

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