Neil R. Luebke's Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

Commentary On
What Job You Can Accept

At the most general level the problem in this case is the possible conflict between moral values and job selection. In this particular instance a conscientious chemical engineer is faced with the problem of working for a pesticide company, an area of commercial activity that his family and he have long opposed. The general problem confronts people in many areas of possible employment. Should a person opposed to gambling work in a casino? What about working as a janitor in a casino rather than operating one of the tables? Should a person opposed to drinking liquor work serving beverages to customers in a bar? What about working in a restaurant that has a bar attached to it? In a military context, of course, the problem arises in the case of conscientious objection to military service, or at least military service that involves the possibility of killing other persons. Should an engineer who is a pacifist work in a defense-related industry? Some job situations may involve political commitments. Suppose you are a civil engineer who is Jewish, a strong supporter of Israel, and work for a multinational firm. What should you do if you are assigned to head one of the firm's construction projects for a government that is an enemy of Israel?

It is one thing to be opposed ethically to the product or service provided by a potential employer; it is another thing to decide not to use that product or service personally. A person who does not smoke, for example, might have no difficulty working for a cigarette manufacturer. There are a number of bartenders who are teetotalers. The problem that confronts Gerald in the case is not one of being forced to use pesticides in his own farming; it is rather the compromise of his own convictions as well as the tacit approval of pesticide production and use which his working for Pro-Growth Pesticides might convey. This approval of pesticides would not only be in opposition to his own ethical views but would oppose his family's strong convictions. Indeed, his father's opposition to pesticides seems to have been one of the major motivating factors in leading Gerald to a college career in chemical

engineering.

There are at least four ethical considerations that confront Gerald: first, his own ethical opposition to pesticide use; second, his obligation to uphold his family's commitments; third, his obligation to use and develop his own skills in the best ways possible; and fourth, his obligation to help support his family in time of hardship. Let us consider this latter obligation a little more thoroughly. We certainly cannot assume that, if Gerald does not get a job with Pro-Growth Pesticides, he will have no opportunity within the coming months to get another engineering position. There may be other possibilities looming in the future that he does not yet know. Moreover, we know that engineering is a demanding curriculum, requiring skills in mathematics, design, general scientific knowledge, knowledge of specific applications in equipment and processes, familiarity with timetables and organization of work, experience in working in groups and with group projects, and possibly training in business and management skills. In short, there may be other job opportunities available to Gerald outside of engineering, opportunities to use many of the skills he has picked up in his chemical engineering program.

We should also look at this situation from the points of view of the potential employer, Gerald's engineering college, and Gerald's classmates. At least two considerations are relevant here. First, the pesticide company, in granting an interview to Gerald, is assuming that he is a legitimate candidate for a position; otherwise, they wouldn't waste their time and effort in discussing the matter with him. If he is not interested in the position, he should let them know up front. To fail to do so would not only waste the company's resources but also possibly undermine the chances of another student interviewing with the company. In many cases such company officials can meet only a limited number of students, usually preselected. Second, it is possibly wrong for Gerald to assume that the pesticide company is interested only in pesticides. The company may be planning to expand into other areas of farm chemicals, perhaps into areas to which he has no conscientious objection. In short, Gerald should be up front with the company about his own feelings, and if the company representative still wants to go through with the interview, Gerald may find out that some of his objections are not valid. However, if Gerald goes to the interview without initially telling the company about his objections, his actions may harm other potential candidates and reflect poorly on his school. The decision is not merely a matter of going or not going to an interview; it is rather a decision of how to address the question of an interview in such a way

that his college is not harmed, the job prospects of Gerald's fellow students are not harmed, the company is not harmed by wasting its resources, and possibly Gerald himself is not harmed by getting a bad reputation among interviewers.

Let us suppose that Gerald follows the advice of his friends and goes ahead with the interview without alerting the company about his conscientious feelings regarding pesticides. Let us suppose that what happens as a result is described in section III of the case study. Both the interviewer and Gerald are now in a very unhappy situation. Here Gerald seems to have only two alternatives, neither of which is acceptable: either he lies about his views on pesticides or he tells the interviewer his true views on pesticides, thus exposing him to the legitimate charge of proceeding through the interview under false pretenses.

The advice of Gerald's friends does not seem to be worth much. Everything that Allen says in his first statement may be true: somebody else may take the job; it won't go away because he stays away from it; the job's going to be done anyway. But none of these claims is directly relevant to the question of whether Gerald should compromise his ethical values. Both Bob's and Don's suggestions seem to call on Gerald to compromise his professional standards. One of them suggests that he become a subversive within the organization; the other one suggests that he become a reformer inside the organization. In both cases, Gerald is being asked to compromise his professional obligation to serve his client or his employer as faithfully as he is able.

The civil engineer and writer Samuel Florman (The Existential Pleasures of Engineering) has emphasized that engineering is and ought to be a creative, satisfying, socially valuable, and respected career choice. Much of a professional's self-identity and self-respect is essentially bound up with his or her career. On the other hand, we all have the experience of doing jobs we don't like. They may be jobs that seem demeaning; some may involve boring work that doesn't use our talents; some may require doing unpleasant tasks, such as an auto mechanic telling a car owner that her car isn't worth repairing, or a retailer telling a customer that he can no longer extend him credit, or a supervisor telling an employee that she is going to be demoted because her work is substandard. The type of job situation confronting us in this case, however, is potentially more serious. We may be wrong in some of our convictions, and certainly our moral viewpoints do undergo change. But change in this sense usually leads to greater personal integration, not disintegration. If an individual such as Gerald takes a position that daily requires

him to split his personality--to compromise his ideals, to consider himself a person with whom he would not want to associate--there is a likelihood of self-inflicted psychological damage in addition to the damage he might bring to his employer.