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Module 04: Ethics Essay

A code of ethics is one of the most important parts of being an engineer. Every decision I make applies my personal code of ethics to work towards the best solution available. Even if not written down and standardized, a code of ethics allows one to check themselves and others against their personal values and those demanded by society. Keeping these values and ethics gives a framework to use for making decisions involving topics such as safety, environmental considerations, and benefit to society.

When I am faced with an ethical situation the first thing I do is work to gather more information. This information consists of the internal consequences to myself and/or my organization and the external environment. The external environment includes the health, safety, and wellbeing of other people as well as the short and long term effects on the environment. Some specific items I take into consideration are repairability and maintenance and the hazards associated with such topics. If the end product is unnecessarily difficult to repair and maintain, it will have adverse effects on not only the environment and the financial situation of the consumer, but also may present a serious safety hazard if the end product is critical to safety or response. While these may not always be the best for me, it is very important to me to hold myself to my ethics as someone who could very well be on the other end.

Going out to a wider view, we talked as a group about the ethical incidents faced by several large companies in recent times. Two of these incidents involved an automobile manufacturer failing to be honest and realistic about their product, instead choosing to work around the issue resulting in very high environmental emissions and serious safety hazards to those in and around the vehicles. We also talked about an incident regarding data privacy issues. In this incident, Amazon was requested to turn over data from a voice assistant in the proximity of a potential murder without a warrant. This incident publicized the issues involved not only with the devices around our home listening constantly, but the ethical implications involved with the breach of privacy if that data was freely available to the wrong hands. The last incident discussed was fictional, but brought up many important issues about data privacy and how one's information can easily be unethically handled through carelessness.

The ethical considerations of the group were very similar to my own. The biggest differences were not in what people considered but rather the priority of those considerations varied heavily. For example when analyzing the VW emissions scandal, the group was split on our most concerning consideration. For some the most concerning and center stage concern was that of lying to customers about what they were getting in a negative way, many others were concerned about the ethics of how the situation was handled and the lack of responsibility given. This was concentrated by the universal primary concern for safety as seen with the Ford Pinto issue where everyone agreed the issue should have been of great concern and been fixed rather than being swept under the rug.

The three most relevant virtues to the case study of the VW emissions scandal are integrity, honesty, and responsibility. These virtues were chosen because they were the ones worst violated by those involved. The relevant executives acted without regard to integrity as they knowingly and purposefully violated the virtues of honesty and responsibility. They violated the virtue of honesty by creating methods to defeat emissions regulations, lying to their customers and the government about their capabilities. They violated the virtue of responsibility by not taking accountability for their actions and refusing to do anything to correct their actions until forced and never facing any consequences. An applicable virtue that is not included in the list is that of Courage, particularly that of taking charge to fix the issues presented.

In conclusion ethics is a very important and deep topic that may seem clear and obvious but in practice is complicated and easy to fall short on. It is our task as engineers to be the best we can be and to follow through.