



Professional Ethics (HS-219)

Week 7 (Handout)

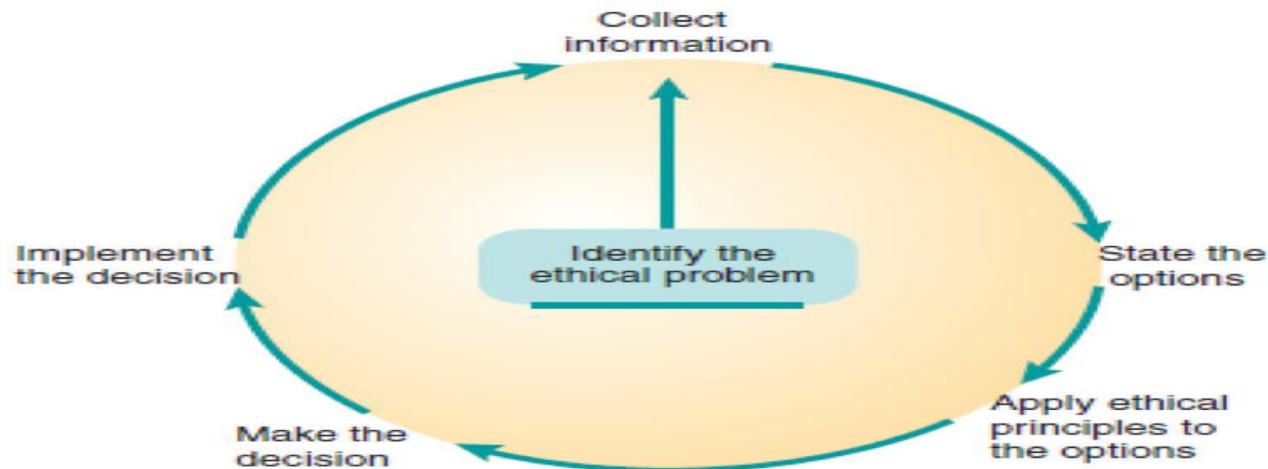
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Ethical Problem Solving Techniques



1. Conflict Problems
2. Line Drawing Technique
3. Flow Charting

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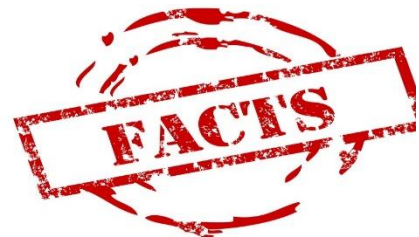
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Analysis of Issues in Ethical Problems

The first step in solving any ethical problem is to completely understand all of the issues involved. Once these issues are determined, frequently a solution to the problem becomes apparent. The issues involved in understanding ethical problems can be split into three categories:

1. Factual,
2. Conceptual
3. Moral [Harris, Pritchard, and Rabins, 2000]

Understanding these issues helps to put an ethical problem in the proper framework and often helps point the way to a solution.



concept



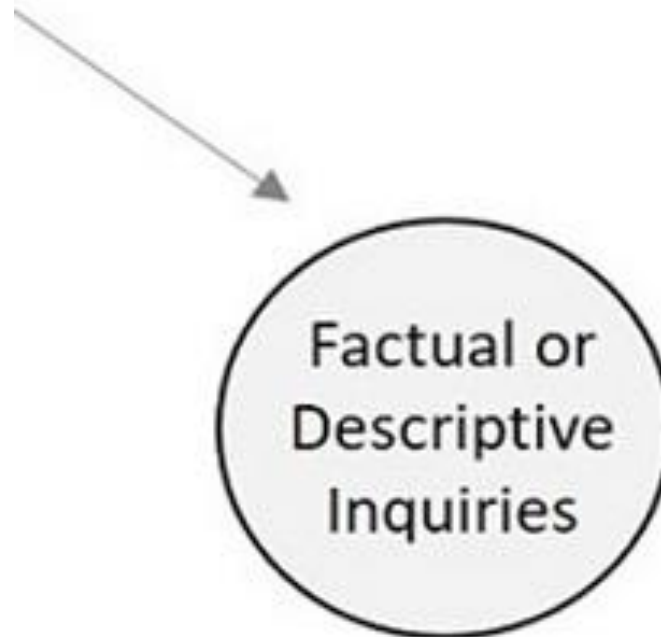
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Factual Issues

Factual issues involve what is actually known about a case, i.e. what the facts are.



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In engineering, there are controversies over facts. For example, global warming is of great concern to society as we continue to emit greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, trap heat in the atmosphere. This is thought by climate scientists to lead to a generalized warming of the atmosphere as emissions from automobiles and industrial plants increase the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere. This issue is of great importance to engineers since they might be required to design new products or redesign old ones to comply with stricter environmental standards if this warming effect indeed proves to be a problem. However, the global warming process is not fully understood, and the need to curtail emission of these gases is a controversial topic. If it were known exactly what the effects of emitting greenhouse gases into the atmosphere would be, the engineer's role and responsibility in reducing this problem would be clearer.

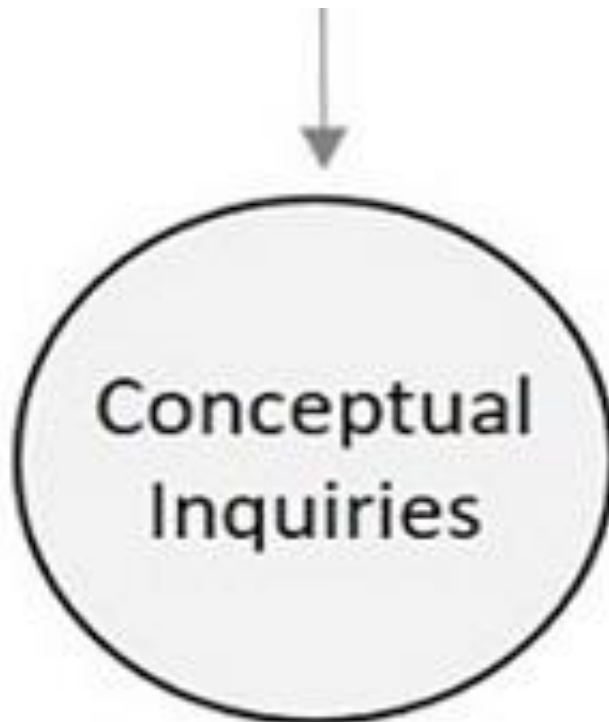
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Conceptual Issues

Conceptual issues mainly focuses on the meaning or applicability of an idea.



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Conceptual issues have to do with the meaning or applicability of an idea. In engineering ethics, this might mean defining what constitutes a bribe as opposed to an acceptable gift, or determining whether certain business information is proprietary. In the case of the bribe, the value of the gift is probably a well-known fact. What isn't known is whether accepting it will lead to unfair influence on a business decision. For example, conceptually it must be determined if the gift of tickets to a sporting event by a potential supplier of parts for your project is meant to influence your decision or is just a nice gesture between friends. Of course, like factual issues, conceptual issues are not always clear-cut and will often result in controversy as well.

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Once the factual and conceptual issues have been resolved, at least to the extent possible, all that remains is to determine which moral principle is applicable to the situation. Resolution of moral issues is often more obvious. Once the problem is defined, it is usually clear which moral concept applies, and the correct decision becomes obvious. In our example of a “gift” offered by a sales representative, once it is determined whether it is simply a gift or is really a bribe, then the appropriate action is obvious. If we determine that it is indeed a bribe, then it cannot ethically be accepted. Given that the issues surrounding an ethical problem can be controversial, how can these controversies be resolved? Factual issues can often be resolved through research to establish the truth. It is not always possible to achieve a final determination of the “truth” that everyone can agree on, but generally, further research helps clarify the situation, can increase the areas of agreement, and can sometimes achieve consensus on the facts.

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Conceptual issues are resolved by agreeing on the meaning and applicability of terms and concepts. Sometimes agreement isn't possible, but as with factual issues, further analysis of the concepts at least clarifies some of the issues and helps to facilitate agreement. Finally, moral issues are resolved by agreement as to which moral principles are pertinent and how they should be applied.

Often, all that is required to solve a particular ethical problem is a deeper analysis of the issues involved according to the appropriate principles. Once the issues are analyzed and agreement is reached on the applicable moral principles, it is clear what the resolution should be.

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Moral Issues

Once the factual and conceptual issues have been resolved, all that remains is to determine which moral principle is applicable to the situation.



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Case Study



In 1980, Paradyne, a computer company, bid to supply the Social Security Administration (SSA) with new computer systems.

Factual Issue: The request for proposals clearly specified that only existing systems would be considered. Paradyne did not have any such system running and had never tested the operating system on the product they actually proposed to sell to the SSA. The employment of a former SSA worker by Paradyne to help lobby SSA for the contract is also clear. In this case, the factual issues do not appear particularly controversial.

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Conceptual Issues: They involve whether bidding to provide an off-the-shelf product when the actual product is only in the planning stages is lying or is an acceptable business practice. Is placing a Paradyne label over the real manufacturer's label deceptive? Does lobbying your former employer on behalf of your current employer constitute a conflict of interest?

These questions will certainly generate discussion. Indeed, Paradyne asserted that it had done nothing wrong and was simply engaging in common business practices. The issue of the conflict of interest is so hard to decide that laws have been enacted making it illegal for workers who have left government employ to lobby their former employers for specified periods of time.

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Moral issues: Is lying an acceptable business practice? Is it alright to be deceptive if doing so allows your company to get a contract? The answers to these questions are obvious: Lying and deceit are no more acceptable in your business life than in your personal life. So, if conceptually we decide that Paradyne's practices were deceptive, then our analysis indicates that their actions were unethical.

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How can Controversies be Resolved in Ethical Problems?



Factual issues can often be resolved through research to establish the truth.

Conceptual issues are resolved by agreeing on the meaning of terms and concepts.

Moral issues are resolved by agreement as to which moral principles are pertinent and how they should be applied.

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Relevance vs Conflict Problem

In a relevance problem, there is no surety whether a principle applies in a particular situation.

In a conflict problem, there are two or more principles which seem to apply to a particular situation, and yet the two principles require different and incompatible actions.

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Methods for Relevance Problem



1. Setting a series of cases
2. Counting the morally relevant similarities and differences
3. Determining the line of demarcation

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Resolving the Conflict Problem



1. Employing lower level consideration
2. Finding creative central way
3. Making hard choice

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Line Drawing Technique



Useful for situations in which the applicable moral principles are clear but there seems to be great deal of gray area about which ethical principle applies.

It is performed by drawing a line along which various examples and hypothetical situations are placed.

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Line Drawing Technique



Line drawing is performed by drawing a line along which various examples and hypothetical situations are placed. At one end is placed the “positive paradigm,” an example of something that is unambiguously morally acceptable. At the other end, the “negative paradigm,” an example of something that is unambiguously not morally acceptable, is placed. In between is placed the problem under consideration, along with other similar examples. Those examples that more closely conform to the positive paradigm are placed near it, and examples closer to the negative paradigm are placed near that paradigm. By carefully examining this continuum and placing the moral problem under consideration in the appropriate place along the line, it is possible to determine whether the problem is more like the positive or negative paradigm and therefore whether it is acceptable or unacceptable.

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Line Drawing Technique



Negative paradigm

Positive paradigm

(NP)

(PP)



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Case Study

It is proposed that our company dispose of a slightly hazardous waste by dumping into a lake. A nearby town takes its drinking water supply from this lake. The research shows that with the amount of waste in the lake will be 5 parts per million (ppm). The EPA limit for this material has been set at 10 ppm. At the 5 ppm level, we expect no health problems, and consumers would not be able to detect the compound in their drinking water.

Negative paradigm (NP)

Positive paradigm (PP)



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Line Drawing Technique



Some other hypothetical examples for consideration:

1. The company dumps the chemical into the lake. At 5 ppm, the chemical will be harmless, but the town's water will have an unusual taste.
2. The chemical can be effectively removed by the town's existing water-treatment system.
3. The chemical can be removed by the town with new equipment that will be purchased by the company.
4. The chemical can be removed by the town with new equipment for which the taxpayer will pay.

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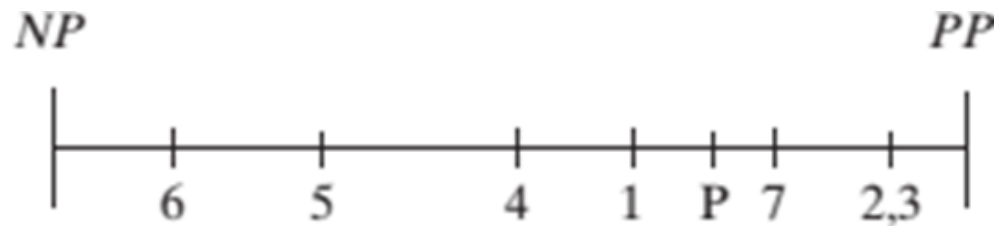
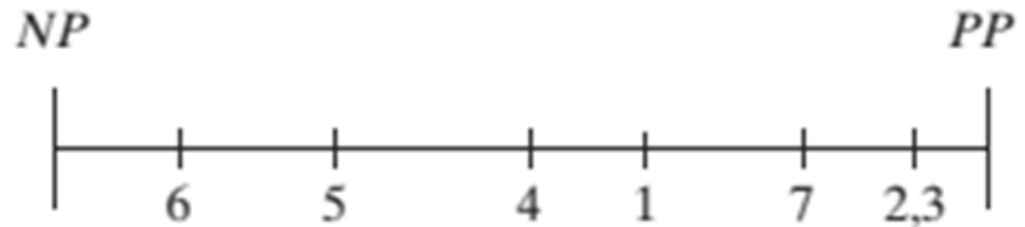
5. Occasionally, exposure to the chemical can make people feel ill, but this only lasts for an hour and is rare.
6. At 5 ppm, some people can get fairly sick, but the sickness only lasts a week, and there is no long-term harm.
7. Equipment can be installed at the plant to further reduce the waste level to 1 ppm.

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Line Drawing Technique



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Case Study

John is employed at Bluestone Ltd. as the senior engineer. He regularly meets with vendors who offer to supply Bluestone with their ongoing needed services and parts. John discovers that one of the vendors, Peter, is an avid golfer like himself. They begin comparing notes on their favorite golf courses. John says that he has always wanted to play at the Cherryvale Golf Resort but has never had the opportunity because it is a private club. Peter says that his company have a corporate membership there for years and he can arrange a guest visit for John for that weekend, “I can easily organize for us to have a game on the company, we’ll even get a steak and few pints afterwards out of it”.

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Task

Use line drawing to assess whether the scenarios of bribery/gift are acceptable. What other examples can you think of to add to these scenarios?

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Scenario

1. During a sales visit, a sales representative offers you a coffee mug with his company's name and logo on it. The value of the mug is five dollars. Can you accept this item? Does the answer to this question change if this item is a \$350 crystal bowl with the name of the company engraved on it? How about if there is no engraving on it?
2. Your meeting with a sales representative is running into the lunch hour. She invites you to go out for lunch. You go to a fast-food restaurant and pay for your own lunch. Is this practice acceptable? Does the answer to this question change if you go to an expensive French restaurant? If she pays for lunch?

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Scenario

3. A sales representative from whom you often purchase asks if you would like to play tennis with him this weekend at one of the local municipal courts. Should you go? Is the answer to this question different if the match is at an exclusive local club to which he belongs? What if he pays the club's guest fee for you?

4. A company sales representative would like you to attend a one-day sales seminar in Cleveland. Your company will pay for your trip. Should you go? How about if the meeting is in Maui? What if the sales representative's company is going to pay for you to go? What if your family is invited as well?

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