MAINTENANCE AND MISSION IN ETHICS: A RESPONSE TO WILBANKS ON ADVOCACY

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What is the proper work of students and professors who devote themselves to the study of social ethics? In "Advocacy Ethics and the Nuclear Arms Race,"[1] Dana Wilbanks argues that academic ethicists should attend to the larger social realities that shape our lives, rather than to the analysis of moral reasoning. We should, he holds, direct an "inquiry of suspicion" and an "inquiry of possibility" toward these larger realities, and boldly advocate changes in the existing social order, especially in that seemingly fixed social structure we call the nuclear arms race. We should not, on the other hand, focus our intellectual energies on the logic of moral reasoning, as Ralph B. Potter and others have urged us to do.[2]

In my response to this thesis, my negative criticism will be that Wilbanks has misrepresented and seriously undervalued the work of analyzing the logic of moral reasoning. I also think he is mistaken in requiring ethics students and professors to choose between analysis and advocacy. At the same time, I affirm the value of advocacy ethics as propounded by Wilbanks. My own thesis will be that the proper work of social ethics must include *both* analysis and advocacy—the former being what I shall call the 'maintenance' element, the latter being the 'mission' element in the ethical enterprise fully understood. More specifically, if we expect to 'use' ethics effectively in changing social reality (mission), we need a thorough grounding in what ethics *is* and how to 'keep it working' (maintenance).

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[1]Author's note: "Advocacy Ethics and the Nuclear Arms Race" was originally presented as a lecture on the occasion of Professor Wilbanks' inauguration as full professor of Christian Ethics at the Iliff School of Theology, on March 24, 1983, and appears in the Spring issue of *The Iliff Review.* While my own teaching is in the field of philosophical ethics rather than Christian social ethics, I shall here assume that the issues to be discussed are, in the main, applicable in both fields. I realize that some readers may wish to challenge that assumption. In any case, I appreciate this opportunity to debate these questions with my friend and colleague, Dana Wilbanks.

[2]Potter wrote *War and Moral Discourse* (Knox Press, 1969) during the Vietnam war, espousing a position on the ethicist's vocation which Wilbanks is concerned to rebut. Cf. Wilbanks, *op. cit.,* pp. 15-16 and 16n.

I. Maintenance

A major thesis that emerges from Wilbanks' essay is that academic ethicists ought to give up their analysis of the logic of moral reasoning in favor of critiquing and advocating change in the structures that shape social reality in harmful ways. I shall call this his 'replacement thesis.' And I want to argue against it (1) that it (he) assumes incorrectly that there is only one task for academic ethicists to perform; (2) that he misrepresents analytic ethics and neglects the vitally important task of studying and teaching the logic of moral reasoning; and (3) that Wilbanks' own program of advocacy ethics itself requires that the logic of moral reasoning be properly understood and employed.

(1) Ethics is that part of human consciousness and activity that has to do with performing morally right acts and practices, and with aiming at good purposes in resultant states of human affairs. An ethicist is someone—typically a professor or a student in a course of study in higher education—who takes a special interest in this part of 'human consciousness and activity,' as opposed to such other parts as science, the arts, technology, or religion. Wilbanks' replacement thesis holds that ethicists have been doing the wrong thing in recent years—studying the logic of moral reasoning—and that they ought to get on with doing something else—critiquing and advocating change in the social order. What I think is incorrectly assumed by this thesis is that ethicists have only one task to perform.

It is generally agreed, I think, that in science there are distinctive tasks (a) for thinkers like Newton and Einstein who work at what Kuhn has called the fundamental paradigms of our understanding of physical reality, (b) for the legions of scientific researchers who work out the puzzles and other unfinished business that is required to complete the work of the most fundamental theorists, and (c) for yet another large group of scientists who perform the still different tasks of applied science. There would be, I think, similar agreement about the variety of roles that need to be played in the arts, technology, religion and other fields where theoretical understanding is developed and applied. My claim here is that ethics is no exception, and that, furthermore, this role differentiation holds both for the division of intellectual labor among persons of different interests and abilities, and for the work of the individual ethicist in teaching and writing about 'the right and the good.' To illustrate, in recent years, philosophical ethicists have employed such distinctions as 'social ethics' vs. 'personal ethics,' 'normative ethics' vs. 'metaethics,' 'moral theory' vs. 'value theory,' and 'pure' vs. 'applied' ethics, all for the purpose of distinguishing the various tasks to be pursued. If ethicists are now to extend their work to include Wilbanks' 'inquiry of suspicion' and 'inquiry of possibility' as part of their field, this might simply add additional domains of inquiry, or might lead to some rearranging of the divisions within the field. But it need not, and I think ought not, require the *replacing* of what ethicists have been doing heretofore.

(2) In arguing that ethicists ought to give up their work of analyzing the logic of moral reasoning, Wilbanks errs in neglecting the positive value of such analysis in stressing mainly the faults of particular practitioners of analytic ethics. Surely it is in order to criticize ethicists who are *exclusively* preoccupied with "narrowness of scope and methodological precision." And something is certainly amiss when ethicists use moral debates about the Vietnam war and strategic nuclear planning as "*merely* illustrative of fine points of argumentation" (my italics). But to argue for tossing out analytic ethics on grounds that many of its practitioners have been narrow-minded and have improperly evaded larger social issues would be to risk throwing the baby out with the bath water. And it could leave Wilbanks vulnerable to the charge of rejecting one caricature of the field of ethics only to replace it with another.

I offer both an 'external' and an 'internal' argument for my claim that there is validity to and a vital need (neglected by Wilbanks) for the analytic study of the logic of moral reasoning. The main premise of the external argument is that highly respected social critics, public officials, and (in their own way) undergraduate students all bear witness to what might be called a withering away of moral reasoning in our late-industrial social order. Philosophers like Arendt and Habermas, novelists like Orwell and Solzenitzin, and playwrights like Brecht—to mention only a tiny sampling—have argued in their work that the infatuation of advanced industrial society with *technical* rationality threatens to swallow up or eclipse *moral* rationality. Public officials, most visibly in the Watergate affair, have demonstrated by their choices and actions that this warning deserves to be taken seriously. And my own experience and that of philosopher-colleagues who work regularly with university undergraduates is that the logic of moral reasoning has been replaced in their thinking to a considerable degree by what might be called the logic of egoism, the logic of hedonism, the logic of cultural relativism, and the logic of scientism. This array of evidence of the misunderstanding or complete disappearance of morality as an essential part of 'human consciousness and activity,' suggests to me that the analysis of moral reasoning deserves relatively more, not less, attention by ethicists in undergraduate as well as graduate and professional academic curricula.

But the skeptical reader may well wish to ask whether I am justified in assuming, as I do in the paragraph above, that there *is* indeed such a thing to be studied and taught as 'the logic of moral reasoning.' It is a reasonable question. What I referred to above as an 'internal' argument for the validity of and need for analytical ethics rests on the premise that the history of Western philosophy, especially 20th century metaethical inquiry, does indeed offer a body of knowledge that justifies the reference to 'the logic of moral reasoning.' This 'body of knowledge' does not, of course, have the conceptual clarity about it or the widely agreed upon canons of validity and soundness that we tend to associate with mathematical, scientific or even legal knowledge. But that fact itself is part of the understanding that needs to be

grasped and communicated. Aristotle observed long ago that an educated person is one who, among other things, does not demand more precision than the subject matter at hand admits of.[3] And much of the substance of 20th century ethical analysis has consisted in disentangling our understanding of the logic of moral reasoning from the logic of mathematical intuitions and deductions, from the logic of scientific data-collecting and hypothesis formulation, and from the logic of aesthetic critique. Since the benchmark emotivist analyses of Ayer and R.L. Stevenson in the 1930's, a half-century of analytic work has refuted a variety of reductionist efforts to deny the existence of a distinctive 'logic of morality.' And, on the constructive side, considerable progress has been made in the sifting and integrating of the insights of intuitionists, empiricists, relativists, emotivists, imperativists, and others into a body of understanding that, while it is still alive with theoretical disagreements, certainly has enough substance to it to disprove a number of the cruder 'heresies' mentioned above.

(3) Thirdly, I want to argue, against Wilbanks' replacement thesis, that his own advocacy ethics position itself depends on the logic of moral reasoning for its own viability. My claim here is that ethical analysis is required in the work of the ethicist to explicate and validate moral reasoning precisely in order to pursue his (Wilbanks') own goal of broad social change. To some extent, contrary to the replacement thesis, Wilbanks himself seems to accept this. At least his 'inquiry of possibility' which has the ethical advocate searching for alternatives to undesirable social structures must, in his view, be preceded by a critical 'inquiry of suspicion' which does involve analysis of a sort. However, this analysis is aimed at—Wilbanks uses Ogletree's terms here—"those fancies and popular conceptions which function to legitimate special privilege, or which justify violence, exploitation and oppression, however grandly universalistic they appear to be."[4] And however much I may agree that these social structures are indeed appropriate targets for the advocate's analysis, I must be prepared (and my students must be prepared) to justify logically claims to that effect. If one cannot justify—in some sense, at some level—one's opposition to privilege, violence, exploitation, and the like, that opposition will be reduced to the status of propaganda or sheer political manipulation. And this, being violence of another sort, is surely not what Wilbanks intends to promote under the name of 'ethical advocacy.'

There is another sense in which Wilbanks' proposal seems to require—without acknowledgement—attention to the logic of moral reasoning. His proposal is that ethicists should accept that their "primary subject matter is the

[3] *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1094b.

[4] If pressed to name an adequate paradigm in contemporary metaethical theory, I would probably refer to 'neocognitivism,' at the risk of relying too heavily on the ethicists—Frankena, Brandt, Baier, Toulman, Hare—who were most prominent during my own graduate school days. Of course, to name 'an adequate paradigm' is very from justifying it—but the latter lies beyond the scope of this paper.

social world in which we live." And his assumption seems to be that the logic of morality belongs to some domain *other than* 'the social world in which we live.' Is this a sound assumption? I admit that, by widely accepted convention, we tend to think of logic as well as morality as belonging to the interior of our minds, rather than to 'the social world in which we live.' But that conventional dichotemy breaks down rather quickly under close scrutiny. Bishop Butler centuries ago classified morality as a 'social institution.' And logic—the rules for sorting good from bad arguments—is surely created and transmitted as social enterprise. Conversely, if we focus on the social world as Wilbanks urges us to do, what we find there that is objectionable and in need of transformation is not only the personal and institutional behaviors *per se;* it is also—perhaps even more so—the warped reasoning by which these are motivated and justified in our fellow human beings.

I want to conclude my critique of Wilbanks' treatment of the logic of moral reasoning by proposing an analogy for understanding the place of ethical analysis in relation to advocacy ethics. The point of my account will be that ethics belongs to a much larger class of human activities in which what I shall call the 'maintenance' function is, while not ultimate, still absolutely essential to the activity. Consider the vegetable gardener. The final goal—the 'ultimate function'—of his or her work seems obviously to be the potatoes, squash, broccoli, and all the rest of what is harvested at the end of the summer's labors. Yet what makes possible these happy results is an ongoing process that often seems to have little to do with the outcome—a process that includes compost building and fertilizing, thinning and weeding, mending hoses and spades and many other 'maintenance' chores, without which the ultimate results of gardening will not be realized—especially if one desires quality produce in good quantities over a period of years. Or consider the activities included in fire-suppression work. We often conceptualize this work by visualizing the dramatic moment in which lives and property are saved through the swift, courageous and competent application of skills and complex equipment to putting out a fire. But only a moment's reflection reminds us that the effective results we prize so highly will only be possible on the basis of a very substantial base of capital investment, theoretical understanding (e.g. of building construction, hazardous materials, hydraulics), personnel selection, training, management, and so forth.

Other examples might be chosen from activities like running a business, practicing nursing or medicine, athletics, and so on. But multiplying examples will not be persuasive if the reader doubts that the analogy holds between these technique-applying fields and domains like ethics and social reform. One might object, for example, that the purported analogies are all 'technical' or 'professional' in the sense that they depend upon the development of trained competence to apply techniques wisely in the service of fairly well-defined ends. Whereas—the skeptic might continue—in ethics and social reform what is needed is simply a morally sensitive imagination to see what needs to be done

and the courage to get up and do it. The reader with this perspective will perhaps have thought it odd that I wrote in the introduction to this article of the need to obtaining a grounding "in what ethics is and how to 'keep it working.' "

In response, I would like to offer three observations: (1) The first is a concession to the skeptic. I agree that ethics and social reform cannot be reduced to the logical form of mere technical exercises. For one thing, the ends of human effort are not given to the ethicist; he/she is responsible precisely for naming and justifying such ends. Also, human beings are proscribed by the very substance of ethical knowledge—Kant's categorical imperative, for example—from being reduced merely to the role of either 'instrument' or 'instrument-user.' And finally, as noted above, ethics does not admit of the degree of precision and certainty in its knowledge that we ordinarily find in such empirically-based technologies as those discussed above.

(2) However, in spite of all these qualifications, it seems to me quite appropriate to think of a person as possessing (or lacking) 'ethical competence.' This is, of course, a matter of degree, as is made clear in great detail by the moral development theorists (Kohlberg, Rest, Gilligan, *et al*). But there are, I believe, 'marks of moral competence' just as there are characteristics by which we judge a person to be a competent (or incompetent) gardener, fire-fighter, historian, mathematician, scientist, or—even!—art critic. As examples of such 'marks,' I would offer the following: the capacity to marshall and weigh the relevant facts in making an ethical judgment, the capacity to use ethical concepts with precision, the capacity to avoid partiality toward one's self or other persons or special interests in forming ethical judgments, logical consistency and personal integrity, the capacity to empathize with the needs and perspectives of other persons involved in an ethical judgment or predicament, a capacity to weigh conflicting ethical claims judiciously. To speak of the need for a 'maintenance' function in ethics is to refer to the need to identify, understand and nurture such qualities as these in the members of a moral community. To this end, the practice of 'analytic ethics,' aimed at understanding the logic which underlies and justifies these qualities, is, I submit, an element of fundamental importance in the vocation of the academic ethicist.

(3) One other observation is called for regarding the 'technical activity' analogies offered above. In discussing them as parallel cases to ethics, I suggested that the maintenance function amounted to essentially an *instrumental means* to the realization of the ultimate function or mission of the activity. But there is an important point about the relation of what we sometimes distinguish as 'process vs. product' that renders the maintenance function something more than just a set of techniques to be valued only insofar as they produce the expected outcomes. In my own experience as a gardener, the maintenance processes have an intrinsic personal satisfaction and fulfillment about them that does not merely wait upon the appearance of the produce at harvesttime. A parallel point has often been made by critics of large-scale

agriculture's seemingly exclusive pre-occupation with high crop yields at the expense of what will be sustainable over the long haul for farmers and their land. And in medicine, physicians have come under increasing criticism recently for focusing too narrowly on the abstracted goal of 'preserving life,' to the neglect of what might be called 'the whole process' of the patient's life. Within the context of ethical theory the point was made by Aristotle in his discussion of the hedonistic paradox. It may well be, he argued, that pleasure is an important outcome of human activities like making music or athletics. But if the agent abstracts that pleasurable outcome and focuses exclusively upon it, treating the flute-playing or the race as a means only, there will in the end be less pleasure experienced than if the agent engaged in the activity 'for its own sake.' Perhaps such a caution about not neglecting process in favor of product has a bearing on the relationship between analytic ethic and the logic of morality on the one hand, and social transformation on the other. I am inclined to believe that it does.

II. Mission

My argument has been that morality is an ongoing process in human affairs which needs to be studied and taught in educational and research contexts, and which has academic and practical value independent of large-scale social change outcomes. And I've rejected the replacement thesis according to which academic ethicists ought to turn away from analysis to become instead advocates for social transformation. However, it is also my view that, so long as advocacy is not incoporated into the intellectual vocation of the ethicist at the cost of eliminating analysis of the logic of moral reasoning, advocacy *does* indeed have a place in that vocation. And Wilbanks' call to abjur the excesses of many 'analysts' in favor of an encountering approach to harmful social practices and institutions does indeed deserve serious attention by academic ethicists.

My own coming to accept advocacy, while it does not reject the theological demand that motivates Wilbanks' 'call,' has been *via* the somewhat different route of the 'critical theory' approach of the Frankfort School. There are many similarities in the two approaches. Probably the most important is the understanding that neutrality is an impossible stance for the academic ethicist to take. Wilbanks attributes this insight to the liberation theologians; I attribute it mainly to the writings of Jurgen Habermas and Brian Fay.[6] If these thinkers are correct about the impossibility of neutrality, it follows that advocacy is inescapable. This does not, of course, license a wholesale abandonment of the quest for fairness and objectivity. On the con-

[5]Wilbanks, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[6]Cf. for example, the Appendix entitled "Knowledge and Human Interests: A General Perspective," in Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Beacon, 1972); and Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice* (Allen and Unwin, 1975).

trary, what is sought is precisely an application of the canons of fairness and objectivity to all who are affected by a certain act, practice or institution. The point is to recognize the fact that our ethical deliberations take place within an already existing social-economic order where, as noted above, special privilege, violence, exploitation and oppression are built into the social structure. Under these circumstances, the attitude of suspicion and the search for alternatives are already required *by the logic of moral reasoning itself.* This is so because the rational structure of morality (i.e. the logic of moral reasoning) is squarely opposed to special privilege, violence, and injustice.

Given my general concurrence with Wilbanks on the justification and need for advocacy of social change as a legitimate part of the academic ethicist's work, it remains only for me to review some of the details of Wilbanks' presentation of this viewpoint in "Advocacy Ethics and the Nuclear Arms Race." In doing so, I find at least four topics upon which more consideration is demanded than Wilbanks' lecture allowed room for.

One of these topics is the language of the ethicist. What is interesting here is that advocacy ethics as propounded by Wilbanks is expressed using a number of psychological categories not usually found in the literature of morality. 'Suspicion' is the most prominent of these, and its prominence in the Wilbanks proposal invites a number of questions. How is suspicion related to 'a critical attitude,' to 'paranoia,' to 'fear?' Are we to view *all* suspicion as 'healthy suspicion?' What ethical outlooks have already been assumed that justify treating suspicion as a virtue? Do we want to insert suspicion as a key virtue into youth programs, reminiscent of the children's organization, the Spies, in Orwell's *1984*? And would this entail *removing* some of the virtues we have traditionally inculcated, for example, into boy and girl scouts in our own culture—'A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, etc.?' Notice how antithetical to 'suspicious' these virtues tend to be. Other psychological categories mentioned are immobilizing "fatigue and apathy," which Wilbanks hints will become sins or vices more basic than self-righteousness and pride.[7] As with suspicion, these categories raise intriguing questions, both about their exact meaning in relation to other psychological concepts and about their relation, in advocacy ethics, to the traditional normative categories of moral discourse, i.e. good and bad, right and wrong, praiseworthy and blameworthy.

A second topic that seems to call for more thorough analysis and explanation concerns the ultimacy of the nuclear arms race paradigm. Wilbanks asserts "The nuclear arms race is *the* predominant characteristic of our social context....a world view with a comprehensive set of assumptions about human beings, human communities, social conflict, the United States, the Soviet Union, international relations, security, and the future"[8] (italics mine). While I am sympathetically disposed to this rather strong claim, and have late-

[7]Wilbanks, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 10.

ly given the nuclear arms race a much larger place in my own work as an academic ethicist, it is clear that many thoughtful social critics think otherwise. Some, for example, hold that the environmental crisis is '*the* predominant characteristic of our social context;' and others point to the economic disparity between Northern and Southern Hemisphere nations. Others, like Leon Wieseltier[9] believe the U.S.-U.S.S.R. ideological struggle to be the predominant paradigm:

> Too many advocates of disarmament speak as if the issue is somehow too big for politics.... For these peace people, as for the military planners they detest, history begins with the bomb, even as it may end with it. All other considerations—especially the contest between the values of democracy and the values of totalitarianism—are irrelevant.

What follows, I believe, from the existence of these alternatives is the need for an argument to show that the nuclear arms race is, as Wilbanks claims, the most fundamental of all these paradigms for understanding the present social context within which advocacy is to occur.

Thirdly, I think there needs to be a more thorough analysis of the problem of priorities for advocates. Wilbanks laments that "The nuclear arms race is not examined in its whole systemic character, but in isolable parts which are amenable to analytic ethical methods,"[10] and goes on to cite, as an objectionable case in point, the recent debate whether it can be moral to intend to do what is in itself clearly immoral. And he faults moralists for debating the merits of counterforce strategy in relation to the canons of just war theory, on the grounds that anyone who deals with particular moral questions on any less grand a scale than that of the nuclear arms paradigm itself "has tacitly accepted and reinforced the dominant social consensus about the necessity of the nuclear arms race to provide peace and security in the world."[11] Viewed in terms of the historical terminology for discussing war and morality, this amounts to demanding that all discussion of ethical choices within warfare (*jus in bello*) should cease in light of the greater urgency for discussing the morality of warfare itself (*jus ad bellum*). Many critics familiar with the Hague and Geneva conventions, with documents like the U.S. Army's *The Law of Land Warfare,* and with the deaths and suffering that have been avoided by adherance to their rules for *jus in bello,* would doubtless take issue with this stance. On the other hand, the admonition that we 'not lose sight of the forest for the trees' is one as likely to be violated by academic ethicists as by other members of society, and so the call to be alert to the most influential paradigm—whatever that may be—is appropriate.

[9]In "The Great Nuclear Debate," *New Republic,* January 10 and 17, 1983, p. 8.

[10]Wilbanks, *op. cit.,* p. 7.

[11]*Ibid.,* p. 9.

The fourth topic that requires further consideration is the range of intellectual responsibilities that Wilbanks proposes to include within the vocation of the academic ethicist. A partial list of the areas needing to be investigated by his ethicist advocate of alternative international security arrangements includes:

> ...what is involved in reducing levels of hostility between peoples; in establishing conditions in which war is less likely; in rooting out and overcoming socio-economic injustices that perpetuate violence and war; and what is involved in nurturing and creating international structures appropriate to an interdependent world....jobs and investments in institutions involved in the development and production of nuclear weapons....methods of communal empowerment, and the demilitarization of American society through economic conversion.[12]

Were we to give names to the research areas here proposed for inclusion in the domain of the academic ethicist, the list would include conflict management, domestic and international economic theory, the history of warfare in human societies, and domestic and international theory of complex organizations. The question, of course, is whether the academic ethicist can responsibly attain and exercise intellectual competence in these areas in addition to his/her own competence in the field of social ethics. To say 'no' is to risk falling under Wilbanks' concern that the

> ...quest for narrowness in scope and methodological precision reflects the disillusionment of modernity about the possibilities for significant social change.[13]

To say 'yes' is to ignore the truth in Goethe's dictum that 'a mark of the master is his sense of limits.'[14] Wilbanks' essay, given its constraints, should not be faulted for failing to address this problem—or the others here noted—in detail. But each of these topics does, I think, present difficulties that will have to be faced if the proffered program of advocacy ethics is to be made viable to its skeptics.

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[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[14] For a more thorough discussion of this problem of the range of intellectual competence of the advocate ethicist, see Joseph C. Hough, Jr., "Christian Social Ethics as Advocacy," *The Journal of Religious Ethics,* V (Spring, 1977), pp. 115-133. Hough is cited by Wilbanks as a fellow supporter of advocacy ethics.

III. Maintenance and Mission

The critical thrust of this response to "Advocacy Ethics and the Nuclear Arms Race" has been to assert, against what I have called 'the replacement thesis,' that 'somebody has to mind the store.' In other words, in the study and teaching which constitute the intellectual vocation of the academic ethicist, there is a large responsibility to analyze, understand, and instruct others concerning the meaning and complex structure of 'the logic of moral reasoning.' This responsibility I have called the 'maintenance function' in the academic treatment of social ethics. At the same time, it is reasonable—even imperative—to insist, as Wilbanks does, that there is a 'mission' to social ethics that goes beyond trying to understand and pass on the structure and perspective of traditional morality; and I take his 'advocacy ethics' to be a provocative conceptualization of that mission. Wilbanks has outlined a program that has important unfinished components to be developed. But the program presents a valid and substantial challenge to some recently popular ways of 'doing ethics,' a challenge that rightly insists on acknowledging the urgent crisis facing Planet Earth and her peoples. It would be irresponsible for academic ethicists to ignore this challenge.