

Seminar 1: Engineering as a Profession

Brief recap of what I learned

Ethics is malleable. Your ethics change throughout your life and seem to **start as more of an innate sense of what is right and wrong, and then change because of your experiences/environment.** The example of almost all children being averse to and uncomfortable around violence, juxtaposed with wars and terrorism existing in the world, is what helped me understand this. It is **also then clear that ethics vary from person to person because our experiences/environments do.**

Furthermore, one student's opinion of "I think killing is wrong in general" was shown to quickly change to "I think it's okay if it's in self-defense", when discussing the situation of a robber shooting a clerk at gas station vs police shooting the robber in self-defense. For this reason, **it is also clear that ethics changes with context.**

Alternative course of action: What do you do when your ethical code is challenged?

One option is to **willingly go against your ethics.** An example of this in the seminar related to blackboard collaborate being required for our classes. One student proposed that if they disagreed with the T&C's of BBC, they might refuse to use it. The question then becomes: "Would you rather allow your ethics to be broken or get no seminar marks?". Ultimately you **must decide whether the action you deem as unethical is worth the benefits.** I believe benefits such as money and power are extremely effective at convincing people to do deeds that they believe to be unethical. It is also quite clear that **the more powerful an entity is, the more it can force you to go against your ethics** e.g. monopolies like Google, Amazon etc. can slowly introduce increasingly questionable policies into their terms of service because they know so many people use/rely on them, and so they can get away with it (legally).

Another option is to try **maintaining your ethics.** Extending on the previous example, it's possible that some students feel it is a breach of their privacy to be required to use video. To try and preserve their ethical standpoint AND get the marks, some students may give excuses as to why they cannot use video (this isn't intended as a specific attack at any particular students, just an observation I have made across many online classes). This could be used as evidence for the claim that **people prefer to reap the benefits of a situation AND remain ethical (in their eyes), rather than go against their ethics.** Note that I included "in their eyes" because it could be argued that it is unethical to breach trust (lie about broken equipment etc.) to preserve your own sense of what is right and wrong. Extending on the point of monopolies above, people may attempt to maintain their ethics by boycotting a company. This usually only happens/is effective when a company goes too far too quickly because then enough people become ethically outraged at once.

Extra thoughts and insights

Ethics are everywhere. The point about people being willing to act unethical for a large enough benefit really highlighted this. It is **perhaps the reason why conflicts of interest are not allowed in a lot of important scenarios.** For example, members of a jury cannot know the people involved in the case (defendants, witnesses, victims etc.) because that could influence their decision i.e. if a witness was your friend you may side with them. Further examples could include the collusion of rating agencies and banks during the stock market crash of 2008 for financial gain, and the destruction of an ancient aboriginal site by Rio Tinto, also for financial gain.

The common fix in most of these situations is to introduce a **neutral third party.** From an ethical standpoint, the most effective third party would be a large group of randomly selected people who

have no conflict of interest. This would **allow for differing yet equally ethical viewpoints to be heard**. For example, some people would be for the mining blast that Rio Tinto performed as it brings jobs and money, yet others would be against it due to the history that is being destroyed. **The more commonly held of these opinions among society dictates what SHOULD happen.**

The argument about neutral third parties perhaps also reveals why we have a democracy instead of a dictatorship. The former is a single (and potentially biased) ethical viewpoint whilst the latter is a diversified one.

Finally, what is/isn't a profession? Well, firstly, to be a professional (in any area), I'd argue one must not only have the knowledge/expertise of that area, but they must also be ethical. What does ethical mean in this context? Following all previous arguments, I'd argue it means **to apply that knowledge/expertise in such a way that a valid third party would deem it ethical**. Therefore, I'd say a profession is any field that needs expertise AND requires adhering to a particular ethical code (that is validated as above).