

Moral frameworks and codes of conduct

Moral attitudes

Our moral attitudes are shaped by numerous influences:

- Our social norms
- Our society's prevalent philosophical viewpoints
- Our community's history and position within its society
- Our religious sentiments
- Our self-identity and personal experience
- Our cultural influences
- Our professional or corporate identity

These can sometimes be in conflict. Does ethical conduct as a professional require complete harmony in all of the above? Is that achievable?

Professional codes of conduct

Doctors are a great example of a profession that abides by a strict code of conduct, relying on four simple principles, without mention of societal, religious or other norms:

Bioethics

- Non-maleficence (do no harm)
- Beneficence (do good)
- Equity (fairness)
- Patient autonomy (including privacy)

To trust someone with your life, they need to promise you they will not abuse this trust.

Professional codes of conduct

Preamble

The medical profession has long subscribed to a body of ethical statements developed primarily for the benefit of the patient. As a member of this profession, a physician must recognize responsibility to patients first and foremost, as well as to society, to other health professionals, and to self. The following Principles adopted by the American Medical Association are not laws, but standards of conduct that define the essentials of honorable behavior for the physician.

AMA Code of Medical Ethics

Visit the Code of Medical Ethics page to access Opinions, the Principles of Medical Ethics and a list of CME courses that are available.

[Review the Code
Opinions](#)

Figure 16: American Medical Association code of conduct. Note how the doctor has a responsibility to the patient, to society, to other doctors, and to themselves, in that order.

Professional codes of conduct

- The Hippocratic oath is ancient, but enforceable codes of conduct are recent.
- A pivotal moment in their development were the Nuremberg trials and the cruelty of Nazi experimentation on humans – similar atrocities have occurred elsewhere.
- "I was following orders" was not deemed as a valid excuse.
- Often, professions have been regulated after a major catastrophe.

The notion that a professional owes allegiance to their profession even when operating in a given hierarchy (e.g., military, or corporate) is **foundational**.

Professional codes of conduct

Even if the law allows it, ...

- a chartered accountant must disclose any financial risks that he perceives to the stakeholders even if told not to by the company CEO.
- a medical doctor cannot violate a patient's do not resuscitate order even if the patient is unconscious and their next-of-kin demand it
- a chartered statistician cannot misrepresent data even if asked by their employer.

An "honourable" professional is a failsafe mechanism for gaps in law, and corporate or even government misconduct. **A data scientist plays the same role for Ethical AI.**

Professional ethics are a failsafe

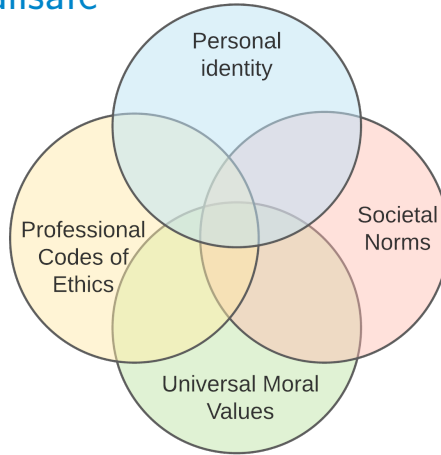
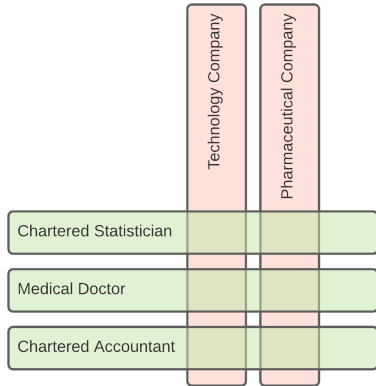


Figure 17: The Royal Statistical Society's code of conduct describes stringent constraints for what appropriate professional conduct of a statistician looks like.

Obligated to speak up against misinformation

"Fellows shall seek to counter false or misleading statements which are detrimental to statistical science, the profession or the Society." What if your employer has a strict policy about participating in controversial debates in social media?

Professional ethics are a failsafe



Professional codes of conduct

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Personal beliefs and medical practice

What if your personal beliefs run contrary to your professional obligations?

52. You must explain to patients if you have a conscientious objection to a particular procedure. You must tell them about their right to see another doctor and make sure they have enough information to exercise that right. In providing this information you must not imply or express disapproval of the patient's lifestyle, choices or beliefs.

Summary

- Establishing what is right is a very complex question touching upon philosophy, religion, politics, history and social sciences.
- Professional codes of conduct are obligations that arise out of the privileged position of being a member of a profession.
- Although some codes of conduct are ancient, most are recent and were shaped at the aftermath of humanitarian disasters.
- Professional codes of conduct are a fail safe that is independent of personal moral attitudes and corporate or government behaviour.

As we will see next, most codes of conduct self-organise in simple sets of **principles**, that act as generic guardrails for the profession.