

Zach Johnson  
Ethics Essay  
CPR E 394  
11/18/19

## Ethics in Engineering

In class we discussed how ethics can apply to engineering. We talked about the purpose of ethics, how our actions as engineers can affect others, and some examples of debatably unethical behavior. We learned a lot about ethical behavior, discussed whether a particular scenario was ethical or not, and explored the purpose of a “code of ethics”.

A code of ethics is a set of standards for how a group can make ethical decisions. The benefit of this is that the complex topic of ethics can largely be broken down to much simpler ground rules. While there is still a lot of gray area when applying these rules to an actual decision, it helps break up the decision process into smaller subprocesses. It allows us the opportunity to ask ourselves if the decision we are making complies with each of the individual rules, instead of asking ourselves the incredibly vague and complex question “Is this ethical?”.

In class we discussed one particular issue so that we could have some practice breaking down an issue to determine whether it was ethical. This issue was the Ford Pinto scandal. More specifically, we discussed whether Ford was acting ethically in the way that it produced and advertised the vehicle. Their actions were questioned very heavily after the release of the Pinto due to the high number of injuries and deaths associated with the vehicle. These accidents were due to a safety vulnerability that had potential to cause fires even in minor accidents. Beginning our discussion, many of us had already made some conclusions about the ethics of Ford’s decision making. Most of us had heard the story before and assumed that Ford was unethical due to media portrayal. After some discussion, our opinions began to diverge some. I, for one, began to believe that Ford may have been acting ethically in their decisions. After all, they followed the safety regulations of the time, and if the standards being enforced are not safe enough then it really is the fault of the organization upholding those standards. One could argue that Ford’s only responsibility is to make cars that adhere to the laws, and beyond that they can make whatever tradeoffs they desire. If they want to make a car that is less safe than all the other cars on the road but still meets the legal standard then they can.

Some other people had different opinions than me and some agreed. A few mentioned that Ford is responsible to their employees, and therefore needs to make wise business decisions in order to be able to support their employees. In this case, the business decision in question was cutting some safety features out of the budget in order to save money. This could mean they have more budget available to hire employees or to pay their employees more. Others still fully believed that Ford made a bad, unethical decision. However, everyone in the group certainly gained more understanding of Ford’s perspective.

The virtues I find most relevant to this case are honesty, fidelity, and responsibility. Honesty, because in order for Ford’s decisions to be ethical I believe it should have been well-

communicated if there were uncommon threats to safety involved in driving the vehicle. Fidelity, because I believe Ford has a responsibility to remain faithful to the needs of both their customers, their employees, and to the law. Responsibility, because I believe it is important that Ford owns their actions and willingly pays the price if they are in the wrong. The other virtues are not as relevant because I believe this issue was primarily about Ford communicating potential risks to their consumers. I can't think of any virtues not included in The Virtue of Ethics that are relevant, because the other virtues describe the issue well.

Everyone approaches issues of ethics differently, but I personally base my decisions on how they affect other people and what my social responsibility is. Ideally, all decisions made would have absolutely zero dangers for other people, but that is impractical. In real life, all decisions made have certain risks involved, and we need to weigh the tradeoff we are making in terms of improvement to quality of life and risk. I believe that it is the responsibility of product producers to make dangers and risks clear to consumers so that they can make an informed decision.