

## Ethics & Human Communication

Ethics is a general term for what is often described as the “science of morality.”

- In philosophy, ethical behavior is that which is “good.”
- The Western tradition of ethics is sometimes called moral philosophy.
- This is one of the three major branches of philosophy, alongside metaphysics and epistemology.

**Ethics can be divided into several categories.**

### *Descriptive Ethics*

Simply involves describing how people behave and/or what sorts of moral standards they claim to follow.

Descriptive ethics will include research from the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and history in order to determine what people do or have believed about moral norms.

Descriptive ethics is sometimes referred to as comparative ethics because so much activity can involve comparing ethical systems:

- comparing the ethics of the past to the present,
- comparing the ethics of one society to another
- and comparing the ethics which people claim to follow with the actual rules of conduct which do describe their actions.

Descriptive ethics asks two basic questions:

- What do people claim as their moral norms?
- How do people actually behave when it comes to moral problems?

### *Metaethics*

Investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean.

- Are they merely social inventions?
- Do they involve more than expressions of our individual emotions?

It is a philosophical study of

- the meaning, nature and methodology of moral judgments and terms,
- relations between moral concepts,
- the correct ways of arguing about moral issues, similarities and differences between various normative systems like morality, religion, law, etiquette, aesthetics, the judgments of taste, etc.

### *Normative ethics*

Takes on the task of arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct.

- This may involve articulating the good habits that we should acquire, the duties that we should follow, or the consequences of our behavior on others.

Normative ethics is concerned with classifying actions as right and wrong without bias, as opposed to applied ethics.

### ***Applied ethics***

Involves examining specific controversial issues, such as abortion, infanticide, animal rights, environmental concerns, homosexuality, capital punishment, or nuclear war.

By using the conceptual tools of metaethics and normative ethics, discussions in applied ethics try to resolve these controversial issues.

The lines of distinction between metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics are often blurry.

- For example, the issue of abortion is an applied ethical topic since it involves a specific type of controversial behavior.
- But it also depends on more general normative principles, such as the right of self-rule and the right to life, which are litmus tests for determining the morality of that procedure.
- The issue also rests on metaethical issues such as, "where do rights come from?" and "what kind of beings have rights?"

### **The Media and Ethical Behavior**

Communication is basic to being human, and is essential for social interaction.

Ethical issues are bound to arise because

- communication plays a significant role in influencing others
- intent is so important as a motivation
- we consciously choose to use a specific type of communication to get what we want

Why do we seem to attach so much importance to what the media do?

- The ethical decisions the media make affect large numbers of people.
- The decisions the media make should come under closer scrutiny than our own because they affect more people.

The media are also playing a different role from the one average citizens play

They are acting to inform us on matters about which we would otherwise have little knowledge.

- The rationale used by nearly all forms of media is that they are performing a public service by adding to the "marketplace of information."

Ethical behavior is required of media practitioners because of their moral obligations

- To themselves—to preserve their own integrity;
- To their clients—to honor contracts and to use their professional expertise on their client's behalf;
- To their organization or employer—to adhere to organizational goals and policies;
- To their profession and their professional colleagues—to uphold the standards of the profession and, by extension, the reputation of their fellow practitioners;
- To society—to consider social needs and claims.

The roles we take on as media practitioners imply a responsibility to perform certain functions associated with those roles.

Responsibility is defined as a "bundle of obligations associated with a job or function."

Reporters are responsible for covering newsworthy events

- As part of that responsibility, they are expected to present a fair and balanced account from an objective viewpoint.

Does responsibility equate to accountability?

- Accountability refers to blaming or crediting someone for an action normally associated with a recognized responsibility.

The assumption would be to hold a person responsible for an action also accountable for the results of that action.

- This assumes that the responsible person is relatively autonomous, or free to make decisions associated with his or her job without outside pressure or influence.

Under normal circumstances, we assume that media practitioners have autonomy.

- However, the nature of “outside” influence has changed
- Today, the most troubling influences in all forms of media can come from the inside.
  - Can a major news organization that is overseen, or run directly, by an entertainment division make entirely autonomous decisions about its reportage?
  - Can an advertising or PR practitioner make entirely autonomous decisions about their client’s businesses?

The temptation to pass the buck on moral decisions increases as the organizational hierarchy becomes more complex.

Media are becoming big business.

- Newspapers are owned by conglomerates,
- public relations and advertising are often partners under the same ownership,
- the entertainment function often overrides the information function.
- Decision making is becoming attenuated with accountability spread thin throughout large and complex organizations.

Complex organizations tend toward decentralized decision making, which calls for professionalized decision makers at every level.

The ideal would be for both the responsibility and the accountability of decision making to correlate.

- However, organizations lend themselves too readily to a dilution of accountability in decision making.
- Moral “buck passing” becomes the rule rather than the exception.

It’s too easy to blame others for decisions over which we have had minimal input or control.

- The public relations practitioner who is caught in a deception can, too easily, blame her client.
- An advertising executive can attempt to justify a tasteless ad as a client-based decision.
- Reporters can slough off blame for invasion of privacy on their editors.
- The softening of network news can be blamed on pressure from above.

This failure to assume accountability for our actions because of “orders” from above is frequently referred to as the “Boorman defense,”

As human beings, we seek accountability.

- We want to know who is responsible for certain actions and who is accountable for the consequences of those actions.

The dilution of accountability now common to most large organizations frustrates onlookers who can't determine who is to blame when something goes wrong.

- This confusion is exacerbated when factors other than media influence play a role in certain consequences.

If accountability for moral decision making has become diluted in modern mass media organizations, what is to become of our personal ethical standards once we become enveloped in the complexities of mass media structures and routines?

### **Can personal ethics become professional ethics?**

The obligations incurred by an individual assuming a professional role may differ radically from personal obligations.

- When we adopt a profession whose role is to provide information, the obligations of that role may supercede those of our personal lives.
- By letting our personal principles take first priority, we could be compromising our professional principles.

### ***Which do we want most to be, a private citizen or a media professional?***

Typically, one assumes the role of a professional willingly, accepting that a muting of personal values is part of the payment for doing so.

This does not mean that we suddenly become immune to human suffering or deaf to pleas for civility or good taste.

- It simply means that professional values may, and often do, outweigh personal values.

To some degree personal and professional principles will mesh.

- However, deference is usually given to professional principles.
  - Those principles ideally have been established for good reasons—reasons that go beyond satisfying personal values.

**The ultimate test of any principle, personal or professional, must be how the resulting actions based on those principles—affect other people...  
not just for the person acting (the moral agent), but for all those involved or affected by the action.**