Knowing What is Right; Doing What is Right - Managing Competing Choices that Both Appear Right

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A Note of Appreciation

I thank the Radiation Protection & Shielding Division of the ANS for sponsoring this session on ethics at this national meeting of the ANS; I thank Rob Hayes for organizing and chairing the session; and I thank Rob also for giving me the privilege of participating as a speaker in this session. I consider the scheduling of sessions on ethics as a mark of true professionalism. So, thank you, Rob. I hope we'll have such sessions also at future meetings of the ANS.

Outline of This Paper

This paper has three main sections, which cover the three points made in the title:

1. Knowing what is right
2. Doing What is right
3. Managing competing choices that both appear right

Albert Einstein Quotation Concerning Relativity

"Relativity applies to physics, not to ethics."

(Einstein strongly objected to people referencing his theory of relativity to justify moral relativism)

Moral (Ethical) Relativism

"Moral relativism is the position that moral or ethical propositions do not reflect universal moral truths. In moral relativism, there are no absolute, concrete rights and wrongs."

(Wikipedia)

Knowing What is Right

- In light of the moral relativism prevalent today (and it is indeed very prevalent), how is a practitioner of any profession to know what is "right"?

- If the question of what is "right" is left entirely to individual opinions and choices, the practice of a profession (e.g. engineering) would be chaotic, unreliable, reprehensible, and a menace to society.

The Importance of Knowing What is Right

First Principle:

Professionals in any given profession must come to a consensus concerning "what is right."

The Need for an Agreed Upon Code of Ethics in a Profession

- No profession can function equitably and serve the public with integrity if each practitioner has his/her own private definition of what is "right". Moral relativism won't work.

- Practitioners must come to an agreement on what it means to practice their profession ethically

- Must agree on what is acceptable & what is not; agree on what constitutes ethical practice & what does not

- Adopting a code of ethics is a necessary step in achieving consistency in any profession. Consensus

- Medicine, law, accounting…better business bureau

Limitations of a Code of Ethics

- A code of ethics informs practitioners of the profession concerning consensus as to what is "right"
- However, no code of ethics can cover every possible situation
- There will always be gray areas
- "Judgment calls" are needed from time to time
- So, a code of ethics is not an exhaustive list of absolute rules covering all cases
- Also, knowing what is right does not guarantee that the right thing will actually be done

Beyond *Knowing* What is Right – *Doing W*hat is Right

Second Principle:

It's not enough to *know* what is right; professionals also need to be committed to *doing* what is right; and they must set up

a framework within which doing the right thing is widely admired and applauded….

and rewarded.

Quotations on Doing Right

"Even the most rational approach to ethics is defenseless if there isn't the will to do what is right." - Alexander Solzhenitsyn

"Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." – The Apostle James (Bible)

"To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage." - Confucius

There must be the will to do the right thing; and sometimes it takes great courage to do the right thing.

Weighing the Relative Merits of Competing Choices

THREE CATEGORIES

Category 1: Good vs bad choices (choice easy)

Category 2: Bad vs bad choices (lesser of 2 evils)

Category 3: Right vs right choices (greater of 2 goods)

- When both choices can be shown to be "good" and "right" from different perspectives

- How to manage such competing "good" or "right" choices?

Three Situations in Which Two "Good" Alternatives Might Compete

1. Should I maximize profits for my employer, <u>OR</u> enhance the quality of the product for the customer?
   - Both actions are "good" from different angles
   - Engineer "ought to" act as a "faithful agent" for both
   - Should seek the "best" for both

2. Should I report ALL pertinent information OR only information that is favorable to me and/or my employer?
   - Both actions can be viewed as "good" and "right"

3. Should I report a coworker for a minor ethics code violation OR protect my coworker's reputation/career?

Managing Such Competing Choices Well Means Relying on More than a Code of Ethics

- Code of ethics alone is not always a sufficient guide. Personal morality, compassion, etc. also come into play.

- Sometimes a "right" choice (according to the code) is clearly the only ethical way to go

- But sometimes a "right" choice (according to the code) would cause great personal harm to others (reputation, career) with no real benefit to anyone

- Sometimes a "right" choice (according to the code) would cause you to be ashamed of your choice even though it was technically a "right" choice

Conclusions

- Engineers should study the Code of Ethics for their profession and know what it says

- Know what is "right" according to the Code

- But realize that the Code will not always tell you which "right" choice is best

- Consider also what is "right" according to higher values and higher principles of morality, fairness, justice, caring for fellow humans

- Have the courage to do the right thing

Statement of Author's Personal Basis for Making Ethical Choices – Vic Uotinen

My personal basis for making moral and ethical choices is based on my faith as a Christian. I serve as the director of the Christian Nuclear Fellowship (CNF), an informal, interdenominational group of Christians who work in various capacities in the field of nuclear science and technology. We are a group of professional colleagues united by our faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior, and in our acceptance of the basic truths of historic, biblical Christianity as expressed, for example, in the Apostles' Creed. The CNF is not affiliated with any particular denomination or church. We share a commitment to the core of historic Christianity – to what C. S. Lewis called "Mere Christianity." (See for example, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mere_Christianity) .

Believing that Christ is Lord of every aspect of our lives, our purpose is to encourage each other to live out our Christian faith day-by-day and to apply Christian principles, Christian ethics, and a Christian worldview in all aspects of our personal and professional lives. In this way, by faithfully serving and following Christ, we endeavor to serve as effective witnesses to the gospel and agents of positive transformation not only in our families and our communities, but also in our places of work and within our profession. We carry out this purpose of encouraging each other in these things through national meetings that we conduct twice each year and by publishing occasional literature related to integrating our faith with our work as nuclear technology professionals.

The CNF is one of many professional and academic fellowship networks that connect Christian colleagues within various professions and encourage Christian professionals to seek to apply Christian ethics and Christian principles in the practice of their professions. See for example the listing of such groups at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's web site for Christian Professional and Academic Societies (http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/faculty/resource/christian-professional-societies).

For more information about the CNF, please visit our web site at www.usnuclearenergy.org/cnf .