

Ethics: a definition

An ethical system is a set of principles, norms, and rules that helps individuals in a community of thinking, feeling, agents make painful decisions in a way that they believe will preserve their kind.

If Builders Stuff Up

- Subcontractors might not get paid
- People might lose money selling their houses
- A house might be ready way too late
- People might get sick from a leaky house
- People might die from a collapsing building

If we stuff up

- Teachers might not get paid
- People might lose money in their business
- A program might be delivered years late
- People might get late or wrong treatment
- People might even die (Therac 25, LAS)
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- *What we do has consequences for other people*

Meta-requirements

- You have to be able to **learn** an ethical system
 - It cannot be too complicated. It is unlikely that anyone knows all the laws, regulations, and by-laws in New Zealand.
- You have to be able to **use** an ethical system
 - It cannot require you to do the impossible
 - It cannot require information no-one could get
 - You may need to use it fast (shallow computing)
 - It has to be public so others know what to expect

Naturalness

- Humans are a social species
- Thanks to **mirror neurons**, we literally feel the pain of others
- Some other animals are known to experience such empathy
- A sense of fairness is also a biological inheritance
- Nietzsche was wrong about the origin of morals

Perfection — Not!

- We have small heads and live in a complex world.
- We make mistakes in evaluating situations.
- We make mistakes in carrying out rules.
- No system of rules we can remember could possibly be complete.
- A system needs to provide means for reconciliation and restoration.

The Thelemite System

- “Do what thou wilt”
shall be the whole of the Law – Aleister Crowley
- Sounds like a doctrine of devils, eh? What if what I will is to kill everyone I meet?
- No, say the Thelemites, this refers to your **True Will**, not what you happen to feel like.
- But how do we know what our True Will is?
- How do our neighbours know?
- Can we be wrong about our True Will?

The Wiccan Rede

- “An it harm none, do what thou wilt.”
- But what counts as harm?
- Who decides?
- If we want to do X to Y and today Y says that's OK, but looking back 50 years Y says it was harm, did we do right or wrong today?
- We **cannot** know all the effects of our actions, we cannot even in most cases calculate the probabilities of foreseeable effects.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the idea that the moral worth of an action is solely determined by its contribution to overall utility, that is, its contribution to happiness or pleasure as summed among all persons. It is thus a form of consequentialism, meaning that the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome—the ends justify the means.

— Schools Wikipedia

What's wrong with that?

It is an ethics for beings with god-like powers of perception, foresight, and calculation. Since it is *impossible* for us to foretell the consequences of our actions, it is an ethics we *cannot* live by.

Classic example: would you save a child in danger? Yes? You didn't know it was going to grow up a Hitler, a Stalin, a Pol Pot, did you! Millions died horribly because you saved that child. You should have known better! (:-)

Granny Weatherwax

“Sin is treating people as things”
Granny Weatherwax, in
Carpe Jugulum, by
Terry Pratchett.

“Love your neighbour as yourself”
Leviticus 19

The Golden Rule

Negative form: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others”

Positive form: “Do as you would be done by”

Long-winded: think of all other people as beings like yourself; treat them the way you would want to be treated in their circumstances.

Found in all the great ethical systems.

Granny Weatherwax was right!

The Seven Laws of Noah

- Prohibition of idolatry
- Prohibition of murder
- Prohibition of theft
- Prohibition of sexual immorality
- Prohibition of blasphemy
- Prohibition of meat taken from a living animal
- Requirement to establish courts of law
- *What will keep a society going?*

Why does a profession need a code

- In New Zealand at the present time, do I really need to say more than “leaky homes”?
- If more, how about “unfortunate experiment”?
- We got the Bill of Rights Act 1990 because we could not trust Parliament's “Unbridled Power”; because we have that act – Parliament has a rule that there must be a BoR report on a proposed Act before it's passed – we can trust Parliament not to be *blatantly* evil (written before John Key's GCSB Act)

Why does a profession need a code

- We want our profession to *continue*
- We want our profession to be *respected*
- We want to get *paid*
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- So we have to act, and we have to be known by the public to act, in ways that are consistent with these desires.

ACM Eight Principles (1)

- Act in accord with the **public** interest
 - Be good, be respectable!
- Serve the interests of clients/employers
 - Get paid!
- What we produce should be good quality
 - Get paid *again!*
- We should act ethically no matter what our bosses or clients say, especially when it comes to telling the truth about matters within our technical competence

ACM Eight Principles (2)

- Manage ethically
- Make the profession better respected and more worthy of respect
 - We want to be admired and we don't want to be afraid of being found out
- Be good to our colleagues
- Keep on learning how to do our job better (both more proficiently and more ethically)

Presuppositions

- There is such a thing as the public interest (“health, welfare, and safety of the public”)
- There is such a thing as acting ethically that the ACM did not have to define (closer to the Noahide laws than anything Nietzsche would have approved of)
- That includes practices of truthfulness and forming and keeping contracts (also Lev 19)
- The Code is not meant to be complete