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# Ethical Reasoning in Technical Communication: A Practical Framework

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## Abstract

Professionals in technical communication confirm ethical problems at times, just as in law, medicine, engineering, and other fields. In recent years STC has increased its effort to generate a greater awareness and understanding of the ethical dimension of the profession [1]. This article is intended to contribute to that effort.

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To clarify the nature of ethical problems, we first distinguish between the ethical perspective and several other perspectives. We then discuss three types of ethical principles. Together these principles make up a conceptual framework that will help illuminate almost any ethical problem. Finally, we demonstrate the application of these principles using hypothetical case studies.

## The Nature Of Ethical Problems

Typically, when faced with an ethical problem, we ask, "What should I do?" But it is important to recognize that this question can be asked from a number of perspectives. One perspective is an attempt to discover the course of action that will best promote a person's own interests. This is not, however, a question of ethics. Indeed, as most of us have discovered, there is often a conflict between ethical requirements and considerations of self-interest. Who hasn't had the experience of being tempted to do something enjoyable or profitable even while knowing it would be wrong?

A second nonethical perspective is associated with the law. When someone asks, "What should I do?" he may want to know whether a course of action is required or prohibited by law, or is subject to legal sanction. There is often a connection between the perspective of law and the perspective of self-interest, for the desire to discover what the law requires is often motivated by the desire to avoid punishment and other legal sanctions. But between the perspectives of law and ethics there are several significant differences.

First, although many laws correspond to moral rules (laws against murder, rape, and kidnapping, for instance), other laws do not (such as technicalities of corporate law and various provisions of the tax code). Furthermore, almost every legal system has at one time or another included some unjust laws—such as laws in this country that institutionalized racism or laws passed in Nazi Germany. Finally, unethical actions are not necessarily illegal. For example, though it is morally wrong to lie or break a promise, only certain instances of lying (lying under oath) or promise breaking (breach of contract) are punishable under law. For all these reasons, then, it is important to recognize that law and ethics represent significantly different perspectives.

One additional perspective should be mentioned: religion. Religious doctrines, like laws, often correspond to moral rules, and for many people religion is an important motive for ethical behavior. But religion is ultimately distinct from ethics. When a Catholic, Protestant, or Jew asks "What should I do?" he or she may want to know how to act as a good Catholic, Protestant or Jew. A question of this type is significantly different from the corresponding ethical question: "How do I behave as a good human being?" In answering this latter question, one cannot refer to principles that would be accepted by a member of one faith and rejected by a member of another or a non-believer. Consequently, unlike religiously based rules of conduct, ethical principles cannot be derived from or justified by the doctrines or teachings of a particular religious faith.

## Three Types Of Ethical Principles

To resolve ethical problems, then, we must employ ethical principles. We discuss here three types of ethical principles: goal-based, duty-based and rights-based. Although these do not provide a simple formula for instantly resolving ethical problems, they do offer a means to reason about ethical problems in a systematic and sophisticated manner[2].

### Goal-based Principles

Public policies, corporate decisions, and the actions of individuals all produce certain changes in the world. Directly or indirectly, they affect the lives of human beings. These effects can be good or bad or a combination of both. According to goal-based principles, the rightness or wrongness of an action is a function of the goodness or badness of its consequences.

Goal-based principles vary according to the particular standard of value that is used to evaluate consequences, but the most widely known goal-based principle is probably the principle of utility. Utilitarians claim that we should assess

the rightness of an action according to the degree to which it promotes the general welfare. We should, in other words, select the course of action that produces the greatest amount of aggregate good (the greatest good for the greatest number of people) or the least amount of aggregate harm. Public-policy decisions are often evaluated on the basis of this principle.

## Duty-based Principles

In the case of duty-based principles, the focus shifts from the consequences of our actions to the actions themselves. Some actions are wrong, it is claimed, just for what they are and not because of their bad consequences. Many moral judgments about sexual behavior are in part duty-based. From this perspective, if patronizing a prostitute is wrong, it is not because of harm that might come to the patron, the prostitute, or society, but simply because a moral duty is violated. Likewise, an individual might make a duty-based assertion that it is inherently wrong to lie or break a promise even if no harm would result, or even if these actions would produce good consequences.

## Rights-based Principles

A right is an entitlement that creates corresponding obligations. For example, the right to free speech—a right that is valued and protected in our society—entitles people to say what they want when they want to and imposes an obligation on others to let them speak. If what a person says would be likely to offend and upset people, there would be a goal-based reason for not permitting the speech. But from a rights-based perspective, the person is entitled to speak regardless of these negative consequences. In this respect, rights-based principles are like duty-based principles.

While many people believe strongly in the right to free speech, few would argue that this or other rights can never be overridden by considerations of likely consequences. To cite a classic example, the consequences of needless injury and death override anyone's right to stand up and cry "Fire!" in a crowded theater. Nevertheless, if there is a right to speech, it is not permissible to impose restrictions on speech every time there is a goal-based reason for doing so.

## Applying These Ethical Principles

Together these three types of ethical principles provide technical communicators with a means of identifying and then resolving ethical problems associated with their work. We should begin by asking if a situation has an ethical dimension. To do this, we ask whether the situation involves any relevant goals, duties, or rights. Next, we should make sure that ethical considerations are not being confused with considerations of self-interest, law, or religion. If we choose to allow nonethical considerations to affect our decisions, we

should at least recognize that we are doing so. Finally, we should see what course, or courses, of action the relevant ethical principles point to. Sometimes, all point unequivocally to one course of action. However, in some cases these principles will conflict, some pointing in one direction, others in another. This is termed an "ethical dilemma." When faced with an ethical dilemma, we must assign priorities to the various conflicting ethical considerations—often a difficult and demanding process.

We now present and discuss two hypothetical case studies. In our discussion we refer to several goal-, duty-, and rights-based principles. We believe that the principles we cite are uncontroversial and generally accepted. In saying this, we do not mean to suggest that there are no significant disagreements in ethics. But it is important to recognize that disputes about specific moral issues often do not emanate from disagreements about ethical principles. For example, although there is much controversy about the morality of abortion, the disagreement is not over the acceptability of the ethical principle that all persons have a right to life; the disagreement is over the nonethical question of whether fetuses are "persons."

We believe, then, that there is a broad consensus about many important ethical principles, and it is such uncontroversial principles that we cite in our discussion of the following two cases.

### Case 1

Martin Yost is employed as a staff writer by Montgomery Kitchens, a highly reputable processed foods corporation. He works under Dr. Justin Zarkoff, a brilliant organic chemist who has had a series of major successes as Director of Section A of the New Products Division. Dr. Zarkoff is currently working on a formula for an improved salad dressing. The company is quite interested in this project and has requested that the lab work be completed by the end of the year.

It is time to write Section A's third-quarter progress report. However, for the first time in his career with Montgomery Kitchens, Zarkoff is having difficulty finishing a major project. Unexpectedly, the new dressing has turned out to have an inadequate shelf life.

When Yost receives Zarkoff's notes for the report, he sees that Zarkoff is claiming that the shelf-life problem was not discovered earlier because a group of cultures prepared by Section C was formulated improperly. Section C, Yost realizes, is a good target for Zarkoff, because it has a history of problems and because its most recent director, Dr. Rebecca Ross, is very new with the company and has not yet established any sort of "track record." It is no longer possible to establish whether the cultures were good or bad, but since Zarkoff's opinion will carry a great deal of weight, Dr. Ross and her subordinates will surely be held responsible.

Yost mentions Zarkoff's claim about the cultures to his very close and trustworthy friend Bob Smithson, Senior Chemist in Section A. Smithson tells Yost that he personally examined the cultures when they were brought in from Section C and that he is absolutely certain they were OK. Since he knows that Zarkoff also realizes that the cultures were OK, he strongly suspects that Zarkoff must have made some sort of miscalculation that he is now trying to cover up.

Yost tries to defuse the issue by talking to Zarkoff, suggesting to him that it is unprofessional and unwise to accuse Ross and Section C on the basis of mere speculation. Showing irritation, Zarkoff reminds Yost that his job is simply to write up the notes clearly and effectively. Yost leaves Zarkoff's office wondering whether he should write the report.

#### Analysis.

If Yost prepares the report, he will not suffer in any way. If he refuses, he will damage his relationship with Zarkoff, perhaps irreparably, and he may lose his job. But these are matters of self-interest rather than ethics. The relevant ethical question is this: "Would it be morally wrong to write the report?"

From the perspective of goal-based principles, one would want to know whether the report would give rise to any bad consequences. It is obvious that it would, for Dr. Ross and her subordinates would be wrongly blamed for the foul-up. Thus, since there do not appear to be any overriding good consequences, one would conclude that writing the report would contribute to the violation of a goal-based ethical principle that prohibits actions that produce more bad than good.

Turning next to the duty-based perspective, we recognize that there is a duty not to harm people. A goal-based principle might permit writing the report if some good would follow that would outweigh the harm to Dr. Ross and her subordinates. But duty-based principles operate differently: producing more good than bad wouldn't justify violating the duty not to harm individuals.

This duty would make it wrong to write the report unless some overriding duty could be identified. There may be a duty to obey one's boss, but neither this nor any other duty would be strong enough to override the duty not to harm others. In fact, there is another duty that favors not writing the report: the duty not to knowingly communicate false information.

Finally, there is the rights-based perspective. There appear to be two relevant rights: the right of Dr. Ross and her subordinates not to have their reputations wrongly tarnished and the company's right to know what is actually going on in its labs. Unless there is some overriding right, it would be

morally wrong, from a rights-based perspective, to prepare the report.

In this case, then, goal-, duty-, and rights-based principles all support the same conclusion; Yost should not write the report. Since none of the principles furnishes a strong argument for writing the report, Yost is not faced with an ethical dilemma. But he is faced with another type of dilemma; since refusing to write the report will anger Zarkoff and possibly bring about his own dismissal, Yost has to decide whether to act ethically or to protect his self-interest. If he writes the report, he will have to recognize that he is violating important goal-, duty-, and rights-based ethical principles.

## Case 2

Susan Donovan works for Acme Power Equipment preparing manuals that instruct consumers on the safe operation and maintenance of power tools. For the first time in her career, one of her draft manuals has been returned with extensive changes: numerous complex cautions and safety considerations have been added. The manual now stipulates an extensive list of conditions under which the piece of equipment should not be used and includes elaborate procedures for its use and maintenance. Because the manual is now much longer and more complex, the really important safety information is lost amid the expanded list of cautions. Moreover, after looking at all the overly elaborate procedures in the manual, the average consumer is apt to ignore the manual altogether. If it is prepared in this way, Donovan is convinced, the manual will actually lead to increased numbers of accidents and injuries.

Donovan expresses her concern in a meeting with her boss, Joe Hollingwood, manager for Technical Information Services. Hollingwood responds that the revisions reflect a new policy initiated by the Legal Department in order to reduce the number of successful accident-related claims against the company. Almost any accident that could occur now would be in direct violation of stipulations and procedures described in the manual. Hollingwood acknowledges that the new style of manual will probably cause some people not to use the manuals at all, but he points out that most people can use the equipment safely without even looking at a manual. He adds that he, too, is concerned about the safety of consumers, but that the company needs to protect itself against costly lawsuits. Donovan responds that easily readable manuals lead to fewer accidents and, hence, fewer lawsuits. Hollingwood replies that in the expert opinion of the Legal Department the total cost to the company would be less if the manuals provided the extra legal protection they recommend. He then instructs Donovan to use the Legal Department's revisions as a model for all subsequent manuals. Troubled by Hollingwood's response, Donovan wants to know whether it is ethically permissible to follow his instructions.

## Analysis.

From the perspective of goal-based principles, writing manuals that will lead to increased injuries is ethically wrong. A possible good consequence is that a reduction in the number of successful lawsuits could result in lower prices. But neither this nor any other evident good consequence can justify injuries that might have been easily prevented.

A similar conclusion is arrived at from a duty-based perspective. Preparing these manuals would violate the important duty to prevent unnecessary and easily avoidable harm. Moreover, there appear to be no overriding duties that would justify violating this duty.

Finally, from a rights-based perspective, it is apparent that important rights such as the right to life and the right to health are at stake. It might also be claimed that people have a right to manuals that are designed to maximize their safety. Thus, ethical principles of each of the three types indicate it would be morally wrong to prepare the manuals according to Hollingwood's instructions.

Because Case 2 involves moral wrongs that are quite a bit more serious than those in Case 1, we now go on to consider an additional question, one not raised in the first case: What course of action should the technical communicator follow?

An obvious first step is to go over Hollingwood's head and speak to higher-level people in the company. This entails some risk, but might enable Donovan to reverse the new policy.

But what if this step fails? Donovan could look for a position with a more ethically responsible company. On the other hand, there is a goal-based reason for not quitting. Donovan could attempt to prepare manuals that would be safer than those that might be prepared by a less ethically sensitive successor. But very often this argument is merely a rationalization that masks the real motive of self-interest. The company, after all, is still engaging in an unethical practice, and the writer is participating in that activity.

Would leaving the company be a fully adequate step? While this would end the writer's involvement, the company's manuals would still be prepared in an unethical manner. There may indeed be an obligation to take further steps to have the practice stopped. To this end, Donovan might approach the media, or a government agency, or a consumer group. The obvious problem is that successively stronger steps usually entail greater degree of risk and sacrifice. Taking a complaint outside the organization for which one works can jeopardize a technical communicator's entire career, since many organizations are reluctant to hire "whistle blowers."

Just how much can be reasonably asked of an individual in response to an immoral situation? To this question there is

no clear answer, except to say that the greater the moral wrong, the greater the obligation to take strong—and perhaps risky—action against it.

## Conclusion

The analyses offered here may strike the reader as very demanding. Naturally, we are all very reluctant to refuse assigned work, quit our jobs, or make complaints outside the organizations that employ us. No one wishes to be confronted by circumstances that would call for these kinds of responses, and many people simply would not respond ethically if significant risk and sacrifice were called for. This article provides a means of identifying and analyzing ethical problems, but deciding to make the appropriate ethical response to a situation is still a matter of individual conscience and will. It appears to be a condition of human existence that to live a highly ethical life usually exacts from us a certain price [3].

## A Postscript: Case 3

This case is presented without analysis so that readers can resolve it for themselves using the conceptual framework described in this essay.

A technical writer works for a government agency preparing instructional materials on fighting fires in industrial settings. Technical inaccuracies in these materials could lead to serious injury or death. The technical writer is primarily updating and expanding older, unreliable material that was published 30 years ago. He is trying to incorporate recently published material into the older material, but much of the recent information is highly technical and some of it is contradictory.

The technical writer has developed some familiarity with firefighting through his work, but has no special training in this field or in such related fields as chemistry. He was hired with the understanding that firefighting specialists in the agency as well as paid outside consultants would review drafts of all the materials in order to catch and correct any technical inaccuracies. He has come to realize, however, that neither the agency specialists nor the outside consultants do more than skim the drafts. Moreover, when he calls attention to special problems in the drafts, he receives replies that are hasty and sometimes evasive. In effect, whatever he writes will be printed and distributed to municipal fire departments, safety departments of industrial corporations, and other groups throughout the United States.

Is there an ethical problem here? If so, what is it, what ethical principles are involved, and what kinds of responses are called for?

## References

1. Significant activities include the reestablishment of the STC Committee on Ethics, the preparation of the STC "Code for Communicators," and the group of articles on ethics published in the Third-Quarter 1980 issue of *Technical Communication* (included in this anthology), as well as several articles published in other places, and the continuing series of cases and reader responses that have appeared in the STC member newsletter *Intercom*.
2. The arguments justifying ethical principles as well as ethics itself are beyond the scope of this essay but can be examined in Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory: The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973) and William A. Frankena, *Ethics*, (2nd ed.) (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973). Other informative books are Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), and Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1975). All these books are addressed to the general reader.
3. STC might develop mechanisms designed to reduce the price that individual technical communicators have to pay for acting ethically. For their part, individuals may have an obligation to work for the development and implementation of such mechanisms.