

COMMUNICATION ETHICS--METHODS OF ANALYSIS James A. Jaksa and Michael S. Pritchard
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The very nature of ethics penetrates the fabric of human life from the common and everyday events to the corporate boardrooms and political thinktanks that develop national security policy. No human being is immune from having to make ethical choices. To be human is to choose and many choices in our lives will be ethical ones. Choices from the mundane to the critical and choices from the interpersonal to the international will influence our human condition. The authors James A. Jaksa and Michael S. Pritchard have provided a powerful teaching tool in their recent book Communication Ethics--Methods of Analysis. There is not guarantee that a student of ethics will always make the proper ethical decisions after having read this book, but few will be as prepared to understand the ethical complexities and moral positions that they may encounter in their lifetime. The text is well designed with an excellent balance of moral theory and hypothetical case studies that takes ethics out of the realm of abstraction and grounds it in the real world of people and relationships.

The relevance of the study of ethics is reflected in a survey that states American colleges and universities are teaching over 11,000 courses on the subject. The media draws attention to the major ethical issues such as Watergate, Iran-Contra, Pentagon procurement scandals, medical malpractice and the sexual exploits of the Evangelicals Bakker and Swaggart, but these are misleading. As the authors state, ethics is not confined to the noteworthy. The dynamics of a society are not sustained exclusively by the leaders of politics, religion and science. Leadership is vital to the growth and sustainability of a culture and the lack of ethical leadership as reflected in numerous current events forces us to question the direction the United States culture is headed.

Communication Ethics states four main goals: 1) Stimulating the moral imagination--the development of forethought and reflection is crucial in avoiding difficult dilemmas. This is perhaps one of Jaksa's and Pritchard's most important contributions to the study of ethics. To develop the critical thinking skills to pursue preventive ethics will enable students to hopefully avoid serious ethical quandaries. Ordinary individuals can get swept up in situations where their morals can be compromised. This idea is expressed in Samuel Florman's article Moral Blueprints, ". . . most evil acts are committed not by villains but rather by decent human beings-in desperation, momentary weakness, or an inability to discern what is morally right amid the discordant claims of circumstances . . ." Students need to become familiar with the conditions that can give rise to unethical decisions. 2) Recognizing ethical issues--the ability to realize that ethical issues can arise in everyday occurrences and to be able to discern difficulties and recognize deceptions are important steps in the reflective ethical process. 3) Developing analytical skills--this goal is concerned with examining ethical concepts such as justice, self-respect, respect for others, rights, utility, etc. Understanding and application of these concepts is vital. 4) Tolerating disagreement--there is of ten no absolute right and wrong when dealing with ethical situations. To be open to different approaches is paramount if one is to be successful in engaging in critical ethical questioning.

The first of three parts that the book is divided into addresses the need for ethics. The question that is raised is whether there is a crisis of confidence in United States leadership. Starting with the U23 incident and on to Vietnam and Watergate, there is a steady increase in public opinion that the government has consistently lied to the public and continues to do so. A credibility gap has developed and continues to

expand into this era of Iran-Contra, Pentagon procurement scandals, investigations into a number of Senators and who knows what awaits in the shadows.

The authors site several polls which reveal a growing skepticism among U.S. citizens concerning the ethical conduct of all our leaders from politicians to corporate heads as well as religious leaders, lawyers, and the press. Despite a growing cynicism, Americans still feel that honesty and integrity are desirable traits.

Various modes of persuasion is another topic discussed in Part One. We as consumers have developed defenses against forms of advertising persuasion, yet we need reliable information on subjects ranging from buying a car, making a career change or voting in an election. Virtually all decisions involve some form of persuasion. The most important aspect of ethical persuasion is characterized by voluntary change. Kenneth Anderson suggests that ethical persuasion cannot be based on deceptive manipulative techniques but rather that the persuaders and their audiences are co-participants in communication. It is evident that without honesty in communication, a societies ability to move forward is in jeopardy.

The sections on truthfulness as a norm and respect for the word, address the vitality of the word as a major integrating factor of the culture. In the words of the former secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjold ". . . to misuse the word is to show contempt for humanity. It undermines the bridges and poisons the wells. It causes Man to regress down the long path of his evolution." We can only ponder how far as a culture we have regressed due to the chronic patterns of deception and disinformation used by modern governments.

The basis for participatory democracy and interpersonal communication are grounded in the exchange of truthful information. Interference with these processes will impair choice and cripple the democratic process.

Part Two begins with an overview of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development. Kohlberg's theory comprises three levels with two stages in each level. Preconventional thinking is the first level and consists of two stages motivated by self-interest, either fear of punishment or hope of reward. Egocentric behavior predominated the first level. Children up to the age of nine reflect this level, however some adolescents and adult criminals portray many of the same characteristics.

Level two of moral reasoning is termed conventional thinking. Moral decisions at stage three and four are determined by making judgments based on legal and social order. Conventional laws are the norm of level two.

Level three is post conventional thinking and is distinguished by the capacity for critical thinking through self-reflection and independent free thought. It is Kohlberg's belief that as an individual moves through the stages he or she comes closer to the values that respect the rights and dignity of all. What is most important is how the person reaches a moral conclusion.

Jaksa and Pritchard introduce numerous writers and theories, which makes it impossible to mention them all. Their approach to moral theory is pluralistic in the sense that certain strengths of different theories can be adapted. The structure of the book is formed to stimulate the thinking process rather than reaching the right solution. There are literally dozens of pages of case studies and real life scenarios which invite us into the moral arena.

The authors review five kinds of moral theory which they refer to: 1) Consequentialist--one must balance the good and bad consequences; 2) Non-consequentialist--emphasizes acting on a principle regardless of the results (as in Kant's categorical imperative); 3) Egoist--what is good or bad for oneself; 4) Utilitarian--to promote the greatest good for the greatest number; 5) Virtue--the emphasis of moral character. As one encounters the various case studies, the justification of the theories are weighed.

There is an excellent chapter which discusses Kant's categorical imperative in relation to Sissela Bok's principle of veracity. Bok states that she doesn't condemn all lies but they all have a negative weight attached to them and liars underestimate the damage done by lies and they overestimate the good. Kant's position is that human dignity is most important and that lies threaten the very roots of communication. Is lying ever justified?

Part two concludes with a defense of Bok's principle of veracity by Joseph Kupfer and by Bok's set of justifications designed to resolve the conflicts about lying.

Part three consists of three case studies, one hypothetical, concerning the ethics and economics of a new drug and two case studies of real life events, the Challenger disaster and Jeb Stuart Magruder's involvement in Watergate. Part three centers around the problems of groupthink. Irving Janis has identified eight characteristics of groupthink and they are reflected in the case studies: 1) illusion of invulnerability--the group may be willing to take excessive risks; 2) stereotypes--the reasoning away of discordant views; 3) rationalization--shifting responsibility to others; 4) illusion of morality--the right decision inherent in the group; 5) self-censorship--we wouldn't do something that was immoral; 6) illusion of unanimity--everyone's silence implies consensus. Don't disrupt the group unity; 7) direct pressure--encourage to provide conformity; 8) mindguarding--the group protects itself from disturbing ideas. The pressure to complete a major medical or scientific project with a financial bottom line or a national security policy or a reelection campaign can raise a plethora of ethical decisions as the case studies can attest. To avoid serious problems, a person should have a clear vision of his or her own position on situations that may challenge one's ethical basis. The case studies show people being swept up in circumstances much larger than themselves.

The complexity of every avenue of our culture creates endless ethical dilemmas. Jaksza and Pritchard have provided an excellent manual in preparing students to develop an ethical foundation. The luxury to engage in critical preventive ethics should not be wasted.

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