

Chapter 2

Toward What End? Three Classical Theories

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ABSTRACT

Ethics as a distinct line of inquiry dates back to antiquity. Historically, the professions in particular have taken ethics seriously, since by means of ethical behavior a profession earns trust from the community it serves. The emerging profession of information assurance and security can engage in ethical deliberation using a variety of existing theories. The following chapter begins by answering whether there is really any point engaging in ethical theory. We argue there is such a purpose. Following this section, the chapter outlines three classic theories of Western ethics, namely utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. We offer three of the most enduring theories for use in this book. Before we reach them, however, we must first explain why professionals in information assurance and security might want to learn them.

INTRODUCTION

The study of ethics is very old. The origin of ethics as a distinct line of inquiry dates back to the ancient Greeks. Since that time, the study of ethics has not been restricted to professional philosophers. Today, it permeates all cultures, from the most elaborate systems of ethical theory to bumper sticker slogans. The professions, in particular, have historically taken ethics seriously, since it is by

means of ethical behavior that a profession earns trust from the community it serves. The emerging profession of information assurance and security is grappling with ethical dilemmas of all sorts as it comes of age. Rather than reinventing the wheel, practitioners and students can engage in ethical deliberation using a variety of existing theories, drawing from the wealth of ethics tradition from other professions and from classical ethical theory.

Not only would practitioners and students in information assurance and security learn something from what has already been said about ethics,

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they are also encouraged to contribute their unique point of view, based on their expertise. After all, information assurance and security affects society in profound and intimate ways. Professionals in this field are an important voice in an ongoing conversation on ethics. We stated that ethics is nothing new. However, given the innovative nature of technology—and humanity’s eagerness to adopt it—it would be just as accurate to say that ethics is forever new.

In this chapter, we join a long and intricate conversation, going back for thousands of years – a conversation that persists because ethics is forever relevant to the issues of the day. We begin by answering a direct challenge to this premise. It responds to the question whether there is really any point engaging in ethical theory. We think there is such a purpose. In this chapter, we will investigate three of the most enduring classic theories of Western ethics, namely utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. Certainly many other theories exist, but as a place to begin, these three will serve us well. They are typical and widely known. A basic understanding of these theories is a prerequisite for an informed discussion of ethics. Before we discuss them in detail, we must first explain why professionals in information assurance and security might want to learn them.

Why Engage in Ethical Theory?

Joseph Badaracco, Jr., writing in the “Harvard Business Review on Corporate Ethics” (2001/2003) once made a provocative claim. He wrote that “following the rules can be a moral cop-out.... [Quiet leaders] typically search for ways to bend the rules imaginatively (p. 11).” He continued by arguing that these leaders “try not to see situations as black-and-white tests of ethical principles (p. 11).” That way, they are not compromising their principles when they cut a deal. Otherwise, ethics might interfere with success. Badaracco’s statements greatly resemble the moral advice of Nic-

colò Machiavelli (1532/1991), to the effect that sometimes it is best not to be moral. If we assume the contrary, that ethics means professionals do have binding ethics obligations, how would we discern what those obligations might be?

One might suppose that studying ethical theory would be prudent. Writing in the same periodical Laura Nash (1981/2003) found theoretical inquiry into ethics impractical, generally distracting from the common sense about workplace ethics. It was her opinion that a theoretical view of ethics is like a dinosaur – lumbering along and useless, incomprehensible to busy practitioners with urgent things to do. She was not alone feeling this way. Eight years later, writing in the same periodical on behalf of ethics, Kenneth Andrews (1989/2003) found a philosophical approach to be, in his words, remote and disengaged. Roger Crisp (1998/2003) wrote that he has heard this all before, about the perception that philosophical ethics is hopelessly abstract and impractical, to the extent a layperson can ever hope to understand its abstruse methods and jargon in the first place. And since philosophers cannot even agree among themselves, then why should busy practitioners look to them and their methods for guidance?

Aside from the objection to ethics generally, as voiced by Badaracco and Machiavelli, and aside from the objection to a *philosophical* approach to ethics, as voiced by Nash, Andrews, and Crisp, there is a more devastating critique that, though it accepts the importance of ethics as well as the importance of a philosophical approach to ethics, it casts doubt on the usefulness of a general ethical *theory*. It goes by the name of Particularism. According to particularism, the general principles arrived at by any ethical theory should be balanced, if not completely replaced on occasion, by a unique response to the particular and unique situation where you find yourself. Ramsey McNabb (2007) has offered hypothetical examples in which adhering to an ethical principle seems wrong. One such example is the old familiar question of refusing to tell a lie to a crazed killer who asks if you know

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