

CHAPTER THREE

Understand Ethical Problems

3.3.6 PERSONAL VS. CORPORATE MORALITY

This is an appropriate place to discuss a tricky issue in engineering ethics: Is there a distinction between the ethics practiced by an individual and the ethics practiced by a corporation? Put another way, can a corporation be a moral agent as an individual can? This is a question that is central to many discussions of business and engineering ethics. If a corporation has no moral agency, then it cannot be held accountable for its actions, although sometimes individuals within a company can be held accountable. The law is not always clear on the answer to this question and can't be relied upon to resolve the issue.

3.3.6 PERSONAL VS. CORPORATE MORALITY

This dilemma comes most sharply into focus in a discussion of virtue ethics. Can a company truly be expected to display honesty or loyalty? These are strictly human traits and cannot be ascribed to a corporation. In the strictest definition of moral agency, a company cannot be a moral agent, and yet companies have many dealings with individuals or groups of people.

How, then, do we resolve this problem? In their capacity to deal with individuals, corporations should be considered pseudo-moral agents and should be held accountable in the same way that individuals are, even if the ability to do this within the legal system is limited. In other words, with regard to an ethical problem, responsibility for corporate wrongdoing shouldn't be hidden behind a corporate mask. Just because it isn't really a moral agent like a person doesn't mean that a corporation can do whatever it pleases. Instead, in its interactions with individuals or communities, a corporation must respect the rights of individuals and should exhibit the same virtues that we expect of individuals.

3.3.7 WHICH THEORY TO USE?

How do we decide which theory is applicable to a given problem?
The good news is that in solving ethical problems, we don't have to choose from among these theories. Rather, we can use all of them to analyze a problem from different angles and see what result each of the theories gives us. This allows us to examine a problem from different perspectives to see what conclusion each one reaches. Frequently, the result will be the same even though the theories are very different.

3.3.7 WHICH THEORY TO USE?

Take, for example, a chemical plant near a small city that discharges a hazardous waste into the groundwater. If the city takes its water from wells, the water supply for the city will be compromised and significant health problems for the community may result. Rights ethics indicates that this pollution is unethical, since it causes harm to many of the residents. A utilitarian analysis would probably also come to the same conclusion, since the economic benefits of the plant would almost certainly be outweighed by the negative effects of the pollution and the costs required to ensure a safe municipal water supply. Virtue ethics would say that discharging wastes into groundwater is irresponsible and harmful to individuals and so shouldn't be done. In this case, all of the ethical theories lead to the same conclusion.

3.3.7 WHICH THEORY TO USE?

What happens when the different theories seem to give different answers?

This scenario can be illustrated by the discussion of WIPP presented previously. Rights ethics indicated that transporting wastes through communities is not a good idea, whereas utilitarianism concluded that WIPP would be beneficial to society as a whole. This is a trickier situation, and the answers given by each of the theories must be examined in detail, compared with each other, and carefully weighed. Generally, rights and duty ethics should take precedence over utilitarian considerations. This is because the rights of individuals should receive relatively stronger weight than the needs of society as a whole. For example, an action that led to the death of even one person is generally viewed very negatively, regardless of the overall benefit to society. After thorough analysis using all of the theories, a balanced judgment can be formed.

APPLICATION

1- The Disaster at Bhopal

2- The Aberdeen Three

THANKS FOR ATTENTION