

# ETHICS MATTER

*Editor's Note: The Newsletter Advisory Board asked Simone Himbeault Taylor, U. of Michigan, chair of the Principles and Practices Committee, to submit this article on ethics in view of the recent release of CPC Standards. She suggests that we should not take too limited a view of what the Standards represent. To that end, she reminds us of the ethical foundations from which professional standards emanate.*

Ethics matter. Personal, institutional and social ethics: they define us; they are the cornerstones of who we are. Yet, while ethics define us, we are often hard pressed to define ethics. How can we engage in ethical behavior without a basic understanding of ethics themselves? More often than not, this is what we ask of our students, our new professionals and, in fact, ourselves.

We know that ethics are the foundation for principles of conduct and yet this understanding does not really clarify what that fundamental foundation is. Some may argue that "ethical" behavior is equivalent to concepts of spiritual, legal or moral behavior. Yet, while a sense of ethics may provide us with inner guidance, a mechanism for pursuing justice and the underlying values to make good decisions, ethics are independent of these outcomes.

The concept of ethics and the very word itself have their roots in Greek culture. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle offered views on ethics in terms of four virtues: temperance, justice, courage and wisdom. Each spoke of ethics as a vehicle for achieving the complete development of the individual. They also attributed the ultimate outcomes of society to collective individual

action. Thus, while we may speak of professional standards or the principles and practices of our work, 2,000 years of history remind us that true ethical behavior is not the domain of the organization, but of the individual.

According to Plato, ethical development is a process. It consists of drawing on reason and virtue, instilling temperament and perfecting the virtues by habit and making an effort to ascend the so-called "Divided Line of Knowledge." Progressing along this Divided Line moves us from the levels of imagination and opinion toward genuine thought and greater knowledge.

The attainment of the ability to reason abstractly allows us to access the truth and to distinguish opinion from reasoned knowledge. Because ethics are inextricably linked to reasoned thinking, the world of ethics lies somewhere between Plato's ultimate "truth" and the mental abyss of lame opinion.

More recent thinking has humanized these concepts. Rousseau, for example, contended that creating enlightened individuals would ultimately create enlightened citizens. Rousseau's view teaches us the importance of being led by both

reason and "the needs of the human heart." He promoted the view that a conscience tempered by the heart prepares us for independent moral action within our larger social environment.

Rousseau softens the Greek view of ethical behavior by suggesting that justice and goodness are not simply based on reason but "are true affections of the soul enlightened by reason. . . ." The ultimate aim is to achieve a just society in which individual choice serves and shapes the common good.

Yet, what are ethics if not a vehicle to achieve justice? Plato argued that SOME justice is better than NO justice. This concept brings us directly into the realm of ethics. The connection of justice to ethics lies in our desire as individuals and a society to discern what is "fair." Law is one societal vehicle to define and achieve what is fair; however, we are again reminded that the ultimate responsibility for ethical behavior rests with each of us and may not be abdicated to a "system."

The paradox implicit in ethics is that we have chosen the grayest area of our existence as the place to make meaning of our world. Earlier, we said

that ethics define us; they also justify our behavior. Ethics have a long history of reflecting the norms of a society at a point in time.

Consider, for example, our changing notions regarding racial and sexual equity. Historical misconceptions about the inequality of minorities and women shaped national policy for years. What we believe influences our ethical stance; we find that responses,

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In the name of ethical behavior, have been more suitable at some times than others.

Ethics will not tell us right from wrong, but they may assist in guiding us to act in a manner consistent with our beliefs. To the extent that we place importance on living an "examined life," ethics is the magnifying glass through which we may scrutinize our actions in order to evaluate their defensibility.

What does all of this have to do with us — the career professional and corporate recruiter? Each day, in our work and in guiding the work of others, we encounter circumstances that cause us to express our most basic beliefs and to take responsibility for our actions. Whether determining if alcohol should be served at student events, establishing guidelines to determine who may recruit on campus or addressing ethics related to managing information technology, our actions reflect our beliefs.

This is how our decisions are motivated by our own ethical code and how ethical behavior is fundamental to our daily lives. This is true whether we experience ethics as a document of professional standard or as the seed we carry within us representing the best of who we are.

This, in the end, is what we mean by ethics and why ethics serve to define us. And why should we not be defined by what is best within us? As we examine our professional standards, let us study them not simply as quasi-legal guidelines. Rather, let's embrace these concepts as the expression of a greater, more profound ethical foundation that guides us personally, professionally and socially.

Thus, we end where we began  
Ethics matter.

*S.H. Taylor 1991  
Midwest College  
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