




6-2011

The Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Twenty-Five

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Pritchard, Michael S., "The Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Twenty-Five" (2011). *Center for the Study of Ethics in Society Papers*. Paper 91.
http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ethics_papers/91

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The Center for the Study of Ethics in Society at Twenty-Five

Michael S. Pritchard, Co-Director

Our Beginnings

In August 1985, nineteen faculty from the Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering and Applied Sciences, General Studies, and Health and Human Services met for three days in the Bernhard Student Center to exchange ideas on the place of ethics in their teaching and research. At the time, this was a rather unusual endeavor. Coming from different disciplines, various members of this group had occasionally talked with each other about their shared interests in ethics; but, for the most part, this was more a matter of chance than planning.

In my own case, there were a few pivotal moments that prompted me to want a more structured environment for exploring ethical issues with people from disciplines other than my own, Philosophy. In the 1970s, Jim Jaks (Communication) and I had served on the Faculty Senate together and often met on the tennis courts. Based on several of our casual conversations in between shots, I thought he might be interested in Sissela Bok's new book, *Lying: Deception in Public and Private Life* (Vintage Books, 1978). After reading it, he said to me, "It sure would be good to teach a course on that subject sometime." I agreed. So, for the next decade or so, Jim and I taught a course together on lying and deception, drawing our students from Communication and Philosophy, respectively. Not entirely satisfied with what we

were reading, he and I eventually wrote a book together, *Ethics in Communication: Methods of Analysis* (Wadsworth, 1st ed. 1988, 2nd ed. 1994).

In the early 1980s, Shirley Bach (General Studies, Science Area) convinced me that I should get involved in research ethics by serving on WMU's Institutional Review Board (IRB), whose creation she had recently spearheaded. Then she and I got involved in WMU's Science for Citizens Center, initiated by Robert Kaufman (Political Science) with the support of the National Science Foundation. This eventually led to an Honors College course on ethics and risk that Shirley Bach and I organized, aided by Frank Wolf (Industrial Engineering), Larry Oppliger (Physics), and Mike Stoline (Mathematics/Statistics).

Each of these ventures marked significant departures from "business as usual" for the faculty involved. *Practical* ethics (e.g., medical ethics, research ethics, ethics in communication, engineering, political science, statistics, and even in philosophy) was not at the core of any standard discipline at the time. This seems to be true even today. So, each of us had to volunteer time beyond our usual teaching schedules to find time to work together.

However, in addition to creating interdisciplinary teaching opportunities, some of us discovered, largely by chance, that we had common research interests in ethics. In a casual conversation with Ron Kramer (Sociology/Criminal Justice), Jim Jakska mentioned that he and I were using the Ford Pinto case in our team-taught ethics class. Ron replied that he, too, was interested in this case, adding that he had a file cabinet full of documents and notes on it—and that he had even attended court hearings in Winnamac, Indiana, where the Ford Motor Company had to defend itself against the charge of negligent homicide, as a corporation.

However, what finally convinced me that we should explore the idea of establishing an ethics center at WMU was a phone call I received from Jim Peterson (Sociology). Jim told me that he had learned from Professor Vivian Weil at the Illinois

Institute of Technology in Chicago that I was interested in whistleblowing. Jim and Dan Farrell (Management) were writing a teaching module on whistleblowing as a part of an engineering ethics series of publications she was editing. What a way to learn about a colleague's common research interest, I thought.

Colleagues whose offices are only a good drive and a chip shot away from each other (both offices were built on or near where the old WMU "goat hills" golf course used to be) learn about their mutual interests only through the efforts of someone they know who teaches 135 miles away, in another state! There must be a better, less fortuitous, way of learning about such things, I thought. Shirley and Jim agreed.

So, in the summer of 1985, we decided to organize a faculty workshop. We composed an invitation list of twenty faculty whom we thought might have a serious enough interest in ethics to take time out from their summer vacations to explore common interests in ethics. Nineteen of those faculty showed up.

As luck would have it, Diether Haenicke, WMU's new president, spotted a few of us taking a short break from one of our sessions in the Bernhard Center. Curious to find out more about why so many faculty would spend their free time in late summer to talk about ethics, he joined us for one of those sessions and eagerly participated in our discussion. Seeing our new president as seriously engaged as we were by ethical issues boosted our confidence that this was the right time for our new endeavor. Before our workshop concluded, we decided to form the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society. This, we imagined, would be a place where faculty, students, and the larger community could regularly meet together to talk about significant ethical issues of the day.

We faced two immediate problems. First, although we had lots of enthusiasm, we had no money. Mike Moskovis, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, asked us if \$3,000 would help. Delighted, we said, "Yes!" However, he added a caution, "Nothing interdisciplinary ever seems to last

around here.” We took this as a challenge (perhaps even a rallying point) rather than as discouragement.

Fortunately, we had lots of friends at other colleges and universities. We invited several of them to visit us, offering to cover their travel costs. When we learned about ethics speakers visiting the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, or other nearby campuses, we invited them to take a side-trip to Kalamazoo. Pleading poverty, we offered to cover the additional travel costs for their side-trips and a small honorarium. We also encouraged “local talent” from WMU, Kalamazoo College, Nazareth College, and Kalamazoo’s business and professional community to make public presentations—pro bono. Bolstered by our \$3,000 start-up fund and lots of good will from our friends, our first year featured a robust series of public presentations, as well as some very enthusiastic study groups.

Our second problem was to find a home—a place within WMU that would be perceived as welcoming the participation of everyone, not just those in a particular department or college. Our first thought was that the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, with its reach across the entire academic community, would be the ideal home. Provost Phil Denenfeld officially endorsed the establishment of the Ethics Center. However, he worried that providing us a home within his office would launch an avalanche of similar requests from across the university. So, he encouraged us to look elsewhere.

Fortunately, Laurel Grotzinger, Dean of the Graduate College, had recently written an article in her college’s newsletter that stressed the importance of ethics in higher education. Although the graduate programs at that time did not span the entire university, their reach was broad; and Dean Grotzinger’s message seemed as relevant to undergraduate as graduate education at WMU. So, Shirley Bach, Jim Jaksa, and I knocked on her door and outlined our ambitions, including our wanting to find a home in the Graduate College. Dean Grotzinger graciously welcomed us and became our most ardent advocate. Through her efforts, we were able to secure a modest, but stable budget to

continue beyond our first year. For this we will always be grateful. Without her continued support, Mike Moskovic's initial reflections on the typical fate of interdisciplinary ventures at WMU might well have applied to us, as well.

In our second year, we paid President Haenicke a visit, reminding him of his impromptu participation in our summer workshop. We shared with him our wish to extend our reach by creating an "in-house" publication series of leading Ethics Center talks. The president offered us \$5,000 in "one-time money" to establish the series. Apparently, he was pleased with the results, as this level of funding became a permanent feature of our annual budget. Joe Ellin (Philosophy) agreed to serve as the series editor, a position he held until he recently passed away.

In the early 1990s, shortly after Laurel Grotzinger resumed her career as a reference librarian in Waldo Library, we accepted Dean Douglas Ferraro's offer to sponsor us within the College of Arts and Sciences. This is where we happily reside today.

The Hastings Center Aims and Goals in Teaching Ethics at Thirty

So, what did we talk about during that workshop in the summer of 1985? Among other things, we spent quite a bit of time discussing what we thought the aims and goals of teaching ethics in higher education should be. Fortunately, this was a question that had been explored intensively several years earlier by the Hastings Center, a prominent New York ethics "thinktank".

In 1977, the Hastings Center assembled a large, diverse team of well-known ethics educators from around the country to pursue this question. At that time I was on leave from WMU, participating in a year-long National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on ethics, psychology and religion, held at Yale University. Yale's Gene Outka, director of our seminar, was

one of those educators invited to participate in the Hastings Center project. From time to time he asked members of our seminar what we thought the aims and goals of teaching ethics should be. My recollection is that, although various opinions were proffered, nothing close to a consensus emerged.

However, three years later the results of the Hastings Center group surfaced in a series of publications. 1980 marked the publication of *Ethics Teaching in Higher Education* (Plenum Press, 1980), edited by Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, along with a set of monographs discussing teaching ethics in a variety of areas—business, engineering, journalism, law, medicine, philosophy, the social sciences, and so on. Despite the vast differences among the academic disciplines represented, consensus was reached on five basic aims and goals. These aims and goals were emphasized in each of the individual monographs on teaching ethics that emerged from the Hastings Center deliberations. The consensus was that efforts should be made to:

- Stimulate students' moral imagination
- Help students recognize moral issues
- Help students analyze key moral concepts and principles
- Stimulate students' sense of responsibility
- Help students deal effectively with moral ambiguity and disagreement

An especially noteworthy feature of these aims and goals is that students are not treated as if they are just beginning to engage with moral issues. They are regarded as already having some ability to engage their moral imagination. The aim is to stimulate it further. They, like the rest of us, sometimes need help recognizing moral issues, as the situations calling for moral reflection and decision-making cannot be expected to come to us with a warning light that says, "Here I am, a moral issue."

Too often, we recognize moral issues only after we have made choices that create additional moral problems (by lying, for

example, rather than meeting the problem head-on before complicating matters through deliberate deception). Urging that students receive some help in analyzing key moral concepts and principles does not presume that they have no prior acquaintance with these concepts and principles, only that their further analysis and clarification is needed. Stimulating students' sense of responsibility is different from trying to implant it. Again, what is called for is further stimulation of something that is presumed already to be there in students, but which will be engaged in contexts about which they have much to learn. Finally, it is assumed that students have already had some experience dealing with moral ambiguity and disagreement. Handling this effectively and well is another matter, however. In short, it is not moral indoctrination that the Hastings Center group called for. Rather, it advocated serious moral engagement, with consequent moral enlargement.

Another Hastings Center participant, philosopher Bernard Rosen (then at Ohio State University) once told me that he suggested another item for the list—the dispensability of the teacher. When students leave their courses, he commented, they cannot take their teachers with them. They will be on their own, deciding for themselves, if not by themselves. One of the aims in teaching ethics, said Rosen, should be to help students prepare themselves for the challenges of going on without their teachers. Although this did not end up on the Hastings Center list, Rosen observed that none of the participants objected to his suggestion.

Those of us who organized the summer workshop in 1985 benefited from being able to present these aims and goals to the participants for their consideration. I do not know to what extent they found these aims and goals appropriate or helpful enough to use them in their own teaching, but I have regularly borne them in mind in all my ethics courses since they were first published in 1980.

However, I need to qualify my last statement. Although I still present these aims and goals to my students, I have found over the years that my interpretation of what they mean has

undergone some changes. In what follows, I would like to discuss some of these modifications and refinements.

I begin with the fourth goal, stimulating students' sense of responsibility. My initial take on this goal was that it borders on the "preachy". How could I stimulate students' sense of responsibility? By a kind of moral "cheerleading"?—"Be good," "Do the right thing," "Don't be unethical or immoral," "Be responsible". Such admonitions hardly provide any insight into what taking them seriously might entail. Besides, preaching is hardly teaching—and interpreting the fourth goal in this way seems quite out of step with the other four, each of which seems central to critical thinking rather than moral cheerleading.

Initial discomfort with this fourth goal resulted my attempting to sneak around it. It occurred to me that if I simply focused on the other four that a student's sense of responsibility would, in fact, be aroused—without my having to mention it. I think I was right about this. However, as I later realized, there is a way in which I can engage students' sense of responsibility without being a moral cheerleader or moral preacher.

Here I enlist Calvin and Hobbes as aides. I am referring to the still popular, but now-retired, comic strip characters, not the 16th century theologian John Calvin, and the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Six-year-old Calvin is what we might call a 'minimalist' when it comes to responsibility. After making his bed one day, Calvin is praised enthusiastically by his mother. Hobbes expresses surprise that Calvin's mom is so impressed by what he has done. Calvin replies, "I like to impress her by fulfilling the *least* of my obligations." Given his minimalist attitude, we might wonder how well Calvin has made his bed. It looks good on the outside, but how about the sheets underneath (assuming he has any)?

We can think of one's sense of responsibility as being somewhere along a spectrum. At the lower end of the spectrum is Calvin's minimalism. At the higher end is conscientiousness, or even going "above and beyond the call of duty". I ask students to speculate on what kind of professional (doctor, lawyer, engineer,

and so on) they think Calvin will become, assuming that he retains his minimalist attitude as an adult. Students can be invited to reflect for themselves on where on this spectrum of responsibility they would like to be in their careers, and what this is likely to require of them.

The other four Hastings Center goals similarly encourage students to think for themselves, with the teacher helping to facilitate this. Presenting case studies for students' consideration can be an effective way of stimulating their moral imagination. In my early years of teaching ethics in engineering, I had an ample supply of what I call "big news/bad news" stories to share with my engineering students. Many of them could be easily recognized by name—Pinto, Hyatt Regency Walkway, Chernobyl, Challenger,.... One need only watch the TV news or peruse any daily newspaper.

So, I thought, here's how to stimulate students' moral imagination. Mention one of these stories by name. Ask the students if these names are familiar to them. Watch nearly everyone raise a hand. Then invite them to reflect on the ethical issues these stories—typically issues about alleged wrongdoing. Or, I could start by asking students to think of ethics and the media. Soon I would hear all the familiar names I just mentioned—and more. Having linked ethics with familiar stories that had received media attention, the discussion could begin.

One problem with providing students with a steady diet of such cases is that very few, if any, of them will ever be involved in such "big news/bad news" stories. A second problem is that, by focusing so much on the negative, students might be led to conclude that ethics is largely a matter of wrongdoing and its avoidance (This seemed to be the primary association made by engineers Jim Jaksa and I interviewed when we asked them to talk about ethical matters in engineering practice.). Although ethics must focus much of its attention on the negative in this way, it is also important to attend to the positive—acting responsibly, rightly, and for the sake of making things better.

Unfortunately, this more positive dimension of ethics receives much less attention in the media. In part, this may be because stories of ethically commendable work may be seen as less exciting than stories of wrongdoing. Or it could be, in part, because we tend to take for granted much of the commendable work that is done for us (We expect our cars and cell phones to work well, our bridges to hold up well, our elevators to work safely and efficiently, and so on.).

Suppose, however, we shift our attention to engineers doing their work well—constructing safe buildings and bridges, designing safety improvements for the vehicles we drive, or developing recyclable packaging materials. Here the stories are likely to be less dramatic, but they may show engineers at work in ways that require much engineering imagination in order to accomplish their desired ends.

Notice that I said *engineering* imagination. Insofar as such imagination is necessary in supporting ethically desirable ends in engineering (such as safety, combined with efficiency and usefulness), I now see this as an essential part of the *moral* imagination of engineers. Although it may be focused directly on the technical dimensions of the problem, this is done against the background of the ethical responsibility of engineers to protect the health, safety, and welfare of those who will be affected by this work.

Whereas initially I conceived of the exercise of moral imagination as focusing explicitly and primarily on moral concepts and principles relevant to the work of engineers, I no longer think that this is so. The employment of the technical imagination of engineers in this way is as much a part of their moral imagination as is their employment of moral concepts and principles in framing their work. Acknowledging this in teaching engineering ethics is important in helping students see that ethics should be seen as an integral part of their major area of study (such as engineering) rather than simply an “add-on” from another area of study. The same point can be made about other professional areas, such as law, medicine, and social work—each

of which should be seen, ideally, as integrating ethics into its special professional domain.

Regarding the second Hastings Center goal, helping students recognize moral issues, I've already indicated that we cannot count on these issues announcing themselves as moral issues. Recognizing them in such terms is not always easy. Here is an illustration. Speaking with an audience of engineers and ethics teachers, an engineer presented a fictional case. Imagine, he said, that your job is to recommend the size of drainage pipe that should be used for a housing development nested in a rustic area just outside a modest sized city. The 50 or so homes are surrounded by a few forested hillsides. "What diameter do you think the drainage pipes for rain and snow overflow should have?" he asked us. Engineers and ethics teachers alike began to guess. "16 inches?" "24 inches?" "32 inches?" "40 inches?" Finally, one member of the audience asked, "What's this have to do with ethics?" "Yes," chorused much of the audience.

The engineer responded with some questions of his own. "What will this community need if, in a few years, many of the trees on the surrounding hills are cut down in order to make room for a shopping mall or another set of homes? This may result in much more water running down the hills than now, when there are trees, grass, and other foliage to absorb the rain and melted snow. Did you take that into account in your calculations?"

Some said they had. Others said they had not. Still others asked, "Why *should* we?" The point is that underlying the calculations are assumptions about the responsibilities of engineers (and developers) to "look down the road." What are they, and who should determine what they are? Once asked, these questions may be difficult to answer. Those who were concerned with what this little community might have to deal with, say, five years down the road might well have been exercising their moral imagination as they considered different possibilities. Whether or not anyone was explicitly thinking about the responsibilities of engineers in considering these possibilities, the speaker was now urging that this could, and should, be done.

Here is another fictional example to consider, one that can be used in pursuing the first three Hastings Center goals—and, with a slight modification, the fifth one as well. A young civil engineer works for the traffic and roads department of a county with a mix of urban and rural settings. The young engineer's supervisor tells him that as the fiscal year is coming to a close, there is a modest amount of money left in the budget for making some road improvements. The supervisor wants the engineer to recommend the best use of these remaining funds. The engineer is told to assume that this money will be swept up from the department at the end of the fiscal year if it is unspent, but he should not assume that the next fiscal year will provide additional funding for completing the recommended project. So, recommendations should be restricted to projects for which the current funds are adequate.

As the engineer looks around the county, he settles on two affordable projects that he thinks would be good. However, there is not enough money to do both. One project would be to make safety improvements at an urban intersection, the other at a rural intersection. Both intersections have had fatal accidents for the past several years—an average of two a year at the urban intersection, one at the rural intersection. Both also have had accidents resulting in injuries and property damage. Here is a rough breakdown of the comparative data:

	Urban Intersection	Rural Intersection
Daily traffic flow: major road	20,000 vehicles	4,000 vehicles
Daily traffic flow: minor road	5,000 vehicles	1,000 vehicles
Average no. fatalities per year	2	1
Average no. injuries per year	20	5

Data on the results of similar improvements made in other parts of the state, as well as adjoining states, indicate that making the improvement at the urban intersection will cut the in half the average number of fatalities per year. A 50% reduction in injuries can reasonably be expected, too. Similar percentage reductions at

the rural intersection can be expected if the improvement is made there instead.

The initial question for students is: Which of these two sites should the engineer recommend for safety improvements. Students in classes with whom I have discussed this question initially respond overwhelmingly in favor of the urban intersection. They say that this is not a difficult moral question—this, they say, is on the side of “the greater good,” a distinctly utilitarian refrain. So, one might say, they have no difficulty recognizing this as a moral choice. But, given the obviousness they see in this choice, they do not see it as a moral *issue*.

However, at some point a few students will object that more should be said about the rural intersection. After all, isn't it the more dangerous intersection? Drivers who pass through it face a higher probability of being killed or injured than those who pass through the urban intersection. Once this observation is made, many see the moral landscape differently than before. Is it *fair*, they ask, for the county to prefer the safety of the many to the few, given that most of those who pass through either intersection are tax-paying members of the same community? How much worse, they ask, would the rural intersection have to be in order to take priority? If one relies only on the “numbers,” overcoming the 4 to 1 advantage of the urban intersection would require a *much* higher incidence of fatalities and injuries at the rural intersection. “But,” a student might now ask, “what is *fairness*, anyway—and why is that so important?” “Well,” another might respond, “what is ‘the greater good’ without fairness?” This clearly takes us to the third Hastings Center goal, analyzing key moral concepts and principles. The way to this was the recognition of a moral issue (the second goal), and the exercise of moral imagination (the first goal).

A slight variation on this example can also take us to the fifth goal, dealing effectively with moral ambiguity and disagreement. Suppose that, as is often the case, it is a *group* of engineers who, together, need to recommend one of the improvements. Suppose, further, that there is initial disagreement

about which intersection to recommend. (Or we could also imagine initial disagreement about whether these are the two most promising possibilities.) How should these differences be resolved (“My way or no way” is not likely either to win the day or to provide the best solution, even if someone is able to force the issue in this way.)?

As I’ve said, I continue to use the Hastings Center aims and goals of teaching ethics in my classes. Beyond this, I would like to think that the Ethics Center programs and projects over its first 25 years have also contributed to furthering these ends, not just for students, but for everyone who has been involved in them. All of us are lifelong learners in ethics—together.