
UNIT 16 INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS*

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16.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are as follows:

- To understand what is professional ethics.
- To explain what is professionalism.
- To understand the need of being ethical in any profession.
- To understand and analyze the role of ethical norms, rules and regulations, and how we can maximize the actualization of these codes of conduct to practical situations with the help of examples.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethics is primarily concerned with what one ought to do, along with defining and analysing the concepts of right and wrong. When the setup of ethical norms and practices to consider an act right or wrong is made up on objective grounds, then it is usually considered that what is right, good, or bad for one person; would be right, good, or bad for everyone, irrespective of the conditions or context of any individual, culture, and society. The ideal ethical norms and principles that killing, telling lie, and cheating is wrong, that treating people as a mere means is not right, are applicable on everyone, they can be universalized, or they seek the happiness of maximum human beings. They are not usually confined to any given particular context or perspective. These objective grounds for determining what is good, right, and wrong might not work in some crucial situations where it becomes difficult to decide the rightness or wrongness of an action. Saying this, however, should not be seen as accepting the position of moral relativists,

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that our moral judgements, notions of truth-falsity, right-wrong are always dependent on context or perspective of a culture. What is right and acceptable in one cultural practice may not be acceptable in another culture. The possibility of accepting universal values would then become negligible. The problem arises when sometimes we find ourselves in such a situation where it becomes so difficult to take a decision in line with the fundamental ethical principles. Ethical dilemmas of real life situations involve much more layers of complexities which make it too hard to resolve these dilemmas based on any single conventional principle. Applied ethics deals with these real life situations where we try to find out the moral possibility/permissibility of specific acts. It seems to be an important requirement to consider the conditions and circumstances in which an action has been performed or about to be performed before taking any decision about the rightness or wrongness of that action. It demands to think and reflect upon the whole situation. The issues and debates of applied ethics demand a critical analysis, and an evaluation of our conventional moral principles. Morality should not be considered as a preachment and lessons to live an ideal life. Being an integral element of philosophy, there always remains a scope to reason, to think, to critically analyse and examine the customary and traditional set of principles, to question the eternal nature of these principles. This is how we move towards the path of reflective morality in order to test the effectiveness of the established moral rules in a particular situation, whenever it is required. Reflective morality does not reject the conventional moral principles, it only helps in reaching to a better decision by presenting such an approach that either adds some novel element or subtracts the unnecessary element to resolve a particular issue.

Suppose, for example, a person who works as an accountant in a big private firm, his father gets seriously ill and has to be hospitalized. He requires bulk amount of money for his father's operation. His boss is very strict and he believes that if he would ask for money, his boss would never give him. That is why he took the money from company's account without informing his boss in order to save the life of his father. He saves his father's life, and gradually with time he kept all the money back into the accounts of the company. Now the question is how we would determine the rightness or wrongness of the act performed. The person was in an ethical dilemma, we all are know that stealing money cannot be said a morally right action, but at that time saving someone's life was the most important and primary act, the means he selected was obviously not a professionally right one, but he did it under unavoidable circumstances where he did not have any other available option for saving life of his father. Keeping the whole situation in mind we may ask what action his boss would take now, should he punish his employee for not informing him, or for not taking permission before taking the money? The answer could not simply be given in affirmative or negative terms as it requires reflecting upon the criticality of the whole situation. In situations like these the need arises to think in a different direction and it also requires careful, critical examination of the customary moral principles.

Based on the varieties of concepts and nature of the problem, ethics is being subdivided in some main approaches like normative ethics, metaethics, and applied ethics. Professional ethics comes under applied ethics wherein we attempt to resolve the realistic issues such as conflict of interests in a profession, doctor-patient relationship, surrogacy, abortion, environmental issues, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment etc. with the help of ethical principles. Professional ethics falls into the domain of applied ethics because it is concerned with rules, regulations, and norms to be followed in any profession, and these rules ultimately falls back on the concept of what is good, right, and appropriate.

16.2 PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

The term professionalism stands for the way one performs his/her actions in a profession. This way may include a bundle of things in itself, the practices, the standards, the values, skills, education, and training. Professionalism requires mastery over the theoretical knowledge, but only theoretical competence is not enough, a professional should be able to implement the theory into practice.

Professional ethics, as the name suggests, defines and codifies certain ethical norms necessary for all professions. We find codes of conduct and the codes of ethics in professions. The codes of conduct may vary according to different professions, e.g. engineers will be having different codes of conducts from those of medical associations, but we will find same guiding moral principles in every profession. These moral principles govern the behaviour of a professional in ethical decision-making, specifically in a situation of ethical dilemmas. An organisation/institution/company is committed to certain values and it includes ethical responsibilities of a profession. Transparency, impartialness, openness, and loyalty are few desirable characteristic traits of a professional.*

Let us take one example which highlights the unprofessional behaviour of a company. Some cases of raid and arrest of call centers employees were registered in a country. The charge was that the employees used to extort money from foreign nationals. A large amount of money has been taken away from citizens of other countries by these call centers. These call centers appointed young people for this work, trained them to speak foreign language. These employees used to call people of other countries, threaten them and force them to pay millions of dollars. Despite continuous complaints, no action was taken against these fraudulent call centers. Firstly, these types of acts lead us to think how young generation can easily be provoked by the call centers to involve in these unlawful activities only to gain large amount of money by keeping all the values of honesty, dignity and respect aside. Secondly the unprofessional attitude of the call center put down the reputation and image of all other call centers of that country as well, and thirdly the inaction and unprofessionalism showed at the level of the country also affects the relation of two countries.

These unethical acts always involve a risk - risk of losing the job, risk of being caught and arrested, and risk of losing self-respect. Despite being aware of the risk factors involved in these unethical acts, what is the guiding factor that encourages people to perform these kinds of acts, why money-factor, the accumulation of money for personal gains stands over and above all moral values and the respect for one's own and other's life? Undoubtedly these offers may seem tempting at first sight, but neither the intention of doing these acts nor can the outcome be said to be good or right for anyone involved in the act. These kinds of cases are a matter of concern for everyone, these incidents usually come and go without much attention of people as if we come across these cases daily and we are habitual and used to hearing these incidents as bits of information only. The problem is much deeper than it seems to be, one should not take these issues very lightly and ignore them. If these incidents often happen, it does not mean that more frequency of their occurrences reduces the gravity of the issue, how can it make the issue ignorable? On the other hand, the gravity of the issue must be increased when all the moral values, laws, rules, and codes of conduct fail to stop or at least reduce the

*Subramanian. R. *Professional Ethics includes Human Values*, Oxford University Press, 2017.P. 9

frequency of these illegal acts, and lead us all to think on reasons of failure to control such actions.

16.3 WHY ETHICS MATTERS IN PROFESSION?

A Profession always stands in relation to the other, a professional always seeks for good professional relations, a bonding with the other is required for the survival, and progress of a profession, for example bonding between patient and doctor, between a lawyer and his/her client. What is the nature of this bonding, what binds a professional with the other? To maintain this professional relation, we devise certain rules. There are certain codes of conduct and codes of ethics in every workplace. In a workplace, the nature of codes of conduct depends on the type of institution/organization, and they may vary from profession to profession. The codes of conduct are not morally binding in nature, codes of conduct in a profession state kind of actions that are either permitted or prohibited for a professional, these actions are directional in nature; codes of ethics, on the other hand, are statements of value, or guiding principles needed to guide the behaviour of the professionals. The canvas of the codes of ethics is much broader than the codes of conduct. Codes of ethics are the guiding principles that guide professionals to work with honesty, without discrimination, and they are aimed towards public good. These codes of ethics help an organization resolve the situations of ethical dilemma and in decision making; in issues like conflict of interests, safety, and harassment in a workplace. The moral values in all professions are of the same nature, but the decision that is taken in a particular situation in different professions would depend on considering the context, complexities and nitty-gritty of that situation. In medical profession, the ultimate objective of a doctor is to save the life of the patient. But doctors do transcend and think beyond this highest goal in the cases of Euthanasia, where we see a conflict of moral values, of saving life of patient, or to release all the pain and sufferings of the patient. The conflict of values gives rise to ethical dilemmas. The understanding of the need and importance of these ethical principles gradually broadens with the broadening of our canvas of understanding, development of our cognitive faculty of thinking and reflecting. This developing stage is the one where one can question the need, use and benefits of a particular norm for an individual, for a society or for a profession.

The question that becomes difficult to answer is that despite having all the mandatory rules and necessary ethical codes, why we meet up with unethical conduct in professional set up of any company/organization/institution. Every profession demands that work must be done with honesty and integrity, that is the reason certain norms become necessary to be maintained and followed for good governance, for smooth functioning of the profession at the level of the organization as a whole and also at the level of their employees as individual human beings. Every organization should adhere to some norms, codes of conduct, and set of guidelines to regulate the organization in a proper manner and evaluate the conduct of their employees. The formation of rules and codes of conduct consist of multiple layers, various aspectual elements. These multiple layers may include:

- The organization should work for the welfare of the society, thus any act that is not acceptable in the society would be prohibited by the organization.
- The formation of rules should also take into account zero or lesser amount of harm to the environment by any kind of activity.

- The formation of rules should not go against the good of their employees.
- The respect and dignity of each individual who is using the service of any organization should be the top most priority of all professions.

The unethical behaviour in any profession results when the above said conditions will not be met, that is, when it would cause harm to the environment, to the society, to the users, to the employees; and by bypassing all these above mentioned goals, if the organization would contemplate only in making personal profits. Thus certain sets of codes and principles are required in order to distinguish between right and wrong, to establish the values and goals of an organization. We will discuss some issues in the next section that can be termed as unprofessional practices that are impediments for the development of an individual, of a profession, of the society, and of the nation as well.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What do you understand by ‘Professionalism and Professional Ethics’?

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2. What is the role of reflective morality in Applied Ethics?

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16.4 CASE STUDIES

16.4.1 Data Breach

We are living in multiple worlds, one is the actual world which is out there for us, and another is the world of virtual reality which we have created for ourselves. In a virtual world, users provide all their information in order to avail the services provided by a particular platform. The moment we allow that platform to access all the information which is needed before login, it means that we trust that platform to be genuine. Along with the benefits we get from availing their services, our privacy always remains at risk. Despite the promises every company makes with the users, we experience the problem of data breach. What should be the ethical obligations and legal responsibilities to prevent these incidents and make the network more and more strong and secure?

The breach of data is, we can say, the breach of trust. All companies make a bond with their users by promising to provide values like accountability, cooperation, privacy and trust. We often come across the news of data breach; various companies, industries, and organizations suffer from the breach of data. Despite claims of providing the service with all these values, what causes the failure of all these values? The moral duty and responsibility in any profession demands the appropriateness of rules which is equivalent to their strict liability, but the problem is, we often experience a gap between what is being written as standard norms; and what is being followed on practical grounds. Talks about liability and accountability then seem redundant. The breach of data may happen in various ways. Some of these are:

- Making private information public.
- Leaking of information like email addresses, and phone numbers.
- Hackers hack the computer network, the system with the help of malware in order to get access to confidential information.

One weak point that makes it easier for the hackers to leak the data can be said the lack of knowledge of the users. The users allow access without knowing the cons of it, as a consequence they risk their privacy and security. But, even if the users remain at the vulnerable position due to lack of information; industries/organizations/companies must have the moral responsibility to take precautionary steps to keep the data of the user safe. The behaviour of companies has always been reactionary rather than precautionary. As a reaction the companies only inform their consumers about such incidents of breach, and that too can be delayed. Hacking is an illegal act. There are no set standards for these unethical issues in the cyber world which a professional ought to follow. There are only some guidelines that were created in 1992 as the ten commandments of computer ethics; but those do not match with today's scenario because these are quite vague in nature.

WikiLeaks is one such organization that has been known to release the documents to unveil many illegal acts. It has become a medium for many people to express their voices and uncover the questionable acts of the governments. However the sources from which these documents are obtained has always been in question.

Let us take one example of data breach here. The data of millions of users of several countries was leaked from a social networking site. This data included personal information of users like contact numbers, user id, date of birth, information of workplace and email addresses as well. All the data was published by a hacking forum on the dark web. The company denied that no such action is performed from our end, the data was old and already available publicly on the site so the data was scraped from there only. This data can be misused to make fraud calls, send spam emails, for phishing, and in many other kinds of frauds. Once again as a reaction, only after the data was leaked the company said that we will try to strengthen our security systems. The question is why no precautionary measures were taken by such a huge social networking site? Why the security was so weak that risked privacy of the users, as a result it made people lose their trust in that one particular company and made people skeptical in using other similar networking sites as well.

16.4.2 Ethical and Unethical Hacking

Ethical hacking is conducted in order to check the security of the computer systems. It is conducted by experts of the company. The aim of ethical hacking is to improve the

level of security and access the vulnerability of the computer systems. Ethical hacking becomes a necessary exercise to keep the computer systems free of malwares by suggesting improvements and increasing security time to time.

Illegal or unethical hacking is not conducted with the permission of the company. The purpose of this hacking is to steal information and data. One cannot deny that both kinds of hacking require expertise in terms of the knowledge, in illegal hacking the hackers misuse their knowledge to perform a criminal act. This unethical hacking can be done for personal gains, or just for fun, to see the communication of people, to disclose the communication of other people; or one can do it for business, stealing and selling the data.

16.4.3 Corporate Frauds

This example is related to the corporate world. Corporate frauds are unethical acts performed by the company or any employee of the company. Let us suppose a fraud is done by a corporate company of computer service. The founder of this company creates several bank statements to inflate the profits and revenue that did not exist. This process of showing fake profits lasts for nine years. This fraud case also includes creating fake customers accounts to show the profits. The founder of the company maintains the record of fake employees and withdraw large amount of money in the name of salary of the employees that did not exist at all, and the number of these fake employees are in thousands. The benefit of all this is shown in the increase in share prices of the company. This kind of fraud is an example of a big scam in the corporate world that can be termed an ethical crisis. As an effect it will badly affect the share market and audit firms. It also serves as a warning to the investors who invest money in any company without investigating much about the company.

These kinds of scam are clear example of conspiracy, forgery, and breach of trust that puts a question mark on the whole ethics of professionalism. It will also raise question on the disastrous system of accounting and accounting norms of a country. The increasing numbers of such frauds highlights the application of ethical codes and values and make us think again and again about our blind dependency on such professions. These crimes not only damage the image of the company but put down the image of the country as well. However government understands his responsibility and plays his role as it takes some strict actions to control such big frauds by introducing acts like Companies act in which strict rules are introduced to govern the corporate companies.

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is devised for business. This term mainly refers to the policies that make business more accountable and more responsible towards the society about the moral responsibility in any business. CSR makes a company work in the direction of enhancement of the society and environment. It is a concerned effort of companies to set moral standards. Companies implement the policies and practices created under CSR in order to influence the world in a positive manner and set a good image of the company. We can observe the impact of CSR in multi-directions. Various companies do think about improving the environment sustainability by taking steps such as implementing renewable energy resources, minimizing or eradicating child labor because it gives rise to unethical practices.

It is not to deny that in every profession, and in the corporate world we find certain set of norms and principles to run the profession smoothly and free of any obstacle. These codes of conduct can be traced back to the amalgamation of the fundamental principles

of ethics which are named as the utilitarian principle of Mill and Bentham, or the non-consequentialism or deontological ethics of Immanuel Kant, or the virtue based ethics of Aristotle. The codes of conduct based on these principles generally include the following statements:

- One should always keep public good in mind.
- One should not use the knowledge and expertise to any kind of illegal gains.
- One should be courageous enough to fight against the corrupt elements in the system.
- One should be acquainted with the rights of a professional and should be able to exercise those rights.
- One should work for the betterment of the company and of the society on the larger level.*

All these codes are devised keeping in mind the concepts of honesty, loyalty, thinking of maximizing the betterment for all, to do the right thing and avoid the wrong, raising voice against the wrong acts. The crucial question is why there still exists a huge gap between what is conceptually accepted in all professions and what is practically implied. Why the adherence of virtues like truth, honesty, courage, temperance, modesty, righteousness, patience has become so difficult in our life? Where does the fault lies, in the individual, or in the structure of the society that the society trains every individual in such a way that everyone thinks only about his/her own benefits at the cost of harming other human beings, animals and environment. Why human beings have become so incapable of thinking over and above their personal gains? Why we are moving towards a human-centric, individual-centric world day by day, without any concern for the future generations, and for other species. We may always claim that there is no harm in thinking about and to act for personal gains that is how we will be able to secure the future of our next generations, but it can never allow us to use improper, illegal or unethical means to achieve those gains. It should not be exercised at the cost of harming others, or cheating others, or by doing any other act which cannot be called right on the ethical grounds; and which is not acceptable in the society.

Our ethical conducts are based on the values we acquire from different sources. In recent times a kind of decay has been observed in the value system of the society, we see many instances in our daily life where the declining of values can be observed clearly, e.g. not respecting elders, not following rules, and careless behaviour etc. That is the reason why more emphasis is being given on imparting value education as an essential element to students in schools and colleges because it has become the need of time. The nature of this value education should not be static, it should be dynamic enough so that it can give the freedom to think about other possibilities as well.

Whenever we talk about any ethical principle, we always speak in terms of the relation between self and the other. The very domain of ethics, the ethical space cannot exist in isolation. The notions of duty, right, responsibility all presuppose the notion of other because all these notions lie in the ethical space where without the idea of relation these terms will become meaningless. This other can be a human being, a group of people, any organization/company, or any other species or environment. The relation is obvious

*Subramanian. R. (2017). Professional Ethics includes Human Values, Oxford University Press. P.230.

in any sub-category of ethics; professional ethics, too, functions on the notion of the relation between self and the other otherwise it will make no sense to talk about ethics in profession or in any other domain of ethics.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the difference between Ethical and Unethical hacking?

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2. What is the role of the relation of self and the other in professional ethics?

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16.5 LET US SUM UP

Professional ethics is an essential element for every profession. It provides certain codes of conduct for proper functioning of a profession. Apart from learning skills and acquiring practical training, ethical behaviour is equally necessary in every profession. Ethics in any profession is important in order to prevent the society from unethical and illegal activities like data breach and corporate frauds. The ethical codes and rules help a profession maintain a healthy image and this good image strengthens the profession. The ethical codes are based on the conventional ethical principles but the domain of applied ethics makes us think on these principles in a new way when we deal with any issue related to applied ethics. Different issues of different domains of applied ethics demands to think critically and reflectively considering the whole situation. Apart from reflective thinking on the problem, the codes of conduct of professional ethics will be actualized only after we will be able to understand the relatedness of self with the other. An ethical agent will always demand a coherent relation of self and other.

16.6 KEY WORDS

- Professionalism** : It is defined as the way one performs actions in profession. It includes practices, standards, values, skills, education, and training.
- Professional Ethics** : Professional ethics depicts and codifies certain ethical norms necessary for a specific profession. These norms

may vary according to the type of profession, for example engineers possess different set of codes of conducts from those of medical associations.

Data Breach : When a company or any employee of the company attempts to leak the information and tries to make that information of the user of that company public then it is called breach of data.

16.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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16.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress I

1. The term professionalism stands for the way one performs actions in a profession. This way may include a bundle of things in itself, the practices, the standards, the values, skills, education, and training. A carpenter possesses good skills to do his job, but he has not taken any professional training to become a carpenter, so carpentry will be called a trade and not a profession. Professionalism requires mastery over the theoretical knowledge, but having only theoretical competence is not enough, a professional should be able to implement the theory into practice. Professional ethics codifies certain ethical norms necessary for a specific profession. These norms may vary according to different professions, like engineers will be having different codes of conducts from those of medical associations. We can say that more or less these norms are aimed towards the welfare of the common people, and the society.
2. Reflective morality does not deny principles of conventional morality but the ethical dilemmas of real life situations involve much more layers of complexities that make it too hard to resolve these dilemmas based on any single conventional principle. Applied ethics deals with these real life situations where we try to find out the moral permissibility of specific acts. It seems to be an important requirement to consider the conditions and circumstances in which an action has been performed or about to be performed before taking any decision about the rightness or wrongness of that action. It demands to think and reflect upon the whole situation. The issues and debates of applied ethics every time demand a critical analysis, and

evaluation of our conventional moral principles. Being an integral element of philosophy, there always remains a scope to reason, to think, to critically analyse and examine the customary and traditional set of principles, to question the eternal nature of these principles. This is how we move towards the path of reflective morality in order to test the effectiveness of the established moral rules, whenever it is required. Reflective morality only helps by presenting a better approach by adding some novel element or by subtracting the unnecessary element to resolve a particular issue.

Answer to check your progress II

1. Ethical hacking is conducted in order to check the security of the computer systems. It is conducted by experts of the company. The aim of ethical hacking is to improve the level of security and access the vulnerability of the computer systems. The purpose of it is to suggest improvement in the system and to increase the level of security. Unethical hacking is not conducted with the permission of the company. The purpose of this hacking is to steal information and data. This unethical hacking can be done for personal gains, or just for fun, to see the communication of people, to disclose the communication of other people; or one can do it for business, stealing and selling the data.
2. Any ethical principle or any sub-domain of ethics presupposes the relation between self and the other. The very sphere of ethics, the ethical space cannot exist in isolation. The notions of duty, right, responsibility all presuppose the notion of other because all these notions lie in the ethical space wherein without the idea of relation these terms will become meaningless. The codes of professional ethics will also become empty without considering this relation, transparency in work, work for the welfare of the organization, for the welfare of the society, all these includes the notion of other. This other can be a human being, a group of people, any organization/company, or any other species or environment.