

# Case Studies and Ethics Education

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## Introduction and Background

- Background
  - Education
  - Teaching in Philosophy
- Murdough Center and National Institute for Engineering Ethics (NIEE)
  - On-campus engineering ethics course
  - Distance learning courses for students and engineers
  - Guest lectures throughout Whitacre COE
- Use case studies in both on-campus course and distance learning courses

## Benefits of Using Case Studies

- Engaging/Accessible: (in my experience) students are often more willing to discuss ethical issues embedded in case studies than via other routes.
- Educational for Students: Case studies are a useful way to acquaint students with some of the issues/challenges they are likely to face in their chosen fields.
- Informative for Instructor: Student responses to case studies can be descriptively useful. Provide a sense of:
  - What students believe
  - (Possibly) Why they believe what they do

## Limitations of Using *Only* Case Studies

- Pinging pre-reflective beliefs and intuitions about ethics without examining the validity of those beliefs and intuitions.
- Simply talking about cases does not necessarily draw attention to the reasoning process between cases. Do students have the opportunity to recognize and, at least provisionally, resolve inconsistencies in their thinking about cases?
- Using case studies that focus on challenges runs the risk of overlooking other ways in which ethics is part of a profession.

## Possible Solutions

- Optimal: Incorporate education about and discussion of common, general ethical principles
  - Controversy about the role principles should play in our reasoning
  - Controversy about how to teach principles
  - Primary vs. Secondary Benefits
- Minimal: Encourage students to formulate their own (pre-reflective) principles and apply these to cases
  - Provides some structure to their analyses
  - Creates an opportunity for reflection

## Challenges

- Time: Prima facie, it is good that faculty/instructors are taking time to discuss ethics. But, there is other valuable content to cover – only so much time can be allocated to an explicit discussion of ethics.
- Confidence: Discussing case studies is one thing, discussing fundamental beliefs about right/wrong is another. The latter can be uncomfortable for student and teacher alike.

## Responses to Challenges

- Partner with interested and knowledgeable faculty members or instructors (either within your college or beyond)
- Focus on fewer case studies in order to make room for principle oriented reflection and application
- The minimal approach helps address the time and confidence challenges. Students might find their own principles more easily stated and familiar. Faculty member/instructor can concentrate on facilitation.

## Some Thoughts About Choosing Case Studies

- Choose hard cases (e.g. competing goods, seemingly reasonable choices that lead to bad outcomes, proactive vs. reactive scenarios, etc.)
- Choose cases that seem to engender conflicting prescriptions (e.g. maximize positive consequences in Case A, but not in B)
- Choose cases that reflect a diversity of issues the students that are likely to face in their respective fields/disciplines



- Thank you for your interest

- Questions?