Is It Ethical To Lie?

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Abstract

When asked the question, "Is it ethical to lie?", most people will respond with comments such as, "No, it is immoral to lie!", or "No, I wouldn't lie!", and so forth. In the first response, the responder is reflecting on their moral upbringing, but not necessarily the ethical position of the question being asked. In the second response, they probably just did. The problem facing such responses is that the person responding is mixing two different concepts – morals and ethics. They are often used as being interchangeable but are not necessarily the same. This paper will review the differences in morals and ethics, and then address the original question and the ethical implications it poses. The paper will also look at some of the ethics and standards of conduct in practice today by some professional organizations such as the IEEE, ASME, ASEE, SME, SPE, and other forms that may represent doctors and lawyers view of ethics.

Introduction

In the use of the words morals or ethics, there is considerable contention – some will say they are the same in terms of one being right or wrong, others will say that one has a personal meaning (morals), while the second has a societal meaning (ethics). Most will agree that morals are taught to an individual from a young age, mostly being the differentiation between "right" and "wrong" of some event or happening. In this fashion, morals then can be viewed as being one's personal belief in what is right or wrong and will seldom change over time. Ethics, on the other hand, are rules more often set by societal mores, or, in the case of businesses, a code of conduct that benefits the business itself. One quick example is how, over the years, certain words were not permitted in radio and television – they were unethical. In today's programs, there are fewer and fewer instances of a speaker being "bleeped" for uttering a word that once not allowed. The ethics of the time have modified that permitted language use.

Discussion

As previously noted, morals are most often related to a sense of "right" and "wrong". That sense does not generally change but may over time. For example, years ago it was considered immoral for a lady's dress to show her ankles. Consider styles today, throwing in shorts, jeans, and the mini-skirt, that level of immorality has certainly changed! In a more contentious example, consider same sex marriage. Many people consider such an arrangement to be immoral and should not be allowed. That question has been resolved from an *ethical* perspective by the United States Supreme Court, and the societal mores are found to be acceptable – by law.

While morals may be considered personal beliefs, ethics are more closely aligned to the mores of public opinion – what does society believe. From that, ethics may change more rapidly, even year to year as events occur to change the composite public mind. What is unethical today may well be accepted next year, or even next week. Many professional organizations, companies, and others may have a published Code of Ethics. They may codify it as a Code of Ethics, a Creed of Conduct, or simply an Oath of Office. In some cases, the organization may have some form of more than one, i.e. both a Code of Ethics and a Code of Conduct. The Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) has gathered a collection of organizations Code of Ethics [11], providing more than 2000 listings divided into twenty-eight categories ranging from Agriculture to Wildlife & Environmental Stewardship.

In looking at several organizational Code of Ethics, there is great commonality in the areas covered. For example, consider intellectual property. The American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) states; "Respect the intellectual property of others by properly attributing previous works and sharing appropriate credit with co-authors, including students." [3]   From the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE); "to seek, accept, and offer honest criticism of technical work, to acknowledge and correct errors, and to credit properly the contributions of others;" [5]   Finally, from the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), Canon 5; "Engineers shall give proper credit for engineering work to those to whom credit is due, and shall recognize the proprietary interests of others. Whenever possible, they shall name the person or persons who may be responsible for designs, inventions, writings of other accomplishments." [7]

From those reviewed, all Codes of Conduct have some type of preamble as an introduction to the code, rules of practice, or other rules of conduct that the member should follow. For example, the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) provides a preamble stating; "Engineering is an important and learned profession. As members of this profession, engineers are expected to exhibit the highest standards of honesty and integrity. … Engineers must perform under a standard of professional behavior which requires adherence to the highest principles of ethical conduct." [10]

It is interesting to note that, of those reviewed, there are no clauses or indications of what would happen to the engineer who failed to adhere to an aspect of the code. Would they be disbarred? Would their membership be revoked? Would they no longer be allowed to practice their field of engineering? How is such digression brought to the attention of the organization? It would appear, with some exceptions noted later, that the organizations depend on their membership to embrace the codes and practice within the intent of the code. The IEEE in their Code of Conduct does address this to some degree in paragraph 4; "We will not retaliate against any IEEE member, employee or other person who reports an act of misconduct, or who reports any violation of the IEEE Code of Ethics or this Code of Conduct." [4]   There is still no documentation of the actions that could be undertaken against the person based on the reported violation.

Professional organizations are not the only organizations that may have some sort of Code of Ethics. Business entities may also have some form of a Code of Ethics, or some more comprehensive Business Conduct Guidelines. From my career with IBM, I am aware of their Business Conduct Guidelines. It is a comprehensive set of guidelines ranging on subject matter from personal conduct, business obligations, and other subjects that could impact IBM's ability to compete. It also addresses the consequences of violating the guidelines. For example; "If IBM management finds that your conduct on or off the job adversely affects your performance, that of other employees, or IBM's legitimate business interests, you will be subject to disciplinary measures, including dismissal." [13]

Perhaps the two organizations that have the most fully documented Code of Ethics would be the American Bar Association (ABA) and the American Medical Association (AMA). Not only do the components of the code identify the level of ethical conduct expected of its members, but also the disciplinary actions that may be taken are also included. In one state's preamble is stated the expectations of a lawyer; "…But in the last analysis it is the desire for the respect and confidence of the members of the profession and of the society which the lawyer serves that should provide to a lawyer the incentive for the highest possible degree of ethical conduct. The possible loss of that respect and confidence is the ultimate sanction. …" [14]

From the referenced Code of Ethics, it would appear the answer to the original question as to "Is It Ethical To Lie?" would be a resounding answer "No!" That sounds a bit rigid when one considers a child's simple question; "Are we there yet?" being answered, "No, we are almost there." When the real answer may be several hours of travel remaining. Perhaps the answer to the original question should be; "Perhaps, depending on the situation." One question could be; "Is it harmful to the individual or society?" If the answer to this is no, then it may not be a question of ethics at all. If the lie would protect an individual, or large group of people, would it be ethical or not? It may simply come down to a question of personal moral beliefs and ethics wrapped into a simple decision – what is the impact?

Conclusion Morals and ethics are closely related, perhaps at times even used as interchangeable words. A more exacting definition closely identifies morals as personal mores as to the "rightness" or "wrongness" of a particular action, whereas ethics is based more of society expectations of any particular action. Morals are most frequently taught by parents to their children and remain constant over the years. Ethics may change over time, depending on the belief of society on any subject or situation. Morals are not typically taught in school, but ethics should be. A college course that makes the student research a decision involving both their moral belief and the ethical situation presented would be a good foundation for their career to follow. There may be situations during their career where ethical questions arise. It is hoped they reach an ethical conclusion.

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