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PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN ACADEMIA

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Some years ago Eric Ashby proposed a form of Hippocratic Oath for members of the academic profession.[1] More recently the *Journal of Advanced Education* published a draft code of ethics for its readers to consider.[2] Many professional groups have adopted a formal code of ethics or a set of principles which members are expected to observe, while others have canvassed some of the issues which might arise in the course of professional practice (e.g. Royal Institute of Chemistry).[3] In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in some of the ethical issues which can stem from academic work largely because of revelations of fraud and improper applications of research expertise.[4]

The topic is a large one and somewhat daunting because of its complexity and the manner in which many of the issues interconnect. Here I shall only attempt a sketch of the outlines of its scope and indicate the general character of some of the issues. An academic has responsibilities in five major areas: research, teaching, the institution, the profession, and the community. I shall say a little about each of these but give most attention to the first two.

Research

A quite fundamental issue which arises here concerns the general thrust of research efforts and the choices which face an individual in determining his or her own priorities.[5] We are all familiar with the moral dilemmas which can arise, for example, in relation to weapons research versus work aimed at enhancing human welfare, and I do not propose to discuss this topic despite its great importance.

Many problems have emerged from the manner in which research is conducted and the ways in which results are published and it is this area which has attracted the most attention during the past decade, although there is certainly nothing novel about such controversies. Charles Babbage, the founder of computing science, published in 1830 his *Reflections on the Decline of Science in England* in which he discussed varieties of hoaxing, forging, trimming of results and what he called cooking.[6]

It is helpful to view many of these issues as having their origins in a conception of the results of scientific work as being the property of scientists in which they have certain rights. This approach has been developed in considerable detail by Ravetz who argues that the protection of these rights is necessary if scientists are to be confident that their efforts are to be rewarded. This protection is achieved through the mechanism, developed in the late eighteenth century, of publishing authenticated results and so enabling the subsequent citation of such results by others thus ensuring their attribution to the originator. What Ravetz calls an 'etiquette' has evolved which governs citation practices and the operation of the system of quality control which is in the hands of journal editors and referees. Ravetz admits, however, that 'etiquette' is too weak a notion to convey satisfactorily what is involved here.

It is the concern with property and the rewards which may be anticipated to come from it which leads to many of the difficulties which are generated by the operation of the quality control system. Prominent among these is the use of the work of others without adequate acknowledgement. This is often unintentional, for few of us are able to recall the origins of all our thoughts, but sometimes it is deliberate as in acts of plagiarism. Referees sometimes take advantage of their access to the unpublished work of others to plunder both ideas and data. Supervisors have been known to fail to accord full credit to the efforts of their postgraduate students.[7] Name-ordering on publications at times does not reflect accurately the contributions made by each author.[8] The Royal Society has attempted to avoid this problem by insisting upon alphabetical order only. Some workers neglect to publish results promptly out of a concern for secrecy in order to promote self-interest.

Because of the advancement of knowledge depends upon the authenticity of published results it is obvious that the integrity of research workers is of crucial importance. In recent years, however, there has been a spate of allegations and revelations concerning instances of scientific fraud. One of the most publicized cases is that of Cyril Burt[9] but there have been many others.[10] (see Manwell and Baker, 1981). Indeed, Brush has argued that the history of science is so replete with disreputable acts and practices that it offers a most unsuitable model for students to be encouraged to follow.[11]

The gate-keepers of science are the editors and referees of the papers which constitute the journal literature and Ravetz has stressed the fundamental significance of their role.

> *If their concern is no more than the creation of intellectual property which can be cashed for material and social benefits, then there are no internal barriers to the rapid degeneration and corruption of a field at all levels.*[12]

There is another aspect of intellectual property rights which has received little attention in the literature. This concerns ownership claims, or the ascription of ownership rights, to objects and locations rather than to discoveries or results. For example, there is a sense in which anthropologists 'own' the

tribe whose way of life they are studying, archaeologists 'own' the site which they are excavating, and plant taxonomists 'own' the plant group which they are classifying. Such claims are commonly acknowledged by fellow-workers who are normally careful not to trespass or intrude. Often such claims make good practical sense: an archaeological site can only be excavated once and there would be little point in several botanists engaging simultaneously in the re-classification of a plant group.

However, ownership claims of this implicit type are far from being unproblematical. It is not unknown for researchers to 'stake out' a site but do little serious work on it for many years. This prevents others from working on it and so impedes the advancement of knowledge. There is also the difficulty, often the impossibility, of replicating or checking results because sites and social groups are unique. It is worth noting that the reverse holds of many other fields of inquiry. In philosophy and mathematics intractable problems have been worked on by successive thinkers for many centuries. In the physical and biological sciences it is commonplace for several groups to work on the same problem in fierce competition.

A basic assumption of science and scholarship is that knowledge is subject to infinite revision and extension. The truth of this is far from obvious, however, to the members of some communities who fear that outsiders will resolve all their problems before they themselves are in a position to tackle them. This has led some Pacific islanders, for example, to claim ownership rights to problems on the grounds that once these have been solved — usually by foreigners with superior resources — there will be nothing left for their own people to study. For example, a student at the University of Papua New Guinea has argued on these grounds for the exclusion of foreign research workers from his home region:

> *What will there be left for us to research, if we want to get a Ph.D. or even an M.A.? We feel nothing will be left. This is already come into effect. Are Ph.D.s and Masters of Arts designed only for Europeans or for Papuan New Guineans as well? If for all, we kindly ask, if you would leave some for us.*[13]

The adoption of such a position is frequently associated with allegations that research workers are engaged in a form of exploitation in order to further their own careers at the expense of others. If the products of intellectual work are viewed as the property of the producer then it could be argued that there is a sense in which all research, especially in the social sciences, involves an element of exploitation. Indeed, this was suggested during a symposium at the 1975 ANZAAS Congress. I believe that there are difficulties in this view but there can be no doubt that many of us have not been sufficiently aware of the need to respect the rights of others, including animals, when designing experiments, collecting information and publishing results.

A few examples will illustrate some of the ways in which ethical issues can arise from the manner in which research is conducted.[14] Some psychological experiments involve deceiving or misleading participants: Stanley Milgram's work is a case in point. The use of placebos in medical research inevitably requires the deception of patients. The technique of participant observation often involves deceit if it is to be used effectively. Even the use of questionnaires sometimes leads to invasions of privacy and always imposes a degree of inconvenience upon those who are asked to complete them. The reporting of results can adversely affect those concerned especially if confidential information or identities are disclosed. Evaluation studies in educational and other social contexts frequently give rise to quite serious ethical issues when one group is seen to be making judgements about another.

Enough has been said to indicate that the research activities of academics are often far removed from the ivory tower neutrality enshrined in the folklore, but instead are shot through with moral problems and dilemmas.

Teaching

Ethical issues which might arise in connection with an academic's teaching responsibilities have received remarkably little attention. The topic is not even mentioned in the draft code referred to earlier,[15] yet there are several dimensions of the teaching role which can readily generate ethical concerns.

In the teaching of any discipline the academic has a responsibility to present the student with a genuine view or account of it — genuine in the sense that personal bias does not distort the reality of the current state of development of the discipline. There are, of course, sometimes differing views on how a discipline should be conceived and approached but all of these should be presented to the student together with the reasons for believing some of them to be more productive, supportable, and so on, than others. Failure to do this constitutes practising a form of deceit upon students.

In addition, an academic must at all times display and attempt to cultivate in students the intellectual virtues which are constitutive of scholarly standards. These would include respect for evidence, exactness, judgment, carefulness, critical thinking and, in general, resoluteness in attempting to arrive at the truth.[16] (Passmore, 1980). Failure to exemplify and constantly stress the fundamental importance of these standards and qualities would defraud students in that it would not lead to their acquiring the skills and attitudes which are required for an understanding of how knowledge is advanced. To accept shoddy efforts or to suggest that it does not really matter how intellectual work is pursued would be highly irresponsible on the part of any teacher.

More contentious is the question of whether it is part of an academic's responsibilities to attempt to change the values and attitudes of students in areas not directly related to the intellectual virtues.[17] The answer to this lies in the view one takes of teaching: is it intended to provide part of a student's education or is it solely directed at offering a professional training in a set of intellectual skills? I hope that I shall be forgiven for not pursuing that question here!

Students have a right to be taught in a professional and skilful manner just as they have a right to be taught a genuine view of the discipline. An academic who adopts a neglectful careless approach towards teaching is failing to meet a basic professional obligation towards students.

A further dimension is that of the relationship between teachers and students. The nature of this relationship is now less clearly defined than it once was: not everyone would agree that academics stand *in loco parentis*. Whatever one's view on that may be there can be no justification for a relationship which is exploitative in character and which makes improper use of the power which academics have in their teaching role. Exploitation can take a number of forms: the seeking of sexual favours in return for unjustifiably high examination assessments, the use of students as 'subjects' in experiments and investigations,[18] and the improper use of the work of postgraduate students and even perhaps delaying their progress in order to obtain an advantage for the supervisor or department.[19]

Finally, there is the making of judgments about the characteristics of students and the quality of their work. This constantly arises in assessment procedures and the composition of letters of recommendation. Here it is necessary to observe the highest standards of honesty, impartiality and accuracy in order to avoid unjust treatment of students and the deception of others.

The Institution

As a member of a university or college an academic has an obligation to act in such a way as to serve the purposes which the institution exists to serve and to refrain from actions which will corrupt it or bring it into disrepute. Academic life is fraught with conflicting interests and it is no easy matter to maintain a balance between the demands of teaching, research, consulting activities, community service and the maintenance of institutional vitality. Excessive concern with one of these areas can readily result in the neglect of the others. Careerism in the search for personal prestige and power, together with the political activities which often aids its attainment, can easily tempt academics away from their responsibilities. Maintenance of the vitality and integrity of the institution often calls for the frank expression of views which may be unpopular. The expression of such views can sometimes require a high degree of moral courage, especially in times of retrenchment.

The Profession

Some codes of professional ethics contain elements which appear to be designed to serve sectional interests rather than a more general good.

For example, the code of ethics adopted by the Australian Psychological Association in 1970 contained the following:

> *Should a member have cause to disagree with a colleague on professional issues he must nevertheless refrain from criticizing him in public in a manner which casts doubt on his professional competence.*

The nature of academic work is such that it requires public disagreement and rigorous criticism of the products of others since careless or incompetent work cannot serve the advancement of knowledge.

Peer review is the basic mechanism of quality control both in the advancement of knowledge and in the procedures governing academic preferment. The products of peer review processes are usually confidential and are thus open to abuse. The refereeing of papers, research proposals and applications for positions all call for the highest standards of impartiality and integrity. Lapses from such standards are not unknown and self-interest has sometimes taken priority over objectivity.[20]

During difficult times, such as the present, there is a great temptation to denigrate the work of colleagues in order to secure more of the limited resources which are available for one's own department or faculty. There is a growing risk that support for the wider purposes of the institution and the profession will be subordinated to powerful sectional interest groups.

The Community

The responsibilities of the academic profession to the wider community which provides the material resources to support its work may be said to encompass all of the areas touched upon so far: the education of students, the advancement of knowledge, and the enhancement of the reputation of the institution and of the profession. But in addition, academics have a responsibility to use their knowledge and skills to mount a continuing critique of the society which supports them.[21] This important role is facilitated by the provisions of tenure and the principle of academic freedom because social criticism is seldom welcomed by those at whom it is directed. Unfortunately, there have been many historical and contemporary examples of academics losing their jobs and even their freedom as a consequence of fulfilling this responsibility. To remain silent may often be convenient but it inevitably tends to the corruption of both the profession and our institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

Many of the issues which have been touched upon earlier are not peculiar to the academic profession but arise in all forms of intellectual work and institutional life. Those that are perhaps characteristic of the academic life arise from teaching, the unique nature of universities and colleges as institutions, and the task of engaging in social criticism.

Finally, there is the question of how adherence to standards of professional conduct is to be enforced. I must confess to some scepticism about the value of legalistic formulations and the codification of ethical principles. Communities of scholars, like all other communities, can only function if there is a widely shared commitment to common values and aspirations.

> *Either an academic polity has that common commitment, in which case no published rules are necessary; or it lacks that common commitment, in which case no published rules can save it.*[22]

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THERE IS STILL A LONG WAY TO GO:

A Comment on the Conference of University Governing Bodies, University of Melbourne, August 15-17, 1982

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As an outsider observing post-secondary education in Australia in the mid-1970s, Barbara Burn came to the conclusion that it was surprising that the universities, in particular, had not organized in the face of increasing government erosion of their autonomy. She wrote *'The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee has not performed this function or attempted to do so.'*[1] This is not to say that attempts have not been made in this direction, for there is, in fact, a debate on the issues around an Association of Australian Universities which has continued for some years.

One of the prime movers behind this debate is Harry Medlin, who, through the Council of the University of Adelaide, and FAUSA, has ensured that it has been kept in the minds of university governing bodies, the AVCC (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee) and academics generally. Medlin is a past national president of FAUSA, and currently a Deputy Chancellor of the University of Adelaide.

He was also a delegate to the recent Conference of University Governing Bodies, which was held at the University of Melbourne.[2] It was surprising (especially to a fellow-member of his delegation) that he was not more vocal there on the subject. This is particularly so given the outright refusal of the AVCC to consider a request from the Council of the University of Adelaide for the matter to be given space on the agenda.

Nevertheless, the conference proved the point that such an Association is both necessary, but also possibly doomed to failure. Necessary because the seeming acceptance by the conference of an overt but generally unrecognised political argument that all is well in the universities, and that the misgivings that we all — councils, vice-chancellors, staff and students — have over the events of the last seven years stem from our inability to come to grips with 'steady state'. Possibly doomed because the delegations reflected not just the AVCC but the very governing bodies which would have to be the backbone of such an organisation.

This is not to say that complacency was totally the order of the day. There was a great deal said about university autonomy, how it had been eroded and by whom. We were treated to many good statements about autonomy and its relationship to academic freedom, to the special relationship it had with responsibility and to the different perspectives with which autonomy is viewed in different countries, and for that matter in different sectors in Australia. We heard about the issue from government ministers, a variety of vice-chancellors and academics, businessmen, senior members of university governing bodies, and the chairman of a State coordinating authority.

We did not hear from trade unionists, teachers charged with preparing students for university, parents of students or prospective students, nor interestingly, students themselves. What we did not hear — at least in the papers — was the fundamental reason for hearing about autonomy and its erosion. Why?

This is perhaps not surprising when one is dealing with a concept like autonomy which can be a difficult concept to grasp. It is not the same thing as independence and it does not include non-accountability or total removal from the community in which one exists. Nor is it surprising when a group representing the status quo talks among itself.

But it is surprising when it is patently obvious that a struggle is underway within the governing group. And it is equally as surprising in the most specific example that we were encouraged to discuss — research.

This session was entitled 'The Control of Research'. At it, Professor Max Brennan of the Australian Research Grants Scheme (ARGS), gave the most professionally presented paper of the conference. (It almost made us forget the agony students go through in badly designed lecture theatres). He was followed by Professor Louis Davies, and the discussion was introduced by the Vice-Chancellor of Flinders, Professor Keith Hancock. It was Hancock who came closest to grappling with the real issues at hand, though in the end it was sidestepped.

None of the three, nor any of the questioners, addressed the issue of the **political** control of research. Why is it that the direction of research funding has been so drastically altered in the last few years? Why is it that the ARGS has been unable to continue to fund at reasonable levels? Why is it that the ARGS has chosen to support projects partially thus effectively removing some of the control which universities are supposed to have over their internal research funds? Why is it that even where committees monitoring the nature of research exist in the universities, they limit their investigations to that relatively small area of contract research?