Themed Section: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics and Some Thoughts on Social Network Analysis

Ken McPhail
The Centre for Applied Ethics & Legal Philosophy, University of Glasgow, UK

In the autumn of 2006, the University of Glasgow in Scotland held an interdisciplinary ethics forum in preparation for the launch of a new Centre for Applied Ethics and Legal Philosophy.1 Representatives from a wide range of professional groups attended, including the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland, The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, The British Medical Association, The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain and The Nursing and Midwifery Council. A number of large multinationals, including Citigroup and BT were also represented, along with academics from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Most of the business delegates had a strategic responsibility for ethics within their organisations and most of the professionals were ethical, “legislators”, responsible for developing ethical policy within their particular institution. However, the primary reason for inviting specific individuals to attend the forum was not so much related to their specific responsibilities, but rather to their genuine and personal commitment to the ethical development of their respective organisations.2

The event had a number of objectives, we wanted to get an insight into how different business and professional groups construe the ethical challenges they are facing and learn more about how they are responding to these challenges so that we might be able to critically engage with both groups in a more informed way. However, the event was also intended to provide an opportunity for business and professional leaders, with a similar sense of conviction, to learn about and with

1. The centre draws on a long history of advancement in thinking about morality at the University of Glasgow, from the Scottish Enlightenment, Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, to contemporary advances in Medical Ethics, see www.gla.ac.uk/ethics
2. The directors of the centre knew most of the delegates and had worked with many of them on a number of different projects.
each other. This kind of interdisciplinary dialogue seems to us to be at least potentially important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is valuable because many of the ethical challenges facing different professional groups are similar in type, they are to do with things like the nature of professional relationships; the social function of the professions and broad socio-legal discourses on issues like human rights. Secondly, new policy agendas are forcing disparate professional and business groups together into new working relationships and this kind of interdisciplinary forum provides an opportunity to explore whether and how different kinds of values have become embedded in different modes of professional obligations and practices and also the extent to which these values conflict across the professions. And of course, such interdisciplinary dialogue also provides an opportunity to learn how other groups are responding to the ethical challenges they are facing and to share experiences and possibly resources.

This kind of interdisciplinary dialogue may therefore be a valuable source of informal ethics education in the broadest sense. However, at a more speculative level, the event was motivated and informed by the emerging discipline of Network Science (Barabasi 2002). Post Enron, the Alder Hey organ retention scandal, and other similar debacles, many professional bodies have rushed to introduce new ethics education requirements into their curricula. It’s quite clear that most professional training programmes were deficient in this regard and it’s also true that ethics education can have a positive impact on an individual’s moral development. However, while legislators seem to be making the connection between education and organisational culture for example, much of the developments appear to be based on a rather undeveloped sense of the function of communities and networks in sustaining, re-enforcing and enhancing value commitments.

Of course the idea of community has provided an historically powerful concept for analysing and understanding ethical obligations (Rousseau 1984; Conford 1996; Hand 1989). Professional bodies have traditionally secured their Royal Charter by undertaking to serve the public interest and it is important that they are held accountable in terms of their contribution towards broader civic goals. Unfortunately, most professional bodies are primarily concerned with promoting and protecting the interests of their members (Preston et al, 1995; Backof & Martin 1991), but as an informed and critical voice on, for example, health policy or sentencing, they can contribute towards the kind of political pluralism that makes for a healthier form of deliberative democracy (Macedo 1999; Carrington 1999).

However, research within the emerging discipline of Network Science (Barabasi 2002), and in particular a derivative methodology called Social Network Analysis (SNA), provides a different kind of perspective on the relationship between ethics and communities. In particular, SNA focuses on how relational networks are initiated, how they work and how they evolve. Rowley (1997), drawing on Wasserman & Galaskiewicz (1994), explains “The primary
focus of Social Network Analysis is the interdependence of actors and how their positions in networks influence their opportunities, constraints, and behaviour.” This kind of methodological lens focuses less on organisational attributes, like structure and culture, as explanatory variables in individuals’ ethical behaviour and more on network boundaries, patterns of relationships and how these links are to be modelled (Wellman 1988; Wasserman, & Faust 1999).

While new perspectives from Network Science have been applied to a broad range of phenomena from cells (Barabasi 2002) to stakeholders (Rowley 1997), it has yet to be comprehensively applied to the field of professional ethics. Although the role of specific attributes of professional bodies, like their structure and culture, in contributing towards professional debacles like the Shipman murder enquiry and Enron have been quite extensively explored, the majority of the emerging discussion on professional ethics education still construes ethics as an individual achievement. SNA, by viewing ethical outcomes less as a consequence of rational reflection or rule following and more in terms of a network achievement, might provide insightful, alternative perspectives on professional ethics (Rowley 1997). This perspective would change the focus from codes and principles to the kinds of networks within which professionals are embedded, where the boundaries of these relationships lie, the specific nature of these connections and how the connections that structure an individual’s personal professional community could be modelled (Wasserman & Faust 1999). The idea that relational systems might just influence professional ethics does at least seem plausible.

Yet as well as providing a lens for analysing professional ethics, SNA may also provide an alternative way of conceptualising how one might engage in the arena of professional ethics. It goes without saying that the process of aligning professional bodies with the interests of society requires a broad range of educational engagement and legislative reform, but one of the tasks might be construed in terms of facilitating new networks of connections. In the language of SNA, this could be conceptualised in terms of bridging structural gaps between a number of isolated systems of connections. Of course this kind of Social Network Engagement still requires a normative objective. Whether the public interest would be better served by networks that result in greater utility, empathy or justice is obviously a matter of considerable debate, however SNA might provide different ways of thinking about these objectives.

Applying a networked perspective to ethics may lead us to explore the kinds of networked forms of organisation, corporate and otherwise, required for a particular normative ethic to work, or which might allow moral sense to function, in the sense of the emotional connections between individuals (McPhail 2004; Midgley 2003, Bauman 1989, Hutcheson 1999, Hand 1989, Smith 1976, Wilson 1993). For example, Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance and Original Position may only work within a particular kind of networked configuration of relationships, a
network that provides us with insights into what other peoples lives are like (Rawls 1972).

The day then emerged from these influences: a commitment to engage, to challenge and to explore the potential in beginning to network ethical knowledge and develop ethical capacity by connecting disparate professionals and business people which seemed to have a genuine commitment towards ethical development within their respective spheres.

This themed section provides some insights from and analysis of the event. The section takes its structure from the day. Firstly, we provide John Hooker’s keynote address, “Business Ethics, Does it Matter Which Hat you Wear?” Next, we reproduce summaries of the various talks by Michael Wilks, Chair of the Ethics British Medical Associations Ethics Committee; Ann Lewis, President of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain; David Gordon, entrepreneur and Chief Executive, Windsave Ltd; Sarah Thewlis, Chief Executive of The Nursing and Midwifery Council; Colin Stewart, Managing Director of Citigroup Scotland and Prof. Phil Beaumont, Professor of Employment Relations at the University of Glasgow. Finally, we provide a brief summary and discussion of the recurring themes from these presentations along with some concluding comments.
References:


