

Personal Ethics Statement

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As social creatures, people must coexist in an imperfect global society only partially aware of the numerous forces at play. Simply put, we must operate in a complex world without knowing all the facts in any given situation, including the ultimate consequences of our decisions despite our best intentions. For that reason, I am hesitant to assume that any attempt at creating a personal ethics code endures time and applies to all situations. However, I can safely assume that, without a personal code, I am more vulnerable to unethical behavior and choices. Thus, as Howard and Korver (2008) remind us, “the best time to answer these questions is before we face them. We can then consider, without the distorting pressure of a real situation, how they affect our character and relationships” (p. 72). Hence, it is with humility that I present my personal ethical code.

My Personal Ethical Code: Explained

Howard and Korver (2008) stress the importance of clarity and avoiding overambitious positive ethics statements (e.g. I will work to promote social justice). Vague ideals, while laudable, can complicate an already challenging situation and potentially lure us into unethical behavior (Howard & Korver, 2008). For instance, is Robin Hood-esque behavior counteracting rampant financial inequity between the social classes or it is simply theft? Still, favoring action-based ethics over consequentialism and utilitarianism, risks binding us to an inflexible code that may also lead to unethical behavior. Therefore, my code will include a nuanced blend of positive ethics statements and action-based guidelines. Additionally, I will use hypothetical scenarios to illustrate the code’s operation. Although far from all-encompassing, my code will touch on the following ethical considerations: lying and deception, stealing, harming, professional ethics, and an acceptable proximity to unethical behavior.

Lying and Deception. I will not lie or deceive another if I know this action will result in harm. Harm will be defined as a deficit to one's physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Similarly, I will not participate in the telling of half-truths, lies, or deceptive insinuations. Exceptions to this standard are acceptable when truth-telling will cause physical harm (e.g. I will lie to save someone from physical harm) or when consent is expressly given to lie or act deceitful (e.g. during a board game, confirming beforehand that someone enjoys surprise parties). I will not justify lying or deceit to rationalize my behavior or further my self-interests. If at any point the choice to deceive or lie causes harm, even if it would have otherwise been considered ethical behavior, I will be upfront about my actions, clarify my intentions, and work to restore trust.

I will keep secret the information confided to me with the expectation of secrecy—whether expressly stated or not. The only exception will be to prevent harm to oneself or others. I will not weaponize secrets as leverage (i.e. blackmail).

I will avoid self-deception by recognizing that I will never have all the facts. I will not value my Truth above another's or willingly allow another's voice to be silenced. These practices of distortion are deceptive and oppressive. I will not cheat or feign ignorance to further my interests or help someone further their own. Not only is this a distortion of the truth, it is a theft from the rightful owner (e.g. cheating to win money).

Stealing. I will not steal, except as an absolute last resort for survival (the likeliness of that so rare, I feel it barely necessary to mention). I acknowledge that my privilege enables me to use the safety nets built into our society and allows to believe in the charitableness of humanity. Therefore, I will not judge those who are less privileged and steal in order to provide for themselves and their loved ones.

If I find myself the beneficiary of something that is not rightfully mine (e.g. finding cash on the ground, praise for someone else's work), I will make a concerted effort to correct the situation. For example, I will tell the truth when I get credit for someone else's idea. If I cannot return something to its rightful owner, I will perform a proportionate act of kindness for my good fortune. For example, I will donate the cash I find or provide food for a homeless person if I am given more than I ordered.

This positive ethic applies to remedying issues of oppression and privilege. I acknowledge the unearned privileges which I possess and strive to remedy the oppression of others by using those privileges to reduce harm. For example, I will not stay quiet while less privileged people and their labor are exploited, as this is also an act of theft. (See Professional Ethics for further explanation.) In furtherance of this commitment, I will vote in every election for which I am enfranchised to remedy any such injustices.

Harming. As stated previously, I will not lie or deceive if it causes harm and I will not allow myself to benefit from someone's property (material or intellectual) if it causes harm. However, I recognize there are certain exceptional situations where physical harm may result. For instance, I will not stop others from using force to protect, defend, or prevent loss of life if there is an imminent threat and ALL other options have been exhausted. These determinations must be objective and not be used retroactively to rationalize one's actions. (Note: the death penalty should not be used since the threat has been neutralized and it will not return the life that was stolen—i.e. remedy the original harm).

I will not start a physical altercation or encourage others to start one. I will seek alternatives to violence in order to deescalate confrontational situations and help someone escape an environment in which they are being harmed physically, mentally, or emotionally (e.g.

domestic abuse). Similarly, I will not put others or myself in a situation where harm is a probable, logical outcome. For example, I will not partake in the recreational use of addictive substances.

I view abortion as a prudential, rather than ethical issue if acted upon in accordance to the medical community's guidelines and ethical standards (i.e. before the third trimester). Depriving someone of their bodily autonomy is an egregious harm except in instances where there is an imminent risk of physical harm to another person. (Note: I do not believe fetuses constitute persons and thus have no claim to human rights.) Moreover, I will accept and advocate for medically assisted suicide if a patient has a terminal illness and has exhausted all other reasonable treatment options (i.e. where continued treatment would prolong suffering and reduce quality of life).

Professional Ethics. When choosing an employer, I will not work for an organization that does not comport with my ethical code (e.g. use exploitative labor practices) unless I am able to remedy their behaviors and patterns as their employee. For example, I would not work for a conservative lobbying firm that advocates positions in conflict with this ethical code. However, I would accept a position working to correct undesirable (i.e. unethical) behavior in an organization. Furthermore, I will not use my leadership powers (Johnson, 2019) to promote unethical behavior according to my personal code. In accordance with the above mentioned topics, I will not lie, deceive, cheat, steal, or harm another to further my career or professional interests. For example, I will not laugh at an offensive joke to curry favor with the boss. I will also not stay quiet when I see patterns of unethical behavior, even if it means losing my job.

Proximity to Unethical Behavior. This strain of logic follows consequentialism. If I view my actions as directly related to unethical behavior, I will seek alternatives or withdraw. If I

am unable to prevent or correct unethical behavior, I will offer other remedies to the situation when presented with the opportunity. For example, I will not try cure an addict by destroying their stash, but I can help them contact an addiction counselor or other qualified professionals. I will not interfere with someone's alleged criminal behavior unless the risk of physical harm is too great to ignore. For example, as a bank teller, I was instructed to give a robber all the cash in my drawer. However, if there is a risk of imminent physical harm, I will contact the proper authorities and do everything in my power to help without making the situation worse (e.g. I would not feel comfortable using a firearm since I would pose a greater risk to myself and innocent life than to the attacker). If I become aware of alleged criminal activity after the fact, I will weigh the potential benefits and hazards of reporting the incident (i.e. this would be a prudential decision).

Final Thoughts

According to Howard and Korver (2008), a strong ethical code is logical, focused, and useful for real world application. Therefore, while revising my code, I tested it for universality and reciprocity. I also find it practical, noncontradictory, and simple to follow. When necessary, supplementary negative ethical statements and scenarios were added to clarify positive ethical statements. Additionally, this code has been drafted to avoid hierarchal dilemmas except when physical harm is imminent. Protecting the well-being of another person supersedes other ethical considerations (e.g. not stealing, lying, harming, etc.). I did not include a separate section on favoritism (or nepotism, etc.) since these topics fall under the category of *privilege*. Furthermore, social privileges are often held unknowingly, so it is impractical to state "I will not benefit from my privilege." Instead, I find it essential to use my privilege to remedy oppression and not to support or partake in unethical behavior.

As previously mentioned, I recognize my limited knowledge and anticipated lack of relevant data leave me vulnerable to ethical mistakes. Still, to date there are no infallible prescriptive decision-making models—much less universal ethical codes. This caveat is not mentioned to rationalize potential unethical behavior, but rather acknowledge the need to practice self-awareness. Howard and Korver's (2008) drafting guide is a useful tool to start the development process, and I look forward to revisiting this topic to refine my code when necessary.

References

- Howard, R. A., & Korver, C. D. (2008). *Ethics for the real world: Creating a personal code to guide decisions in work and life*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Johnson, C. E. (2019). *Organizational ethics: A practical approach* (Fourth ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.