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Professional Ethics

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Why Do Ethical Codes Have To Be So Boring?

The issue brought into question comes from the essay "Codes of Ethics: Texts in Practice," written by Peta Bowden and Anne Surma, published in 2003 in *Professional Ethics*. The essay highlights the possible errors that having official ethical codes can cause. Authors Bowden and Surma suggest that having ethical codes set at a highly official capacity can lead to alienation in the workplace. They then argue that if codes were more of an ongoing discussion, then the users of each code would feel more inclined to behave in accordance with it. The reason why this discussion is necessary is that ethical codes are not something to be taken lightly. If users find themselves alienated by official codes then another look at bettering the situation for all professionals would be beneficial for the social order of things. In other words, ethical codes are put into place to protect society, to create order, and therefore it is important to analyze the usefulness of ethical codes. In agreement with Bowden and Surma, adding code users' thoughts, opinions, and experiences to ethical codes at an official capacity would aid in the users feeling "engaged" and willingness to adhere to the codes.

The examples looked at throughout the essay cover many universities across Australia. In trying to argue how mundane and bureaucratic ethical codes can be written, Bowden and Surma show that there are certain aspects of the universities' official codes that are line for line

verbatim to each other. While acknowledging that the codes are for similar institutions, the authors further pointed out how this act takes all personality and possible points of self-relevance out of the ethical codes. Bowden and Surma state that when there is no language that allows for user "engagement," this can lead to "alienation" in the code user.

The second point that Bowden and Burma make in their essay is that official ethical codes have a detached, impersonal tone. And because of this, Bowden and Surma suggest users can lead to thinking that ethical codes are self-sufficient and completed, which in most cases, does not actually spell out answers to highly contextual ethical questions or dilemmas, leaving code users out of place. This is a large error according to Bowden and Burma because of its nearly paradoxical nature: ethical situations all carry uniquely different contexts in all matters of the word. The authors argue that a blanket set of codes of educational institutions do not take into consideration the "ethos" of each campus or the culture of each university.

Bowden and Burma suggest a resolution of creating an open discussion of ethical codes at each institution; that this would relieve both code users' sense of alienation and impersonalization in the codes themselves. To do this, Bowden and Burma strategize a plan of taking ethical codes at a high official and bureaucratic capacity, down to a more casual, yet still professional, level and this would then automatically input personable and engageable language into the codes. Because Bowden and Burma found that detached tones cause alienation, they concluded that a more relatable tone would cause attention to the codes.

In reading Bowden and Burma's essay, it is easy to unwittingly agree with what they are suggesting is correct. And this is because their explanation of what can lead to alienation is nearly full-proof; bland and impersonal texts are mundane and generally hard to read through

and thusly difficult to see one's self in. But the difficulty lies in the *how* institutions could improve their ethical codes. Holding an open discussion, in a large meeting per se, would only account for the anecdotes of the people that speak/ are in attendance. At the same time, holding an online survey would not allow for the discussion that an in-person meeting would allow. In addition, the online survey would also only count anecdotes of the survey participants that belong to the institution at the time. Suggesting that such practices would have to be a constant endeavor because of changing faculty and staff. But because ethical codes ought to be changed constantly, the only key issue would be: how do officials write out codes for professionals to follow if they are always changing? And could this cause implications that the codes are not to be taken too seriously.

With the above line of thinking in mind, I believe that official ethical codes ought to be of two parts: (1) an official stance of obvious social orders that are put into place in every profession, and (2) an online forum-like platform for code users to share their anecdotes and opinions. This way, there would be no point of confusion as to why ethics and ethical codes are being taken so lightly. Moreover, code users would then be able to feel engaged with the workings of the codes as well as be able to read on what other professionals have done in the past during similar circumstances. With users having the ability to insert their own personal language into the official body of institutional ethics, then Bowden and Burma's theory on users becoming alienated should then be avoided. Beyond this, there still ought to be a basic blanket ethical codes such as "professionals should not be discriminatory or aggressive" that cannot be called into question.

The argument that Bowden and Burma pose in their essay suggests that the way official ethical codes are written for professional institutions could ultimately cause a ripple in the way that the code users adhere to it. When language is difficult to read because of how detached and impersonal it is, it is understandable that one could not completely be or feel liable to it. Engagement between the code and its users ought to improve the ethical standards of an institution. For this reason, is agreeance with Bowden and Burma, including code users' experiences, opinions, and anecdotes to ethical codes at an official capacity would promote users feeling involved and in compliance with the codes.