

Ethics in Delft

There was a time when I studied medicine. In those days, the issue of ethics never came up at all. At Delft University of Technology however, ethics is a compulsory subject for all the faculties. This is not as peculiar as it may seem.

Ethics is the part of philosophy concerned with such issues as what should we do, what is morally acceptable, desirable, or objectionable? In our part of the world, ethics used to be closely tied in with the Christian religion, but these days it is trying to get by on its own because non-Christians also want to know what is and what is not desirable. Contemporary literature on ethics hardly mentions the words God or the Bible.

Ethics could well be the solid core of philosophy. Other parts of philosophy tend to become separate sciences the moment they become successful. This is how natural philosophy transcended into physics, and how logic became mathematics and information technology. However, this won't work with ethics, since whatever the facts may be, and however good we may be at reasoning, we will always be wondering what we should be wanting, doing, and not doing.

Delft University isn't the only university of technology where ethics is a compulsory part of the curriculum. Other countries also recognise its importance. Canadian engineers wear an iron or steel ring on their little finger to remind them of their social responsibilities. The story has it that the original rings were made from the material of a bridge that collapsed in Quebec, killing almost all the construction workers. The ring is to remind its wearer that one cannot deliver slipshod work without worrying about the consequences. It is a good thing that this message is rammed home during engineers' training.

Ever since I came to Delft I've known why it is that technical education values ethics higher than medical training institutes do. In medicine your responsibility is fairly limited. As a doctor all you have to worry about is the fate of individual persons. It's different with technology, which often involves the well-being of hundreds of people. In January of this year the readers of the British Medical Journal voted for what they considered to be the most important medical breakthrough of the last 140 years. What they chose as winners were piped drinking water and sewer systems. In other words, technical solutions. The readers were right, of course, since technology affects society far more than medicine does. An engineer therefore carries a much greater responsibility than a doctor, and so it is hardly surprising that while medical training ignored ethics, the engineering courses in Delft do not.

And there is something else going on. Doctors work on creations of nature, whereas engineers deal with man-made objects. As a result, the latter embody our insights, standards, and values. Why do cars have safety belts, and why do nuclear power plants have lead shielding? Not because of any laws of nature, but because of our innate desire for safety. The entire world of engineering is imbued with the essence of ethics. It pervades every aspect of our technical artifacts. It's just as well to be aware of the fact. I'm glad that by playing my part in education and research I can contribute in my own way to upholding the standards of ethics in Delft.

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