

Car Exhaust and The Virtue of Ethics

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Picture this: you are the CEO of one of the leading automobile producers in the industry. People from around the world have been driving in your vehicles for decades, and they keep coming back for more. After all, this is a trusted brand and there is no reason for things to be otherwise. That is until 8 years after you take your position at the head of the company, when you discover severe missteps made by the engineers of your company. These missteps were discovered by an agency overlooking the production of your cars, who had found that one of your models did not comply with certain regulations. As it turns out, and as it is described to you, the same problems lie within the chassis of 11 million cars worldwide. In the shame of endangering so many people for so long, you make your final statement on the situation as CEO, and you step down.

When Volkswagen was caught for being dishonest in their emissions test results in September of 2015 in a scandal known as Dieseldieselgate, the executive board of the company claimed that Martin Winterkorn, the CEO, had no knowledge of the incident, despite the fact that he was claiming responsibility. We can't delve into the minds of those executives to find out whether or not they were telling the truth. However, we can be certain that this distinction doesn't need to be made, since the company had breached something important to the integrity of the field of engineering either way. That something wasn't the law or the trust of the people, though in this case both were important and had decidedly been broken. In fact, it was the code of ethics that had been brought to the table the moment the company had admitted to its lapse in judgement.

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, otherwise known as IEEE, has what is known as a code of ethics. This is a list of agreed-upon and widely accepted standards in the profession to keep its image acceptable in the eyes of the public, like how a group of artists hold themselves to a set of standards to retain trust from their commissioners. Without a code of ethics, the only other way to keep industries in check is through the law, which greatly restricts their development. For many groups and companies, a code of ethics can include topics ranging from sharing information to not intentionally harming people. For the IEEE in particular, their focus might be condensed into 3 categories: honesty, education, and the consideration of human life.

The director general of the Institute of Directors at the time of the Volkswagen incident, Simon Walker, had stated his opinion on the matter. "If the board members knew what was happening, that is clearly severe – and possibly criminal – malpractice. If they didn't, then that is a dangerous failure of responsibility." That second sentence, though not incriminating, does harm the reputation of Volkswagen greatly, and encapsulates the issue of ethics greatly. "Failure of responsibility" is not a legal issue. Still, when violated, it opens the door for a number of hazards, such as the unrestricted release of NO_x into the air by falsely tested product. When I discussed this issue with a group of people, the decision was relatively unanimous that the actions taken by Volkswagen in this instance was strictly unethical. The right thing to do would

have been to tell the truth and halt production until the emissions issue was resolved in engineering.

Though this issue is easy to come to a consensus on, there are some that lie in quite a gray area. In another issue, an Amazon Echo device had captured and streamed to the cloud vital information relating to a murder investigation. When police attempted to ask Amazon to obtain that information, the company refused, citing the privacy of their customers. This raises a number of questions when presented to a group. What is considered permission to record a conversation, the purchase of the product or a spoken word? Is it considered unethical to not share data critical to a murder investigation in favor of the privacy of a customer, both of which regard IEEE ethics code 1 regarding public welfare? What is the current definition, in the technology industry, of privacy? It is for this reason that whether what Amazon did was ethical or not was debated within the group, leaving a rather hazy answer. Though everyone's perception of the issues presented by the case were similar, our individual thoughts and focuses on them varied. Whereas I focused mainly on the issue of data collection as it applies to the industry as a whole, those I talked to focused on whether that data should be allowed to be seized by greater authority when it is requested, or whether codes of ethics were actually broken.

Virtue ethics, according to Britannica, is an "approach to ethics that takes the notion of virtue as fundamental." Though in the class this topic was presented to me there were 6 core virtue ethics, there were 3 that I felt applied the most to the issues I read about. The first, honesty, is comprised of truthfulness and sincerity. This was ignored by the engineers at Volkswagen when they gave false information on their tests. The second was responsibility, the ability to act for the greater good when you must, something that both companies can be said to have violated. Integrity was the last, a sort of meta-ethic discussing the quality of the ethical judgement of an entity. While Volkswagen could be said to have had weak integrity in Dieselgate, due to the nature of the problem surrounding Amazon's data collection, their integrity is only in question.

Incidentally, when faced with an ethical dilemma, these are the 3 ethics that are easiest for my mind to comprehend. They cover the 3 interactions that I see involved in these situations, virtue for being ethical to myself, responsibility for being ethical to another person or group of people, and honesty for a truthful and trusted interaction between the two. I make it a point to apply these ethics to my everyday life, let alone my academic work, as a way to develop relationships, to make people comfortable, and to help keep them safe.

The other 3 virtue ethics described to us, fidelity, responsibility, and self-discipline, felt less important to me. Though in many cases they are needed, such as within a team or a family, they are not necessarily needed in all interactions and relationships. At a certain point, a person could sadly lose faith in another after a long line of disagreement and disrespect. There are some people who would feel they are in a much better place without charity from anyone else. Too much self-discipline could lead to indulgence whenever that discipline is broken. These three ethics are still important, but do not ring as true to me as the others. If I were able to add to the list, though, I would want to include flexibility. As casual as the phrase sounds, it seems important to apply when living in a constantly evolving world. Different cultures have different morals and the inability to adapt to those morals implies much about your own. Flexibility could also be applied to situations within a company when things don't go according to plan. Even one

slip-up could have major effects on the end product and its users. Applying flexibility to these situations allows the company to reassess and change plans for the good of the community around them. It is an idea like this that can prevent a number of issues, including the unwillingness to extend time on the development of a car to lower the amount of emissions it produces.

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