

ROBERT WENGERT

Professor of Philosophy  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Some Ethical Questions for Consideration and Discussion

[*Editor's note:* The final session of this conference, perhaps the highlight of the entire event, was not a formal paper. Professor Wengert facilitated a discussion among participants of some ethical questions he had formulated. The questions had been presented to them at the time of registration, so they had been given the opportunity to consider their stance before the discussion occurred. The questions are reproduced here in the hope that they will be of use to others leading discussions on ethical issues.

Before Professor Wengert led the discussion, he introduced some general principles relating to ethics, as follows.]

### **What Ethics Is Not**

1. Whatever religious authorities say
2. Whatever legal authorities say
3. Whatever public opinion is

### **Some Substitutes for "Hard Thinking" in Ethics**

1. Absolutism. Things that are right or wrong are always right or wrong. Circumstances make no difference.
2. Relativism. What is right or wrong depends entirely on how one feels about some matter. What is right for one person could be wrong for another in exactly the same situation.

### **Some Styles of Reasoning in Ethics**

1. Result theories (consequentialist, teleological): An action is determined to be right or wrong by whether its results or consequences

- are good or bad. An example is *utilitarianism*: One should do what will bring about the greatest welfare of all concerned.
2. Nonconsequentialist theories (deontological): Certain things ought (or ought not) to be done regardless of their consequences. An example is *contractualism*: An act is wrong if it violates those constraints which any rational person, considering the matter in a way which favors no one's particular interests, would agree should be imposed.

### ETHICAL QUESTIONS

These appear as a series of statements or of actual questions with which one can agree or fail to agree. They formed the basis for a spirited discussion at the conference and revealed wide differences of opinion among the participants.

1. Is it all right to say, "\$100,000 represents my top offer for this property," when indeed it does not?
2. Is it all right to say, "\$100,000 is what you owe us for our services," when indeed it is not?
3. If the government has fixed the highway speed at 55 miles per hour, is it wrong (immoral, unethical) to drive at 60 mph on the highway?
4. If the government has fixed the emission rate for a chemical from your library's heating system at 55 parts per billion, would it be wrong for you to increase the emission rate to 60 ppb?
5. A student asks for help on a topic for Professor Wengert's class. You find something on a reference database. He thanks you. You overhear him saying to a friend that he is downloading this information, printing it out, and handing it in to Prof. Wengert as his own. Should you say something to Prof. Wengert, whom you know, about this?
6. A week after the event described in question number 5, Prof. Wengert comes to you and says that he suspects one of the students in his class of plagiarizing. He asks if you would know where the student may have gotten the information. Should you tell Prof. Wengert the truth?
7. Three of your staff at the reference desk have begun to wear pro-choice buttons while serving patrons. You tell them not to wear the buttons while working at the reference desk. They say you have treated them unethically by depriving them of their right of free speech. Have you?
8. A lawyer representing the plaintiff in a complicated suit has worked with you in the law library for about a week tracking down obscure

but relevant material. In gratitude for your help, the lawyer has shared with you some references and modes of cross-reference with which you had been unfamiliar. The next week, the lawyer for the defendant asks if you could help him find information on the case. You do not mention its source, but you immediately give him all the information you got from the plaintiff's lawyer. Is this unethical?

9. Credit companies regularly call the library requesting information from the city directory about names of the neighbors of a person whose account is delinquent. Library policy is to refuse to give out such information. Is this unethical?
10. The situation is the same as for question number 9, but this time the agent for the company comes to the library and asks to use the city directory. The agent is always shown where the directory is and even how to use it if help is needed. Is this unethical?
11. Neighbors of the library have requested that it join them in protesting the plan to open a massage parlor in a building just two doors down from the library. You refuse to join the protest on the grounds that a library must remain neutral on controversial issues. Are you right?
12. An arson has occurred locally. At the site, firefighters have discovered a bookbag they think might have been used by the arsonist. The bag is burnt but two of the books are identifiably from your library. You are asked to supply the name of the patron who has the books charged out. You refuse to do so on grounds that it will violate the patron's privacy. Is that the right decision?
13. A young girl has recently been murdered. On her body was found a picture about satanic cults. The picture had come from a fairly recent issue of a news magazine. In the return cart of your library, you see that issue of the magazine. It appears that some pages may have been cut out of it. You decide that investigating it more carefully might compromise the privacy of a patron. You ignore it. Did you do the right thing?
14. Several patrons have requested that the library purchase a diet book which experts in reviews have identified as dangerous to the health of anyone who follows the diet. You decide not to order the book. Is this unethical?
15. Your library charges fees for the use of records, videos, films, databases and recent best-selling books, but there is no fee for other books or magazines. Are you being unfair in your treatment of patrons who prefer audio-visual materials and bestsellers?
16. You are asked by the local police chief and the FBI to tell them of any individuals or groups who request materials on supercomputers and also to tell them of any individuals or groups who ask about

- others using the materials on supercomputers. You readily agree. Are you being unethical?
17. You are asked by the local ACLU chapter and the ALA to tell them of any individuals or groups who are requesting information about others using material in the library. Is this unethical?
  18. As an academic librarian, when the President of the University makes a request, you clearly handle it more quickly and carefully than you would have had the request been made by an undergraduate. Is this wrong?
  19. As a medical librarian, you will give a caller the definition of a technical medical term having to do with their health, but when they further ask what that means and why their doctor might be testing them for that, you refer them to their physician even when you know the answer perfectly well. Is this the right thing to do?
  20. As a reference librarian, you will give a caller the definition of a technical legal term having to do with their welfare rights, but when they further ask what that means and what they are supposed to do about it, you refer them to their attorney even when you know the answer perfectly well. Is this right of you to do?
  21. You charge more than cost on the copy machine so that you can get enough money to purchase some serials you otherwise could not afford. Is this ethical of you?
  22. An employee of your public library has been convicted of child abuse. This took place in another town and did not involve a library patron. He has been placed on probation. His action and conviction have been widely publicized and many people are upset that the judge let him off so lightly. He does his job for your library well. Should you fire him?
  23. Answer the following questions as simply and directly as you can:
    - a) When you say an action is wrong, what do you mean?
    - b) When you say an action is "the right thing to do," what do you mean?
  24. Mention one or two of the highest terms of praise you can imagine for another human whom you know.
  25. Mention one or two of the strongest terms of criticism you can imagine using of another person whom you know.