HERBERT S. WHITE
Professor and former Dean
School of Library and Information Science
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

Teaching Professional Ethics
to Students of Library and
Information Science

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of ethics have been around for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years, and have recently received considerable new attention in the library profession. The author's late friend and colleague Manfred Kochen (1987) offered a very useful analysis in which he attempted to track the development of ethics, which over time many people have claimed as their own domain, but with regard to which there remains a great deal of confusion. The author's own attempt to spotlight the lack of consistency in the library field, as librarians seek not only to define but also to claim ethics as something they possess and others fail to honor, can be inferred from the working title of an upcoming Library Journal article column, "My Truths Are More Moral Than Your Biases" (White, 1990). Kochen's article notes that ethics deal with principles for judging right and wrong. That sounds self-evident enough, but what is right? Who is right? Machiavelli had no difficulty with the issue because to him, might made right. Eighteenth-century theologians postulated that ethical behavior was behavior in accordance with the will of God, but to recognize the difficulty with that definition it need only be remembered that most religious persecution, including the Inquisition and the death warrant for Salman Rushdie, was and is ostensibly in the name of God, and burning at the stake was justified quite neatly on the premise that God would not let an innocent person burn to death. Since they all did burn, they were also declared guilty of heresy, or whatever they were charged with. William James helped us along by noting that
it was the duty of man to know the will of God and keep it (easily said!). John Stuart Mill postulated that right is that which produces human happiness, while Immanuel Kant equated right with reason. Of course, today it is commonly known what difficulties can be found in work settings with the word *reasonable*. "Be reasonable" often means that the speaker is being reasonable while the person who is being spoken to is not. The search for compromise as a reasonable solution runs contrary to the general belief that right equals reasonable and only the unreasonable need compromise (thereby giving a new meaning to the term.) To add to the confusion, one is also urged to stand by one's principles and never compromise them away. Nietzsche pragmatically argued that by right was meant that which produced the next stage of evolution, what Nietzsche called the *superman*. That makes ethics easy to define for oneself, because ethics then becomes whatever one wants it to be, from conclusions one has already reached. One need only note what Hitler was able to do with an extension of Nietzsche's philosophy.

**THE COMPLEXITY OF ETHICAL CONCERNS**

However, this is not a paper on historical developments of ethics, better left to individuals far better qualified than the author. Suffice to say that the confusion and difficulty surrounding the topic continues to this day. When newsman Bill Moyers (1989) conducts an in-depth interview with modern-day ethicist Michael Josephson, many pages of eloquent exposition in conversation with one of the brightest interviewers of the day nevertheless leaves one with the impression that Josephson is dealing with interpretations of the golden rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It is certainly a useful and valid statement, but it does not really help in more than a very limited sense, e.g., do not murder or do not steal. But does not a librarian give information to individuals who would do with it what the librarian would not? That does not fit nearly as well, and it spotlights the problem that ethical concerns for professionals are not easy and obvious issues. Librarians oppose censorship, but the Library Bill of Rights and the codes of ethics adopted by various American Library Association bodies really state the obvious and solve no problems. Library schools must indeed teach this, but more importantly, they must teach how to make it work. However, professional conflicts fall on more complicated ground. What are librarians' responsibilities to employers, be they corporations, universities, or public agencies? Can these responsibilities be contradictory to those owed to library users? What if the inadequacy of funding or staffing provided by library funding agencies means that librarians
are providing inadequate service to them? It is a fascinating characteristic of the professional library literature that librarians worry a great deal about whether or not government documents should be released to the public through the depository library system, and not one whit whether or not anybody can find them in a massive cataloging backlog, assuming the documents are cataloged at all. What is the professional ethical concern in a cataloging backlog; or in a failure to have adequate reference service available; or in the recognition that, while a copy of a book has been purchased, the patron cannot have it because it is charged out and the librarian refuses to borrow another copy? One can see that the issues involving professional ethics are more complicated than they first appear.

**Employer-Employee Conflicts**

The conflicts between responsibility to the profession and to the employer have been discussed in many fields. In general, it has been noted that humanists, such as history or philosophy professors, see their responsibility to their profession, and their employer and his or her value systems play only an incidental role. By contrast, scientists and engineers are seen to owe their greater allegiances to their employer, and they do what the employer asks them to do. Thus, when the author came to Oak Ridge, Tennessee in 1953, there were many individuals there who had worked hard and long on the development of the atomic bomb in the early 1940s. They found out only after Hiroshima and Nagasaki that they had been working on a destructive bomb. It is an interesting sidelight of ethical history to know that some of the refugee scientists from Germany who did know were perfectly willing to drop the bomb on Germany, but after the Germans had already surrendered in the spring of 1945, these scientists were reluctant to drop it on the Japanese, whom they saw as a lesser enemy not deserving of impersonal annihilation. Other individuals, of course, fought the Japanese with far more enthusiasm than they could muster for fighting the Germans. That is, of course, blatant racism, and totally unacceptable even if still practiced in 1991, but quite acceptable in 1942 if one remembers the totally illegal (as well as unnecessary) Nisei internment. What is the role of ethics if it is bent to personal and convenient value systems? Is it wrong to block the entrance to an abortion clinic but acceptable to block the entrance to a nuclear power plant? Do library educators need to deal with these issues?

One company that attempts to straddle the issues of public image when it comes to ethics is Dow Chemical. Dow was one of the developers of Agent Orange as used in Vietnam, in response to the perceived
government need for a defoliant. It is clear that Dow is now sensitive to implications it had no particular reasons to anticipate, and certainly any chemical contractor could have produced this product whose chemical formula was known. However, Dow is now recruiting young people who want to find "chemical solutions to societal problems." Dow’s primary objective, now as then, is to its stockholders, who expect it to make a profit; certainly, the president of Dow knows this—and the young Dow chemist will learn it. Bankrupt ethical organizations are not much good to anybody, and the difficulty is in maintaining a balance. It is sometimes not easy. Exxon is now roundly condemned for allowing the Alaska oil spill to take place, but that oil spill was probably caused by an Exxon employee who was a long-time substance abuser, and some of the people who now condemn Exxon are the same ones who would have objected if Exxon had put into place a tough program of mandatory or random drug testing, and fired the offenders. Some of those people who would prefer to have it both ways are librarians, and some even serve on the ALA Council. The problems of human imbalance are not new, and technology at least offers the potential for greater distribution. In libraries, it means enhanced bibliographic access and document delivery which might help a doctor in a backward area. In earthquakes, the loss of life in California was far smaller than in Armenia, despite the fact that California’s was a quake of greater magnitude, because building construction technology in the United States is better and leaves far fewer homeless.

PERSONAL ETHICS VS. PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Private citizens have responsibilities to prevent injustice, evil, racial hatred, nuclear holocaust, and environmental blight; they are also free to develop personal interpretations. What happens when personal standards get in the way of assigned professional duties as subordinate employees and, just perhaps, in the way of professional ethics? It is, as with the Exxon case, always easy to judge with 20/20 hindsight. German scientists should have refused to develop the poison gases used in Auschwitz and the other death camps, and Werner von Braun was a "bad" German when he helped develop the V-2 bomb that fell indiscriminately all over London. Later, of course, he became a "good" German, and finally the quality of Germans was irrelevant and the Russians were "bad." Now that the Russians are getting to be "good," Americans are in danger of having only the "bad" South Africans, and there are not enough of them to go around.

Retrospective judgments are always applied by winners to losers.
Thus, the Andersonville Trial occurred because Andersonville was a Confederate prison, while what happened in the Union prison at Elmira, New York was irrelevant because the North won the war. Those who have seen the play *The Andersonville Trial* (Levitt, 1960) will recall the idealistic young prosecutor who is ultimately brought into line by the military judges who understand that they are not here in a search for justice or ethics, but rather to find Captain Wirtz guilty so that he can be hung. There are those who are rhapsodic about the Nuremberg trials, but this author has his difficulties. Countries are still using poison gas and tactics of starvation on their own citizens, and the world does not even seem to notice. Indeed, representatives of these countries participate in UN symposia that extol human rights.

In any case, professionals have their ethical codes that can get in the way of practice. Thus, the Hippocratic Oath would require any Jewish surgeon to have attempted to save the life of Adolph Hitler. Lawyers are supposed to do their best to defend their client even if they are certain he or she is guilty, and if possible get their client freed on a technicality even if that outcome means that more crimes will be committed. A recent graduation speech on ethical conduct was delivered at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania by an investment banker who clearly does have a social conscience as well as a knack for making money, Felix Rohatyn. He noted the emphasis in American business on making money through junk bonds, leveraged buyouts, green mail, and golden parachutes, and urged these new graduates to go out and not simply manipulate blips on a computer screen but build the country. Rohatyn’s audience of future financiers cheered him, but what impact his talk had will not be known until much later. It is significant that Rohatyn said what he did because he thought that the Wharton professors had not said it, and later interviews with the audience of graduates indicate that his assumption was correct. What the professors had been teaching is what the financial community had wanted them to teach; by extension, that included leveraged buyouts and junk bonds.

**What Library Schools Teach**

What is taught in library schools, and what does the profession want to be taught there? Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, in a talk presented at a conference in Aberystwyth, Wales, stated quite simply that the job of librarians and information specialists was to help their patrons find whatever information they needed. What those people did with that information was not the librarian’s concern. It is certainly a simple ethic if it can be adopted, and it has similarities to what doctors and lawyers
are supposed to believe. However, Bar-Hillel's thesis opens the door to a great deal of second-guessing. It also contradicts the mood of many individuals who come to library school to become librarians because they want to make the world better. Rohatyn would not have had to make his speech at a library school graduation since library students are not really in their chosen profession for the money.

The big ethical issue for librarians, in their professional literature and in their educational emphasis, has been on access to information. It is an important issue, and it concentrates on familiar themes. Unfettered access is championed and strong stands are taken against government policies that attempt to withhold information either through restrictions on distribution that affect depository systems or by attempting to limit distribution by pseudo-security classifications such as unclassified but sensitive or by charging for government information. Government attempts to limit access have been effectively and articulately opposed. The most significant and visible impact is in the fight against censorship and the banning of books, although banning usually applies only to removal after purchase. Attempts to remove such material as the work of Judy Blume or Kurt Vonnegut on the grounds of unsuitability, or the diary of Anne Frank because it is "depressing" have been vigorously opposed. There are also fights, some equally vehement and some less so, against censorship from the "good" side—individuals who consider Huckleberry Finn or Little Black Sambo as racist, or works such as The Taming of the Shrew as sexist. This is always a difficulty with classics. Shakespeare would not have thought The Merchant of Venice blatantly anti-Semitic but simply the normal thought of the time among Shakespeare's countrymen.

In any case, librarians fight these issues with a will, even to the extent of finding themselves allied with child pornographers, because the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom believes, and many agree, that nothing should be censored. In general, there is no difficulty in getting students to accept these concepts. Many come from library backgrounds, and their value systems are already inclined to accept the premise of open access.

The Book Selection Process and De Facto Censorship

It has already been noted that censorship in libraries consists primarily of removing material already purchased. Below the surface are other issues not as readily addressed. The decision not to buy something in the first place is more easily defended as long as the claim is that this is not censorship but merely the implementation of value judgments, since obviously not every item can be purchased. If there
are librarian biases in this process, it is a thicket into which lawyers would have difficulty following unless librarians were foolish enough to put some of these things in writing. Do librarians discriminate in their own decisions? Perhaps not blatantly, but it is human nature to consider the things one agrees with as more important and worthwhile than the things one disagrees with. Librarians have very little latitude in some areas, but in the decisions of what to buy and what not to buy, they have a great deal. Students are urged in library school courses to purchase "quality" books, but how is that judgment to be made? A study by Indiana University professor Judith Serebnick (1981) notes that librarians buy books that are reviewed, whether or not the reviews are favorable, in preference to books that are not reviewed. Critics who argue that libraries fail to purchase material published by alternative presses may be stressing the wrong point. They argue that libraries must acquire such alternative publications dealing with "different" lifestyles as a public service, while others would take the Baltimore County view that libraries should buy books that users want to read. That is an important issue of distinction, and it does get discussed in some major library education courses.

The reason librarians fail to purchase alternative books is neither an ethical nor a reader-oriented value judgment. The reason they are not bought is because selecting them is too much trouble. Does the library have a role in persuading to a "correct" point of view through selection policies on such issues as nuclear disarmament, freedom of choice for abortion, or the equal rights amendment? Librarians have the opportunity to do this because to a large extent their initial decisions are largely unfettered and only second-guessed.

Bar-Hillel would argue that such value systems are clearly none of the librarian's business, and the Library Bill of Rights and various codes of ethics would at least partially agree. Certainly they would argue that one should not consciously withhold information because of its content, but if one fails to buy the item in which the information is contained, this is a qualitative decision that can be defended. That is the issue that arises when ultraconservatives and alternative press advocates complain that the library does not have their material. Librarians respond that ultraconservative literature is lacking because most of it is badly written and its arguments shoddily presented. This criticism is dangerous because it is totally subjective, but the problems with such criticism are rarely discussed in library schools.

Social Responsibility and the Librarian

Far more open are the social activists who argue that libraries cannot be neutral in the battle between right and wrong. The difficulty
is, of course, in the definition of right and wrong. Sometimes this discussion takes subtle turns. The author's own writings have raised the question of whether librarians, who clearly have the obligation of helping destitute tenants find ways to avoid eviction, also have an equal obligation to help landlords look for ways to evict so that they can tear down a building and erect a shopping mall or high-priced condominium (White, 1986). A small group answers, "Of course"; a second group finds it a contrived question—always a good response for a question one does not want to answer; and a third group argues that tenants need libraries while landlords have other outlets. All three groups can be found on library school faculties and, like faculty anywhere, they do as much inculcating as teaching.

The social activists who see a proactive role for the library in helping the poor (presumably against the oppressive rich) raise issues not covered in the rather bland Bill of Rights and codes of ethics, which fight only enemies on whom all are agreed. Thus, Fay Blake (1978) has argued that libraries discriminate de facto against poor people because poor people do not need bibliographies. It is an intriguing argument because oppressors do not need bibliographies, either, and because understaffed librarians do not have the time to compile that many bibliographies. Michael Harris (1976) has argued for some time that the entire premise of the public library is as a capitalist contrivance to keep poor people in their place, and that Andrew Carnegie knew exactly what he was funding and why he was funding it.

It has been suggested that the public library of the future undoubt-edly had the greater role of serving poor people, because the affluent would have other access to information. It is for many an attractive argument that can lead to ethical difficulties. Libraries have taken on increasing responsibility for helping the illiterate. It is in one sense a curious reversal of the classic library role, quite aside from its moral values. Libraries by their very nature serve people who know how to read, and it is the schools that have by and large failed abysmally in preparing the library's customers. If librarians now take on this responsibility, and do so without additional funding, then decisions are made that take priority and money away from other clients. How are those decisions made? It is something library schools do not teach, and perhaps it is something they cannot teach, but it is an issue to which library educators must alert and sensitize their students.

Even more curious is the issue of latchkey children. This is a social problem which on the face of it has nothing to do with libraries at all, unless the children are drawn to the library as a library rather than just as a safe, dry place. But if the reason they come is to read, then nothing stopped them before and nothing has changed.
The questions of professional ethics raised here are much broader than the simple issue of political activism urged by Henry Blanke (1989). Blanke accuses librarians of having claimed neutrality as a ploy to achieve professional status. The argument is not only dishonest because it suggests that librarians do what displeases Blanke solely as a self-serving device, but it also completely ignores the possibility that at least some librarians might opt not for neutrality but for evenhandedness as a matter of professional responsibility, even though taking political stances is obviously more emotionally rewarding.

These, then, are among the issues of professional ethics with which library schools rarely, if ever, deal. Library educators discuss how censors and bigots should be fought, but not as often about how to recognize and compensate for the librarian’s personal bias. If one is pro-choice, how does that affect one’s attitude toward a patron wearing a Falwell button? If one is pro-life, how does one make sure that this bias does not show? The easy (and unacceptable) answer is either that the other person is wrong (and one can substitute “bigoted” for any biases other than one’s own), or that the other person has other access to information. Is this relevant?

What is the rationale for charging corporate libraries for reference access to public libraries, presumably on the basis that corporations are rich, when corporations pay taxes that support the library and are as entitled to information as anyone else? If the library wants to limit the amount of information it will provide to any client, that is another issue, but what, then, does that decision morally imply? Why do corporate librarians put up with this double standard, rather than simply say that if this is a free library to residents, then service to the resident which happens to be a corporation should also be free? Inconsistency is met with indifference instead of responsibility.

Responsibilities to Employer, Client, and Self

Different professions approach the dichotomy between the responsibilities to their professions and their responsibilities to their employers quite differently. Librarians, like social workers, find a third responsibility in a devotion to their “clients” (it has been a long time since social caseworkers have called them “cases”).

Librarians nevertheless harbor considerable responsibility to their employers. They carry out some responsibilities to their clients but choose those responsibilities inconsistently. They carry little responsibility, if any, to their profession, and that, too, warrants an explanation. Librarians are extremely loyal organization men and women. As a special librarian, the author finds that example most obvious in watching
his colleagues at conferences concentrating not on social involvement but on learning things to make them more effective employees. At one point in its history, the Special Libraries Association faced the possibility of a ruling from the IRS that it was not a professional association at all, but rather a business league, because its primary business and indeed its bylaws stressed improving service to the employer. This acculturation is seen clearly and immediately as former students who are now special librarians come back to lecture at library schools. They clearly represent the organization, the quality of its products, and the uniqueness of its services.

Public librarians show this organizational loyalty in a different way, most directly in their unwillingness to complain openly about inadequacies of support and in their willingness to rationalize that whatever library they are allowed to run is a good library, through a process sometimes called community analysis, which is really only a retrofitting of needs to match resources. Anyone in doubt of this should read any public library's annual report. The essence of management communication, exception reporting—the clear indication of what is not happening and not working—is not to be found. Librarians let their bosses off easily.

Responsibility to clients is unevenly carried out. While their right to access is protected, that access is limited to what is free or within the library's budget. Librarians insist that the federal government supply documents, but whether or not individuals can find what they need because of cataloging backlogs or because of a shortage of reference librarians is not seen as the same kind of moral issue. And yet, if one cannot get information, does it really matter why not? If there is a charge for interlibrary loan service or online searching, does that not impose a barrier to the use of information every bit as formidable as censorship? The response of some libraries—free or not at all—does not provide a solution if the result is not at all. The battle on behalf of library clients as a moral imperative is therefore halfhearted, or at least inconsistent. Huge cataloging backlogs or too few reference librarians are just as effective a form of censorship, particularly for those who have no alternatives. Not blowing the whistle on funding bodies makes librarians accessories in censorship.

Responsibilities for ethical conduct toward library support staff are equally haphazard. Librarians agree that staff salaries are low and that it is unfair for public library clerks to work evenings and weekends at regular pay while other city employees are routinely compensated at premium rates. There is commiseration, but that is all. However, perhaps the library profession's greatest ethical shortcoming is in the way it treats itself. It fails to protect itself by letting others into it, either
because of administrative pressures by university presidents or presidents of the United States, or because of the rationalizations that unqualified staff must be used because there is no money to hire qualified staff. Doctors would never do this. In the absence of physicians, what physicians are supposed to do does not get done, and so money is found for more physicians. The result is not worse medicine, it is better medicine. The result for librarians is worse libraries, and nobody else even knows!

ONE APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF ETHICS

The role of library education is not to provide answers to these questions, because they have no right or wrong answers, but rather to make students aware of the complexity of problems and options, and to make them understand the potential conflicts between their professional responsibilities and what they may see as their societal responsibilities. Can they differ? Certainly they can. What happens then? One might know what one would do but still have no right to instill one's value system under the pretense of teaching. Not at the graduate level, certainly. Library educators are teachers, not trainers or indoctrinators.

The author makes heavy use of case studies, his own and others, to illustrate issues in the classroom. Students almost immediately head for solutions rather than analysis, and it takes half a semester to wean the most articulate and self-assured away from solutions and toward analysis. Dilemmas involving people usually have at least two and sometimes far more alternatives and viewpoints, and ultimately one must choose, sometimes among several alternatives that are excellent, sometimes in situations in which none of the alternatives are very good. It is important that one understands the problem before one attempts a solution. Perhaps this is where Josephson's golden rule approach needs to be modified: Understand the client so that you can do unto them as they would have you do unto them. In practice, however, this causes problems, as any manager can verify.

The author's role in the classroom in attempting to awaken this analytical approach to ethical considerations is to challenge and question everything students say to make them defend it. Devil's advocate is played with their approaches to make sure that they have considered every possible idea that they emotionally reflect in their other dispassionate role as a professional. Of course, the author also has personal feelings and is considered by some to be quite opinionated. However, he understands that this does not matter because in his role as educator he prepares students to be able to deal with the ethical decisions they will have to make later.
CONCLUSION

Education for professional ethics is a preparation for life in a complex and pressure-filled world in which the pressures will be particularly to conform, to compromise, to get along, to avoid "rocking the boat." Perhaps doctors and lawyers understand these pitfalls better than library educators do; at least they spend more time talking about them. Yet newspapers are full of stories about doctors and lawyers who violate this trust. Are librarians, therefore, more trustworthy? Or is it simply that their violations of professional ethics are not considered important enough by outsiders to be noticed? It is one of the paradoxical temptations in the library field that, despite the fact that librarians have very little power and very low salaries, in this area they can get away with a great deal.

Perhaps education for the acceptance of professional ethics is really only an education in decision analysis and self-discipline. But a one-year program that teaches a long list of reference sources and AACR2 interpretations that employers would prefer schools to teach gets in the way of this sort of education, which continues to get short shrift. The curriculum will continue to concentrate on the easy stuff — on the bookburner-bashing already in the literature — and end up congratulating librarians for their own high moral and ethical standards without instilling in them the knowledge of their own values.

Issues of professional ethics require the painful balancing of contradictory values. For example, stopping drunk driving is desirable, but if random breathalizer tests are not desirable, then how does one get from A to B? Society is full of such contradictory pressures and so, of course, are libraries. If students do not see that, it is only because they have created a very selective professional responsibility approach for themselves. Bashing the Blume and Vonnegut banners is important, but it is also easy, and librarians are inclined to do it anyway. The problems are more complex, and morality and ethics are easy to define only if everything except what is "known" to be true is ignored.

One does not have to look very far in today's society to see the complexity of moral issues. The battles between pro-choice and pro-life forces are between two groups absolutely certain of the ethical morality of their course, and that simply forecloses debate. Moral attitude finds little need to discuss. Librarians as human beings are every bit as likely to come down emotionally on one side or the other, but as librarians should serve the need for ammunition (if they bother to seek ammunition) of both groups. Words and slogans do not help here, because peace, humanism, decency, and justice are claimed as their own unique preserve by all causes. The author's own rule of thumb is that the more
aggressively any faction proclaims its own saintliness, the more suspect it becomes.

Professional dilemmas for librarians come in their responsibility to things, causes, and people they do not like. That is not nearly as easy, and not nearly as much fun. But that is what professionalism means, and it is the library educator’s job to at least make sure that students understand and recognize their own upcoming responsibilities—to their employers, patrons, subordinate staff members, professional colleagues, and world in which they live. Anybody who says all of this is easy and obvious is either a fool or a liar, and those are two types not needed anywhere in academia, but certainly not in professional graduate education.

REFERENCES