

# Engaging Ethics

## GUIDELINES FOR PROJECT GRANTS

The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics supports a number of ethics-related initiatives, funds faculty and student projects with a connection to ethics, coordinates and supports ethics reading courses, and provides summer stipends for faculty members to develop ethics-related modules, among other things. But what *is* ethics? Or, more precisely, how does the Prindle Institute understand what ethics is and what it is for a project to engage with ethics?

### WHAT IS ETHICS?

At its most basic, ethics is a field of study that attempts to understand rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, and how these interact with our obligations to ourselves and to others. Whenever you wonder what action would be *right*, whenever you judge that someone acted *wrongly*, whenever you contemplate whether you *should* take a certain course of action, whenever you criticize a policy as *unfair* or *unjust*, for example, you are entering into the domain of ethics.

Importantly, then, ethics is what can be called a *normative* discipline, in contrast to a *descriptive* discipline. Some disciplines are descriptive: they aim to tell us how things *are*. Physics is a good example. It tells us where things (planets, stars, electrons, quarks) are located, how they are moving, where they were in the past, and where they will be in the future. Physics also tells us what will happen in hypothetical scenarios: what would happen if I were to drop this glass vase? Ethics is importantly different from this. Ethics does not seek to tell us how things *are* or how they *were*, or how they *will* be, but rather, it seeks to tell us how things *should* be or how they *should've been*. Simply put, physics might tell us that a certain collection of objects will result in a nuclear explosion, but it won't tell us whether that is good or bad. Ethics attempts to answer that latter question but is silent on the former.

Ethics is usually divided into three main areas: Metaethics, Normative Ethics, and Applied/Practical Ethics.

Metaethics is concerned with figuring out the nature of right and wrong and good and bad. Where did right and wrong come from? Does rightness and wrongness depend on the existence of God? On social agreements? On laws? Is it all fiction, or is it all just in our heads? If you're asking these questions, you're in the field of metaethics.

Normative Ethics is concerned with determining rules or principles that explain the rightness or wrongness of something. Perhaps an action is right or wrong based on its consequences, the intentions with which it was taken, or whether it respects people's rights. If you are trying to figure this out, you are in the field of normative ethics.

Applied/Practical Ethics is concerned with figuring out what the right (or wrong) action or policy is in a particular case. Franz Kafka, on his deathbed, asked his best friend Max Brod to burn his unpublished work. Brod did not do as Kafka asked. But what should Brod have done? What would have been right (or wrong) in this situation? To answer these questions is to be engaged in applied/practical ethics. Though answering such questions might draw on the other fields of ethics, the goal of applied/practical ethics is not to come up with a grand ethical theory or an overarching account of where rightness and wrongness come from; it is, instead, to answer specific ethical questions. Popular areas

of applied/practical ethics include bioethics, technology ethics, business ethics, the ethics of war, and environmental ethics. Most of the initiatives sponsored by the Prindle Institute fall under the field of applied/practical ethics.

## **ETHICS IS EVERYWHERE, BUT...**

Because ethics is about right and wrong, good and bad, should and shouldn't, questions of ethics arise in almost every discipline and every walk of life. There are ethical questions about education, about politics, about history, about science, about engineering, about business, about the environment, etc. For this reason, the Prindle Institute can support a broad variety of projects and initiatives in a wide variety of fields. However, just because ethical questions arise in a certain discipline, this does not mean that by engaging in that discipline one is necessarily engaging with ethics.

Above, we noted that whenever you are wondering what action would be *right*, judging that someone acted *wrongly*, contemplating whether you *should* take a certain course of action, or criticizing a policy as *unfair* or *unjust*, you enter the domain of ethics. To do these things is to be in the remit of ethics, but it is not necessarily to engage with ethics. (Analogously, making a claim about the cause of an electoral result is not necessarily to engage with political science, but it is nevertheless to be within the remit of that field.)

What is it, then, to engage with ethics in a certain area rather than merely brush up against ethics? We think there are at least two conditions:

- First, to engage with ethics, one must identify clearly the key ethical question(s) at issue. Consider climate change. There are many ethical questions related to climate change. Some include: What are the obligations (if any) of individual consumers to reduce their consumption? What kinds of policies should we impose on corporations? What does fairness require between nations that contribute to climate change and those that disproportionately suffer its effects? To engage with the ethics of climate change requires one to identify which particular question(s) one is engaging with.
- Second, to engage with ethics, one must give and evaluate reasons for one answer over others or aim to create substantive discussion and thought about competing answers and reasons. Almost always, this means that one must engage with alternative answers to the key ethical question(s) identified. This is because you cannot have a substantive discussion about a question if from the start you have ruled out all but one answer to that question. We anticipate several objections to this condition.
  - **Objection 1: Isn't this just dangerous both-sides-ism?** One common critique of certain forms of journalism is that they engage in "both-sides-ism," where both sides of a political dispute are presented as equally plausible. Critics cry foul: Not all sides of the debate are equally well supported! One might think that the claim that deeply engaging with ethics involves considering alternative answers to ethical questions is a form of both-sides-ism. That, however, is to misinterpret what we are claiming. One can engage with alternative answers to ethical questions without presenting every ethical question as having exactly two equally plausible answers: pro and con. Some ethical questions are like this, at least on the surface. Consider: Is it permissible to eat meat? Answers tend to fall into two regular camps: yes and no. It is hard to imagine engaging deeply with this ethical question without at least considering these two camps. But other questions have a variety of competing answers. Consider: What health policies are impermissible because they undermine human autonomy? Here there are many possible answers, and engaging with this question deeply doesn't require considering all of them. (And note: even in the meat-eating question, there are probably more

answers than two. There is: *yes, but we should reduce our consumption; yes, but not meat from the following animals; etc.*)

- **Objection 2: Some ethical questions don't have plausible alternative answers.** In some cases, one might think there are no (remotely plausible) alternative answers to certain ethical questions. Consider the question: Is it permissible to own slaves? You might think that the answer is clearly *no* and that engaging with alternative views on this question is problematic. Whether it is permissible to own slaves is clearly an ethical question, but if you believe that there are no alternative views that should be considered, then it is an ethical question that you regard as *closed*. This means that there is little opportunity to really engage with the ethical considerations surrounding such a question. But notice that even if you regard that question as *closed*, there might be nearby questions that you do not regard as closed, for instance: Why is it not permissible to own slaves? There are competing views about different answers to this question, even though all such views presuppose that it is, in fact, wrong to own slaves.

To sum up, then, to engage with an ethical issue requires at least the following: (1) that one identifies clearly the ethical question (or set of ethical questions) that is at issue and (2) that one evaluates reasons for competing answers to that question (or questions). These requirements are not arbitrary. They speak directly to two critical skills that every student needs:

- (1) The skill of recognizing when there is an ethical dimension to a situation and being able to identify what those key ethical questions are in that situation.
- (2) The skill of formulating a defensible answer to these ethical questions.

Without these skills, students will be unable to meet one of DePauw's university-wide learning goals, which is that DePauw students "engage in serious reflection on the moral and ethical aspects of situations."

## **PRINDLE INSTITUTE SUPPORT OF ETHICS PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMING**

If you seek financial support from the Prindle Institute for an initiative, we will consider whether your initiative engages deeply with ethics. As noted above, this means more than that there is a plausible connection between your project and some ethical question(s). You should explain (1) what ethical question(s) your initiative aims to address and (2) how your initiative will give and evaluate reasons for one answer over others or aim to create substantive discussion and/or thought about competing answers and reasons. Below, we answer some specific questions this might raise.

- **How does this apply to artistic projects?**

Artistic projects should specify in their proposal what ethical question(s) the project aims to address and how the artistic work will lead to substantive discussion or thought about answers to this question. The artistic work itself need not do all this work, but the overall project should.

- **How does this apply to students seeking funding for student/faculty research or students seeking funding to present their work at a conference?**

Students seeking funding should pay special attention to identifying the ethical question(s) their research project or presentation addresses. If the proposal is for student-faculty research funding, the main research question need not be an ethical question. However, the student should still identify the key ethical question(s)

and show how some time will be devoted to considering different answers to this question and/or evaluating the reasons in favor or against answers. If the proposal is for funding to attend a conference to present academic research, the student should explain how part of their presentation will draw attention to the ethical question(s) their project highlights and how this may result in substantive discussion.

- **How does this relate to speaking events?**

If you propose bringing a speaker to campus, you should first identify the ethical question(s) that the speaking event will address. Speakers can advocate for a specific answer to an ethical question, but this should be supported by reasons for that answer and good faith acknowledgement of competing answers. Sometimes, a speaker aims to argue that something is an issue of ethical importance, but this has not been widely or sufficiently noticed. This could meet our requirements. The ethical question is thus: Is X an issue of ethical importance? To which the speaker is answering yes, and supporting that answer with reasons. We ask that those seeking funding for speaking events be mindful of how they frame their event so that it does engage meaningfully with ethics.

- **How does this apply to Prindle Reading Courses?**

Faculty/staff seeking to teach Prindle Reading Courses should choose texts that address ethical questions, should be able to identify what those questions are, and should conduct class in such a way that students will evaluate, discuss, and think about different possible answers to these questions.

- **How does this apply to Prindle Summer Fellows?**

Prindle summer fellows receive stipends to develop undergraduate educational resources on a topic of ethical concern related to their regular disciplinary teaching. Competitive proposals should identify the key ethical question(s) addressed by the proposed module. They should explain how students will be given the chance to evaluate, discuss, and think about different possible answers to these questions.

- **How does this apply to film screenings?**

Film is a powerful medium for presenting important ethical questions. If you are seeking support to screen a film, you should identify which ethical questions the film will raise. You should also explain how the screening will be presented to encourage students to evaluate, discuss, and think about different possible answers to these questions. This could be accomplished by a panel or discussion after the film, though there are other possibilities.