On Calvin and Hobbes and Ethics: Principles vs Consequences

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should be in conflict, then priority is rank-ordered as listed. However, there may be exceptions to respect for the wishes of individuals if their behaviour poses serious consequences to others.

Research ethics require fully informed consent of participants regardless of a researcher’s search for deception or coercion might serve the greater interests of society (a small exception is made for temporary deception in exceptional circumstances). Also respect and responsible caring for research participants includes protection from harm. Today there is outrage at gross violations of respect for research participants, not only in Nazi Germany’s end of experimentation, but in brainwashing experiments at the Alan Memorial Institute in Montreal, and in the nuclear radiation experiments on unsuspecting subjects recently disclosed at the United States, all of which may have been considered justified at the time for the greater interests of society.

There is a current issue on whether political correctness has gone too far. Speech and behaviour which respects all persons without discrimination or empower people within our professional codes of ethics. However, it can be argued that talk is cheap when worthless statements have no means of enforcement. It can be argued that enforcing politically correct behaviour protects the vulnerable, increases consciousness of issues, and in the long run changes attitudes in society. For others, coercive measures are deemed to be arbitrary, narrowly ideological, and to restrict honesty, freedom of expression, the advancement of scientific knowledge, the academic freedom. However, whatever the outcome on the political correctness issues, academics should be able to abide by ethical principles in ways which do not diminish scholarly integrity or their sensitivity to the potential abuse inherent in authority relationships.

The present economy will not accommodate professional self-indulgence, and in driving us to be responsible, competent and relevant it may drive us to ignore other than utilitarian values. The utilitarian values of efficiency in the use of resources and effectiveness in visible measurable outcomes are being emphasized more and more as justification for government financial support for academic teaching and research activities, and for professional services. Our educational and health systems are being restructured. Is there value in advancing truth and knowledge for its own sake or only for what has visible immediate benefits for society? Should government supported health services be limited to here essentials? Should the elderly, the disabled, the poor, and children have a lower priority for services because they are seen to be less productive in society?

Do you believe in ethical principles, and/or rules of conduct, or does it all depend on the utilitarian consequences? Are you aware of the work of the Canadian Psychological Association in advocating with others for continued financial support for research and scholarship activities, and for preserving post-secondary education and universal health care across Canada? These value-based activities deserve recognition and support.

As Calvin says, "Still, in the real world, people care about success, not principles... Then again, maybe that's why the world is in such a mess. What a dilemma!" Where do you and I stand?