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Is there one set of scientific ethics?

There are problems and opportunities regarding the ethical responsibility of the scientific community. We find some of these problems (and equally so opportunities) in the attempts to describe what scientific ethics are and can be, in the pursuit of understanding the ethical demands and intentions claimed and framed by the scientific community, and in the stated solutions to the problems of ethical character within science, with science’s integration in the global world, and amongst the scientists themselves. These descriptions, understandings and solutions are often times formulated as normative ethics, in many cases as a codex, or codes of conduct, established by a single university or a community of researchers or universities. These ethical codes therefore signal a particular form of ethical awareness or ethical reflection, that draws its strength and validity from a, more or less directly, postulated vision for an ethically better science, an ethically better scientist and, ultimately, an ethically better world as such.

In this presentation I will reflect on one such vision, the COMEST-report titled *Teaching of Ethics*, from UNESCO, and try to demonstrate its lacks and flaws, as well as its strengths and good intentions. The report, as well as my own interest with this presentation, focuses mainly on the issue of teaching ethics to scientist. An important part of defining *University Ethics* has to include, in my opinion, some vision for teaching ethics at universities. This can be in the format of courses of different degree and level, but more importantly it is about creating an awareness of the ethical responsibilities, possibilities and foundation for science and the scientific activity a university performs and upholds. Basically the teaching of ethics under the understanding of *University Ethics* is finding a form and a forum for awareness, reflection and discussion of the ethical issue. This is also the attempt of the COMEST report.

COMEST stands for The World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology, and the report is, as priory mentioned, titled *The Teaching of Ethics*. It was submitted to UNESCO in August 2003, and was presented and discussed on a follow-up symposium titled “Teaching ethics to science and engineer students”, in Copenhagen in April 2005. COMEST is an international board of scientists, headed by the chairman Dagfinn Føllesdal, who is the C.I. Lewis professor of Philosophy at Stanford University. It is a part of UNESCO’s Division of Ethics of Science and Technology, which has four areas of interest. These are (1) Bioethics, (2) Scientific ethics, (3) Environmental ethics and (4) Technology ethics. The division has declared a three part action program. One wishes to set certain standards of ethics, build up a capacity for ethical action, debate and reflection, and to raise an increasing awareness for ethical issues and reflections, and their importance. One effect of this declaration is the support for the creation of Educational Ethics Programs. In order to do this the division wants to define a core curriculum, and establish evaluation and certification programs that can be used as tools of measurement for different educational ethics programs around the world. That is, one wishes to set the standards for
an ideal study program in scientific ethics, which all other programs can use to model themselves after. This ideal program will be postulated through publications and so called UNESCO-chairs at universities around the world, and will be designed and supervised by an Advisory Expert Committee. COMEST is such a committee.

Here we can see that COMEST is a part of a well founded, and classic, idea of (epistemological) power and (educational) control, that has both a specific structure and a specific strategy. The structure is organized according to a clear top-down model. Decisions are made at the top and carried out at the bottom. Therefore we find the experts (a small group of distinguished scholars and elite researchers) at the top, and the workers (the large body of “ordinary” scientists, professors, teachers, students etc.) at the bottom. The strategy is then, that through the means of evaluation and certification, the top level can control the movements and actions at the lower levels, as well as the general direction of the development within the field. This calls for a well defined and powerfully established core of “the true and the good”, that is an idea of Ethics, which can be upheld as, and implemented in the absolute standards of scientific ethics. This core is the experts’ domain, and one attempt at formulating such a core is the COMEST report.

The COMEST group builds it’s report on the three assumptions, or three basic ground pillars. The first pillar is the idea that “the society” is concerned about the ethics of science. This concern is echoed or displayed in many different ways, and COMEST lists seven of them. Tempo, the rapidity of change and development, is number one on their list. Science is changing both itself and the society of which it is a part, with an unbelievable speed. We see this, first and foremost within the field of technology, but also in e.g. social sciences and management theories. The extreme tempo in modern science has both a practical effect (in applied science) and an academic/theoretical effect (with in the scientific community). We see the practical side of this in the product developments as well as applications of models for learning, living, leading, etc.; and the enormous output of academic articles and books are a good indication on the academic/theoretical effect. The reaction to all this is on one hand, of course the question if we move to fast, i.e. are the new products safe, healthy and ultimately for any good?; and on the other, a anti-science attitude, can science really produce that much new knowledge or are scientists just repeating and quoting themselves, can such a mass industry of academia provide any answers worth anything, is science really the right way to go in creating the good life?

Second on the list are globalisation and the cross-culture perspective. Science is regarded as a modern western phenomenon. When scientific activity is being spread around the world, what happens to science, and what happens to the different societies and cultures to which it is introduced or forced upon? We see a lot of problems arising when the scientific culture “clash” with non-scientific cultures (i.e. societies that are not rooted in the modern western enlightenment). The effects of this can be traced in fields of industry, finance, medicine, but also in more “soft” areas like education, language, and of course politics. The ethical concern here is if science will exploit or disregard the original culture, and perhaps ultimately destroy it, and to what extent people and nature will come to harm in such processes. Another element of ethical concern is the role money and power (epistemological as well as political) plays in this scientific colonisation of the world.

The other five elements on the list are pretty much specialised effects or parts of the first two. They can be described as ethical concerns around the use and abuse of internet and media, a fear of the effects from the fact that traditional upholders of ethics seems to be weakened, the magnification of science’s and applied science’s ability to do good and bad, the environmental issue, and the development of gene (especially human gene) technology. These last elements sums up a general attitude of ethical concern towards science and scientific activity, which we can find in
almost any newspaper, television debate / documentary, or in the local bar, and at many dinner tables.

The second pillar, that COMEST recognises, has to do with the scientist. One claims that today’s scientist risks losing track of himself. By that they imagine that a person that chooses to become a scientist has no clear idea of what that means, i.e. there is no fixed image that can appear as a (role-) model for the young scientist. Scientists today, work in various fields and with various functions, with very different responsibilities, demands and conditions, and as a result of that scientists find themselves trying to fit in all shapes and sizes, and therefore also bearing all forms of ethical principle, motivation and apathy. Today’s scientists are ensemble-line workers, TV-stars, consultants, businessmen and so on. A general ethical code of conduct represented through a general description of “The Scientist”, as e.g. Robert King Merton’s famous CODUS (which of course found most of its forms in the Cambridge scholars of the 1930’s), has lost it’s appeal, or at least lost it’s use. However, as one reads the COMEST report, one does get the feeling that, at least, COMEST would like to see the return of CODUS to center stage.

Finally, the third pillar. It is a clear idea of what ethics is. COMEST defines ethics as the systematic investigation of questions of right and wrong, good and bad. This idea must also carry the belief that moral principals can be “rewritten” as ethical arguments, and as such be submitted to a critical (rational) reflection. The aim is to, through reflection and argumentation, find the right ethical standard, the right set of moral principles. What defines right in this case, are what we have good reasons for accepting. The basic idea of ethic’s, therefore appears as a form of an ethical JTB. But, in some opinions, it can also be understood in a more utilitarian or pragmatic fashion, however, that is not the intention of COMEST.

To answer the call of the pillars, COMEST suggests a comprehensive, systematic and thorough establishment of the teaching of ethics to future scientists. The aim of this teaching should be, and here I quote the report, that “the students should be familiar with the structure of normative argumentation”, which means that the student should possess knowledge of ethical notions, ethical theories and ethical issues. In a somewhat less authoritarian and dogmatic tone COMEST describes the content and teleology of teaching ethics to students of science with the help of five postulations. These can be summarised as:

1. Awareness of ethical issues
2. Clarity in ethical questions
3. Make alternatives and consequences explicit
4. Develop the skill for ethical analysis and argumentation
5. Find areas where practice or legislation is at odds with ethical standards

In practice COMEST suggest that the actual teaching is carried out according to a very simple top-down structure. Ethical experts / professors teach ethical PhD’s, at a ethical research level. The ethical PhD’s then teach none ethical PhD’s, at the level of advanced courses, and ordinary students, at the level of basic courses.

Furthermore, COMEST recommend the establishing of an international board of experts (in ethics). The board then supposedly designs a programme “The Teaching of Ethics”, which describes and formulates ethical research and courses at all levels. After that, universities and other establishments for higher education, submit their individual ethical teaching programmes before the board, which on the basis of their own ideal programme, evaluates and certifies the individual programmes. Hereby creating an international system for recognition and standard in the teaching of ethics, that will, through it’s principle of awarding through a hierarchy of certification, inspire and reward (some may say control and restrict) the actual teachers and creators of different ethical teaching programmes at universities around the world.
An argumentative and decisive report like the COMEST report, is naturally an easy target for criticism. Two apparent perspectives of the critic, centres around, on the one hand the understanding of ethics, and on the other the top-down structure. There are a number of possible flaws and problems concerning COMEST definition and understanding of ethics. First of all it’s dependence on language. What language? Are we talking about an actual spoken language (and then a culturally bound language that naturally favours some people as well as arguments over other people and arguments), or are we talking about a specific scientific or philosophical language (which then will favour a specific form of science or a specific form of philosophy), or as a third option, are the talking about a simple (digital and/or logical) language like Wittgensteins ideal in *Tractatus*. The point is that every argument is an argument within a language, and as such it will be dependent on the restrictions and possibilities that the particular language provides. A side effect and an obvious problem here is also how one make an argument formulated in one language, justifiably “talk to” an argument formulated in another language.

An interesting aspect of the COMEST understanding of ethics as arguments, and by that language, is on what arena the arguments appear. COMEST is advocating for arguments as logical, objective and formal, i.e. arguments representing a clean, genuine and critical rationalism, and against arguments that are rhetorical, subjective and contextual, i.e. arguments representing a dirty, false and sensible rationalism. Such a harsh and absolute distinction between logic and rhetoric’s, has a tendency to cause more problems than it solves. If one is as dependent on arguments as COMEST is, a more synthesising position could be proven more effective. Here another problem appears. How should the arguments be judged and validated? What makes an argument the right argument? One could imagine a fixed set of true principles matching a fixed set of right arguments, or just one principle that somehow governs them all, or that it is the process, the rational method, when put to use, that in it self managed to distinguish the right from the wrong argument. The report gives us no answer.

In the COMEST report ethics is generally understood as formal (analytical) epistemology. It is normative and to some extent deontological (there is some talk of virtue), but fundamentally it is the believable result of a true reflection over justified arguments. Classic rationalism exercised not (only) by a cogito, but by a group of distinguished scholars, so called experts in ethics. However one leaves wondering how this group reflection is designed? Is it, or can it be dialectic, even Socratic dialectic? My guess is no.

This brings us to the next obvious critic, i.e. the critic of the top-down structure. If one decides to be mean, one could simply ask, how do you become an expert in ethics, or better said, how are you appointed expert in ethics? Let me give you three possible answers. (1) By creative thinking and telling the truth; (2) By doing what you are told, according to the method, to the establishment, to the tradition etc.; or (3) By having cocktails with the right people. The problems and flaws in establishing a board of experts are quite apparent.

The structure also indicates the problem of perceptiveness hand in hand with dogmatism. It is far too easy to simply regard the report as an instrument for implementing western thought and the ideas of the enlightenment on the rest of the world. Now I don’t think that COMEST has such a vicious vision, but when they create their top-down structure they make it very hard for someone to think differently and to get trough with a theory or thought that is not in tune with those at the top. There are to effects of this, first of all how can the reflection upon ethical arguments by valid if not all arguments can be heard?, and secondly, since many of the ethical problems are created by a top-down structure, how can a similar structure solve them or even recognise them? This is at the heart of the COMEST reports problems. i.e., what is an ethical problem?
In what way are the concerns described in the report ethical problems? And whose ethical problem are they? This lacks to be expressed and defined, and one is left thinking that the ethical problem is not of any real importance after all. As long as we have an ideal ethical standard, an ethical code of conduct, which is the rational judging of ethical arguments, all problems will and can be solved. But an ethical problem can not be simply reduced or translated to the existence or inventions of a set of (formally) contradictory (critically rational) arguments. Ethical problems are people’s problems. They are rooted in a particular existence, in a here and a then, as well as in a there and in a then. They are embedded in culture and tradition, and expressed in and through situations and individuals. This makes them “dirty” and personal. To make them “clean” and formal, so that they can be argumentatively reflected upon is not as easily done as the COMEST report seems to think it is. However, even more difficult, is the trip back, i.e. how to make the “clean” and formal answers “dirty” and personal, so that way can be applied to the problems they are meant to solve.

The problems concerning the role and understanding of the ethical problem is an indication of the negative effects of the reports distinctive understanding of ethics and scientific ethics. COMEST has chosen a perspective, a specific view and a clear idea, and therefor it is unable to address ethical issues that is not included or recognised within that perspective. Most obvious is here the existential and human aspect, which within the field of philosophical ethics e.g. could be represented by such different thinkers as Nietzsche and Buber. Again one must wonder why COMEST has chosen such a dogmatic attitude, instead of a more synthesising approach. To be fair, one could argue that COMEST actually does advocate for an open and qualified dialog as the best means of solving ethical problems and understanding scientific ethics (like Habermas), but then one has to ask why this is only possible at the top, amongst the experts, and how the results of such an open dialogue will ever be of any real value and have any real implications (e.g. within the field of teaching ethics)?, besides such a reading of the report is undoubtedly ignoring some of its content.

In conclusion, the COMEST report is generally a good thing. It is a wonderful and welcomed step in the direction of creating a good, just and prospering global society that embraces its science, as well as the core of scientific activities and notions, i.e. the rationality of man. But the report also has its flaws and difficulties. And, in my opinion, however agreeable the aim and the focus of the report is, I do believe that we need to think and act somewhat differently.

We need to make ethics rational and scientific ethics argumentative. That is the only way in which we can make reasonable sense and sensible use of it, but we need to be more aware of different forms of argument and rationality (this includes cultural differences). In doing that we need to address different forms of ethical thinking, and more importantly, we need to be philosophers, i.e. we need to ask ourselves what is ethics?, what is an ethical problem?, an ethical action?, an ethical principle?, and so on. COMEST believes that this can only qualified and creatively (i.e. in reality) be done at the top, amongst the experts, and than in order to spread the good results they introduces the top-down structure with it’s dogmatic epistemological power and educational control, which basically calls for a double competence (the scientist knows it’s specific scientific field as well as the field of ethics). But it is a false image of competence on the ethical part, since it merely calls for a mechanical performance. By that I mean, that one way of interpreting the COMEST is to read it as actually having one idea of ethics (the dialectic philosophical critical reflection on arguments) at the top and another idea (the mechanical applied method of structuring arguments according to a fixed model) at the bottom.

Unlike COMEST I believe that a rational (in the philosophical sense) idea of ethics can be placed at all levels, simply by making it personal and problem-based, i.e. to make the researcher, teacher and student aware of the ethics within and around oneself, and when build
arguments, reflection, consequences etc. from that. The top-down structure should in my opinion be turned around, and placed upside down or, better said, flatted out. A board of expert evaluation and certifying the rest, on the basis of some general and formal standard of excellence, will probably not be successful. Instead we need to focus more on the local situations and conditions, the real problems and the real people, and hereby allowing different approaches and practices to the teaching of ethics, so that ethics becomes a natural and relevant part of those involved in and with it.

Therefore, all though I agree with all of the five points summarised on page 6, it is perhaps the first postulation, to create awareness of ethical issues, which should be the only point of reference. If a university, through research in and teaching of ethics, can create awareness, amongst itself (i.e. amongst its scholars and students) the rest will probably, hopefully follow. So how does one do it? Again, a pre-fix general formula is not the right way, instead one should put ones faith in that teachers and researchers in ethics has their own bags of tricks, and through that can learn from each other. Personally I will, despite the approval or disapproval from a board of experts, continue to have my students in scientific ethics read Camus’ short story “The renegade – or a confused mind”. It always wakes people up, and generates a discussion and a reflection.

The COMEST report can be found on the internet site www.portal.unesco.org. Here you search under it’s full title: Teaching of Ethics – report of the COMEST working group on the Teaching of Ethics.

Thank you for the attention!