

A Question of Ethics

What Are Your Ethical Obligations on the Job?

Are your ethical standards different when acting in your professional role as opposed to your private life? Role morality is defined as those norms and codes of conduct that are specific to a role within an organization. **David Luban**, in his book *Lawyers and Justice — An Ethical Study*¹, called the justification for performing the actions required by a role as the “institutional excuse.” He writes, “Can a person appeal to her role in a social institution to excuse herself from conduct that would be morally culpable were anyone else to do it?”

What our job may require us to do is not necessarily reflective of the action our common morality would have us do. Luban illustrates the point by reference to research scientists who withhold a life-saving drug from patients in the control group. This is an example of an instance when the institutional excuse might be invoked. But there are other cases when the justification fails, as in the case of a concentration camp commandant. “Here, we feel, the immorality of the job accuses, not excuses, the person who holds it,” Luban writes.

Luban constructs a Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reasoning to justify those actions which would be considered immoral outside the constructs of the role. The first step justifies the action because it is a role-related obligation. The role-related obligation is justified by demonstrating it is necessary to the role. The third step justifies the role by giving it institutional context which defines the role obligations. And lastly, the institution itself is justified as being morally worthy. There are times when the institutional excuse is enough to override a conflicting common morality, but sometimes not, and proper weight should be given to each side of the role morality versus common morality issue.

For example, an employee of an emergency aid agency has access to



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a warehouse of food stuffs that are sorely needed by starving villagers who are some distance from the warehouse. The individual can transport the food to the village but must steal a truck in order to do so. To take someone’s property without that person’s permission is against the code of common morality. However, by transgressing this prohibition, the individual can save countless lives. By weighing both sides of the ethical argument, the greater good of providing much-needed food to the starving might outweigh the proscription against the taking of another’s property. But what if permission to take the truck would only be granted if the truck was also used to transport a cache of weapons that would be used to kill innocent people? Ethical issues are often complex, especially when anticipated outcomes are conflicting.

Daniel Wueste writes in *Professional Ethics and Social Responsibility*², “... when professional and moral obligations conflict, moral obligation takes precedence. When they don’t conflict, professional obligations rule the day.” He contends that although it appears that role morality justifies an action, it is only appearance; critical morality is actually doing the justifying. He concludes that role moralities generate justification rather than act as “mere conduits for the transmission of justification.”

Wueste suggests four things to consider when attempting to resolve a conflict between role morality and common morality. The conflict can be resolved in favor of institutional

obligations. The conflict can be resolved in favor of noninstitutional obligations. Institutional obligations will never prevail over noninstitutional objectives. Most importantly, only one of a conflicting set of obligations is a genuine obligation; the other is an obligation only in appearance.

Both Luban and Wueste agree that institutional obligations can be justified only if the institution itself is morally justifiable. Those who study role morality acknowledge that there are conflicts that arise in the performance of a role obligation when the required action is contrary to the role actor’s perception of common morality. However, many contend that such conflicts are essentially questions of common morality within a given situation. We must always be keenly aware of the consequences of the decisions we make and the actions we take on the individuals affected by our actions.

References

1. Luban, D. (1088). *Lawyers and Justice: An Ethical Study*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
2. Wueste, D.E. (1994). *Professional Ethics and Social Responsibility*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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