

## **Fraud in Research and Communitarian Ethics**

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by

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My topic today is the ethics of scientific fraud. The first question that came to mind when I was asked to give this talk was, Why would anyone think a philosopher has anything interesting to say about the ethics of scientific cheating? For, what could a philosopher who is not a scientist possibly have to say about the subject? Nonetheless, I suspect that I have a duty to speak to the subject at least as an ordinary citizen and consumer whose interests are affected by the safety and efficacy of the results of research carried out with public and corporate dollars. I will try, as well, to say something useful on the philosophical side.

It seems almost a trite truism to say that cases of falsified or misinterpreted or stolen data, premature publication, failure to recognize collaboration, and other examples of shady practices in science and technological research and development are symptoms of conflicts between individuals' conceptions of their own needs and interests and the interests of the various publics whom they ostensibly serve. One can well imagine that, if retention of one's job or a promotion or a salary increase or the ability to remain mobile to other positions, or one's ability to get grants or to compete for corporate research funds, etc., etc., depend upon producing results, then one's primary objective being to keep the job, promotions, salary increases, career advancing, one will do what one must in order to get what one needs. After all, it's a dog-eat-dog, competitive world here: social Darwinism reigns; only the fittest will survive; and if one cannot *be* the fittest, perhaps there's hope in *seeming to be* the fittest.

No doubt a historian of science could spin a series of narratives about individuals who have fallen prey to the temptations of scientific fraud; she might even be able to explain those narratives in sweeping terms of the spirit of the times, the *zeitgeist*, the values and practices which had, through whatever political and economic forces, come to inform the work of individuals. And a fascinating account that would all be.

A sociologist or social psychologist might be able to detail the dynamics of group interactions by virtue of which falsifications get made and go unchallenged, by which de facto conspiracies are entered into by people who fear the fate of the whistleblower, who often fares much worse than those towards whom the accusing finger is thrust. And again, we might well find such an account as chilling and personally disturbing as we found Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority studies in the 1950s.

But these are the tasks of other social scientists than the philosopher. As a

philosopher, I want to raise a fundamental question or two about the very topic: conflicts of self interest and public interest. I want to ask, with what conception of 'self' and of 'public' is the question framed? In some respects, my question is not unlike the question posed to Socrates by Thrasymachus at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, which that dialogue was written to answer: if one can get away with advancing one's own interests through being unjust to others, and must to some extent sacrifice one's own interests by being just to others, why not be unjust?

Just in case not everyone here has the works of Plato by his or her bedside as nightly reading material, let me remind you that Plato sought to solve the question through conceiving what a just or ideal society would be like, and then reconceiving the individual along the structural lines of that state. Thus, just as justice in the state meant the orderly conduct of its necessary functions by individuals disciplined into their proper roles, so the just conduct of the individual meant the orderly conduct of the individual's life by the faculties of appetites, passions, and reason, ranked and ordered into their proper roles.

One hears some sort of echo of this pattern of reconceiving individuals in terms of the community coming out of at least some of the new crowd in Washington these days. The new Washington buzzword these days is 'communitarianism,' shorthand for the view that individuals ought not to conceive their interests solely in terms of self-interests, but to conceive their interests as at least in large part the interests of the wider communities in which they live.

Actually, this view has its philosophical anticipation in this century in the work of the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued very simply that there could be no such thing as a private language, one in principle understandable by only one individual. For, Wittgenstein reasoned, it is a necessary condition of language that its signs and symbols be capable of correct use—correct use constituted by use in accordance with the rules; the notion of a rule set followed by only one person would require that person to be both able to know when the rule was being correctly followed and when it was being violated; but the language and its rules being private would mean there is no determinable difference between correctly believing and mistakenly believing that the rule was being followed. The upshot of his argument was that humans are, in their language—and as I shall maintain, in their ethics as well—essentially social creatures; the very possibility of symbolic thought presupposes a set of socially shared standards, so that thought becomes impossible on the model of linguistic individualism. Language-wise at least, the notion that the individual exists, thinks, schemes, calculates as a self-contained locus of self-interest involves a false view of the individual. The idea that one is alone, doomed to be not understood and not to understand others, a windowless monad, is a fiction. Just as our language is essentially a social construction which implies the existence and communicative interests of others, so our selves are

social constructions, not rightly conceived apart from the existence and common interests of others.

So, my simple philosopher's point is this: those institutions and conceptions that encourage individuals to think of their interests as not held closely by others, encourage the self-public fusion in terms of which I can convince myself, as Thrasymachus did in the *Republic*, that it is possible for me to be unjust to others and to be happy. When competition becomes no longer friendly, when my interests become separated from yours, when the aims and goals and needs of the public become separated from my aims, goals and needs, then a false self arises, and the potential for conflict between self-interest and the public interest becomes pressing. And this process of generating a false self, conceived in contrast and conflict with the public, is called by the philosophers *alienation*.

If this simple sketch is basically right, we must ask questions like, How does a corporation, as a kind of public, avoid creating those conditions which make for the kind of alienation that permits an individual to commit scientific fraud? No doubt some kind of organizational specialist could answer the question better than I. Nonetheless, as a member of an organization that sometimes, at least, practices communitarian values, let me suggest just a few ways in which organizational practices can reinforce or undermine communitarian values:

1. Motivation through price, not fear;
2. Research conducted by teams, not loners and not "directors" that are uninvolved in day-to-day operations;
3. Hiring for life, not practicing "lifo" or "fifo" reductions of staff;
4. Profit and liability sharing, not agency. In academics, this means multiple authorship; in corporations, this means the team approach and team discipline, were necessary;
5. Promotion of professional values, not corporate or institutional cover-ups. There is not a separate ethics for balance sheets and individuals;
6. Striving to make whistle-blowers unnecessary, but not dishonoring them when they are.

Scientific fraud is committed, my thesis goes, by individuals who are alienated—from truth and its pursuit, from a vision of their role in that pursuit, from a sense of common community and mutual support at the fundamental levels at which we are individuals with needs. Those corporations and other social structures that build on the human tendency for community—for shared commitments to mutually supportive structures of cooperation—that encourage the individual's vision of his or her work as part of far greater pursuits in the public interest, have less trouble with this vexing problem than do those that pit individual against individual and that make prestige, promotion, and retention dependent upon individual productivity.

I close with the simple, profound vision contained in the words of the poet

John Donne:

No man is an island entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

Scientific fraud is a symptom of a view of the self as atomistic, isolated, alone. The poet advises that this view is false, and ought to be replaced by a view of the self as envisioned by the communitarians.