

Ethicists' behavior not more moral, study finds

May 22 2013, by Bettye Miller

(Medical Xpress)—Do ethicists engage in better moral behavior than other professors? The answer is no. Nor are they more likely than nonethicists to act according to values they espouse, according to researchers from the University of California, Riverside and Stetson University in Florida.

In a study published in the journal *Metaphilosophy*—"Ethicists' and Nonethicists' [Responsiveness](#) to Student E-mails: Relationships among Expressed Normative Attitude, Self-described Behavior, and Empirically Observed Behavior"—[philosophers](#) Eric Schwitzgebel of UC Riverside and Joshua [Rust](#) of Stetson University found that ethics professors were no more likely than other philosophers or scholars in other [disciplines](#) to respond to student emails, even though a significant majority said that failure to do so is morally bad.

While faculty—particularly ethicists—who placed a high moral value on responding to student emails also typically rated themselves high on their responsiveness, Schwitzgebel and Rust found that assessment to be generally inaccurate.

"If professors have an obligation to respond to emails from students, then arguably they also have a further obligation to track whether or not they are meeting the first obligation, so that if they are not meeting the first obligation they can take corrective measures," the philosophers wrote. "If this is correct, then the present study offers not just one measure of [morality](#), email responsiveness, but two: email

responsiveness and meeting one's [moral obligation](#) not to be deluded about one's level of email responsiveness. Professors remain far short of ideal by either measure, ethicists no less so than others."

Approximately half of American ethicists believe that professional ethicists behave at least a little morally better than nonethicists, Schwitzgebel and Rust said. In 2009 the two began a series of experiments to determine if that is so.

One previous study found that philosophy books dealing with ethics were more likely to be missing from leading academic libraries than similar nonethics books in philosophy. Another found that ethicists and political science professors voted at the same rate as did nonethicist philosophers and professors in departments other than philosophy. Two other studies found that ethicists behaved no more courteously than nonethicists and were as likely to avoid paying registration fees as nonethicists at conferences of the American Philosophical Association.

Does it matter if ethicists behave any better morally or act more consistently with their espoused values than nonethicists?

If professional ethicists do no better at demonstrating moral behavior or greater consistency between attitude and behavior, that creates a challenge for those who advocate ethics instruction for its effects on behavior, Schwitzgebel and Rust wrote.

This "boosterism" view of philosophical moral reflection—articulated by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill and others—contends that moral reflection will improve [moral behavior](#). Opponents of that view, whom Schwitzgebel and Rust describe as "scoffers," argue that people are going to do what they want anyway and that the role of moral reflection is to excuse their behavior after the fact.

"That is not my own opinion," Schwitzgebel said.

Moral reflection is important to contemplate not simply because it is part of the human condition, he added.

"If we say that moral reflection has only abstract value we lose something huge. Part of the justification of teaching business ethics, medical ethics and personal values is the hope that we can have a positive effect on the behavior of you and me."

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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