“The Possession of Knowledge Carries an Ethical Responsibility”

*Introduction*

Within the field of theories of knowledge, an equally wide range of concerns exists, inherently dependent on those theories themselves. The discussion here is then as potentially broad as all of the human experience, a fact compounded by the inevitable dilemma that the basic subject is so multifaceted. For example, in examining the issue of whether knowledge carries an ethical responsibility, knowledge itself must be approached as the immeasurably vast expanse it is. Knowledge comes in innumerable forms, and this alone may create dilemmas of degree, regarding what ethical responsibilities are attached to it. In the following, the ways in which this statement may be probed will be offered, but there is a resolution that no amount of investigation can offer. Namely, the ethical responsibility when knowledge is present is very real, but it entirely depends upon the circumstances of the situation, as ethics themselves are rarely absolute. More exactly, if there is a definitive attachment of ethics to knowledge, it can only be expressed as the ethical responsibility to weigh the knowledge as carefully as possible, because it provides the foundation for whatever ethics are to be considered.

*Discussion*

If any single factor may be identified as absolutely attaching ethical responsibility to knowledge, it is one ironically removed what any form that responsibility may take. Namely, it is in being certain of the knowledge in question. For any idea or information to be so designated, it must be certain and true, at least as far as the individual can know. This is no small matter. Put another way; ethical responsibility takes on a completely different meaning if the “knowledge” is in any way questionable. For example, to have good reason to believe that a structural flaw may endanger people at an event in a stadium presents one kind of ethical obligation and going to more than a single concern. The belief expressed, if not valid knowledge of the fact, could have serious and damaging consequences for a range of individuals, from the stadium's owner to the civic authorities or emergency personnel unnecessarily called into action. If the flaw is ascertained as fact, however, the ethical course is relatively clear, and this example illustrates a case wherein the responsibility and the knowledge are definitely linked.

Other cases, however, are far less easy to identify because, again, knowledge may exist in a wide variety of forms, even when it is certain as knowledge. The most obvious instance here would be a case wherein the facts known may or may not impact on people dangerously. A person may know for a fact, for instance, that a certain ingredient in a food product does not provide the health benefits its manufacturers claim it does. At the same time, the person also knows that no harm is done by the ingredient; that many people likely feel better because they believe in its efficacy; and that letting this information out would cost hundreds of individuals their jobs. Complicating the matter further is the identity of the knowledge-holder. More exactly, it is understood that businesses and corporations must operate with an active sense of ethical responsibility. This has developed into the modern science of corporate social responsibility, although the concept is as old as commerce itself (Schwartz 20). Organizations must adhere to ethics in regard to knowledge of what they do to comply with social standards and to enhance their status in the eyes of the society, as well as to obey the law. The corporation and the individual, moreover, face the same dilemma in regard to imparting knowledge, which is that the actual import or value of the knowledge must be assessed as clearly as possible. What separates them is the degree of responsibility; as the organization is the larger entity and likely to be more impactful, so too is it more ethically obligated to weigh the potential consequences of imparting knowledge. Nonetheless, and in both cases, there remains the difficulty of understanding the value of knowledge, and often this is a determination that may be only estimated.

It seems, in fact, that the arena of the subject is limitless, because the factors going to each element of it may so widely vary. Returning to the example of the food ingredient, it appears that the business bears, again, the greater ethical responsibility to at least employ the knowledge to end the false assumptions. This is largely prompted by the simple fact that, as the business profits from the product, it is the more ethically indebted to maintain integrity regarding it and to act upon certain knowledge. The issue is complicated. However, one of the dilemmas cited as affecting the individual response; namely, jobs. If no harm is done and many are earning livelihoods because a product is selling based on false information, determining the greater good is not necessarily easy. More exactly, the ethics in this case of using or not using knowledge are confronting a pragmatic reality and an ethical abstract, in a sense. Sharing the knowledge about the product serves the ethical good of honesty to the society, but it also creates the practical damage of adversely affecting lives. Similarly, as the individual with the knowledge must consider this, so too are they driven to question just how far the ethical responsibilities of a single person go, particularly when no danger is created by remaining silent. This is, of course, also only one example of how the many forms of knowledge may take present complicating factors in determining the ethical course.

There is also the matter, as with knowledge, of comprehending the dimensions of what exactly is meant by “ethical responsibility.” On one level, most individuals behave in ways reflecting basic responsibilities, in that they “ethically” make themselves available through the critical process of simply attending to an issue or thing. Ethical responsibility occurs when one person listens to another in an ordinary conversation because this basic example illustrates the awareness of the other that is essential to ethics itself. At the same time, there are larger issues of larger responsibilities, and knowledge here, as with the stadium example, takes on a consequently more important role. Ethical responsibility translates to a recognition of the other in personal relationships, but it incorporates themes like justice and equality when a wider public is acknowledged. This is where, in fact, a theory of knowledge that is inherently social comes into play, and the dimensions are many (Gibbs 133). It seems reasonable that, to many, acting on knowledge ethically is more easily achieved when the parties involved are single individuals, if only because we tend to assume that this scenario creates a “balance of power.” The arena is too small and too balanced to admit to serious breaches of ethics. It is when the polarity is strong, as in the individual's choosing to reveal information that would affect a corporation and the society, that the dimensions change.

This then opens the door to ethical relativism, in that whatever belief system is being debated in the individual mind reflects ideas instilled from the surrounding culture (Kuhse, Singer 2). This element must affect any decision or assessments made here, because knowledge, even at its most questionable, is still a commodity to be applied or withheld, and it is difficult to comprehend then just what ethics are involved. Cultural relativism is inherently problematic, as degrees of ethical judgments vary in different cultures, but it typically holds to the concept that certain ideas are ethically sound for most people, most of the time (Pollock 43). Examples of just how problematic this renders the issue of ethics related to knowledge are rife in the field of criminal justice. This area, moreover, serves to illustrate the complexity of the subject by virtue of the fact that the justice system is as near to a set standard of ethics that any society possesses. This is the agreed-upon framework in which knowledge translates to ethical responsibility, and because the courts themselves are in place to make these determinations. The “knowledge” is presented at trial or through the authorities, and the ethical effects largely decide the action to be taken. Even here, however, relativism creates challenges in attaching value to the knowledge because it is in the nature of any culture for these values to shift over time. Ethics evolve, ideas of what the knowledge actually means changes, and this translates to a change in the knowledge's essence. An example of this is how, in previous eras, the concept of date rape was largely unconsidered by the courts as a crime or gross violation of ethics. The knowledge was there that a woman was compelled to engage in sex against her will, but this was eclipsed by the further “knowledge” that such an act was not inherently criminal. As the society evolved, the ethical incorrectness of such a view was identified, so the initial knowledge took on greater meaning as the latter was dispelled. Equally importantly, it then became commonly understood that knowledge, or awareness, of such an act, required the communicating of it to the proper authorities. Here, then, relativism adds additional complications to the already highly complex task of assessing whether possession of knowledge translates to ethical responsibility, as the natures of the components themselves undergo shifts in essential meaning.

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