

Ethical Dilemmas in Environmental Engineering

Read the Fable “Mercury and the Woodman” by Aesop

A Woodman was felling a tree on the bank of a river, when his axe, glancing off the trunk, flew out of his hands and fell into the water. As he stood by the water's edge lamenting his loss, Mercury appeared and asked him the reason for his grief. On learning what had happened, out of pity for his distress, Mercury dived into the river and, bringing up a golden axe, asked him if that was the one he had lost. The Woodman replied that it was not, and Mercury then dived a second time, and, bringing up a silver axe, asked if that was his. "No, that is not mine either," said the Woodman. Once more Mercury dived into the river, and brought up the missing axe. The Woodman was overjoyed at recovering his property, and thanked his benefactor warmly; and the latter was so pleased with his honesty that he made him a present of the other two axes. When the Woodman told the story to his companions, one of these was filled with envy of his good fortune and determined to try his luck for himself. So he went and began to fell a tree at the edge of the river, and presently contrived to let his axe drop into the water. Mercury appeared as before, and, on learning that his axe had fallen in, he dived and brought up a golden axe, as he had done on the previous occasion. Without waiting to be asked whether it was his or not, the fellow cried, "That's mine, that's mine," and stretched out his hand eagerly for the prize: but Mercury was so disgusted at his dishonesty that he not only declined to give him the golden axe, but also refused to recover for him the one he had let fall into the stream.

Fables are very simple allegorical stories originally invented as a form of political criticism and as a tool to teach cultural values. This particular fable is relevant to our ethics seminar.

Discussion:

- 1) What is the “moral” or lesson of this fable?
- 2) To what kind of ethical situations or case studies does this fable apply?
- 3) What were the consequences of the second woodsman’s “unethical” behavior?

Read the Fable “The Vixen and the Lioness” by Aesop

The Vixen and the Lioness

A Vixen who was taking her babies out for an airing one balmy morning, came across a Lioness, with her cub in arms. "Why such airs, haughty dame, over one solitary cub?" sneered the Vixen. "Look at my healthy and numerous litter here, and imagine, if you are able, how a proud mother should feel." The Lioness gave her a squelching look, and lifting up her nose, walked away, saying calmly, "Yes, just look at that beautiful collection. What are they? Foxes! I've only one, but remember, that one is a Lion."

In ancient times, characteristics of people were assigned to different animals in fables. Hence in “The Wizard of Oz” the “Cowardly Lion” is a significant character as Lions over the centuries are considered the embodiment of bravery. Likewise, Foxes are considered to be clever (not a complimentary character in ancient times) and sneaky.

Discussion:

- 1) What is the “moral” or lesson of this fable?
- 2) To what kind of ethical situations or case studies does this fable apply?

Read the Fable “The Lion and the Mouse” by Aesop

The Lion and the Mouse

Once when a Lion was asleep a little Mouse began running up and down upon him; this soon wakened the Lion, who placed his huge paw upon him, and opened his big jaws to swallow him. "Pardon, O King," cried the little Mouse: "forgive me this time, I shall never forget it: who knows but what I may be able to do you a turn some of these days?" The Lion was so tickled at the idea of the Mouse being able to help him, that he lifted up his paw and let him go. Some time after the Lion was caught in a trap, and the hunters who desired to carry him alive to the King, tied him to a tree while they went in search of a waggon to carry him on. Just then the little Mouse happened to pass by, and seeing the sad plight in which the Lion was, went up to him and soon gnawed away the ropes that bound the King of the Beasts. "Was I not right?" said the little Mouse.

This fable, also an allegory, has several meanings especially relevant in the professional setting of engineering.

Discussion:

- 1) What is the “moral” or lesson of this fable?
- 2) To what kind of ethical situations does this fable apply?
- 3) What kind of professional behavior does this fable suggest may be desirable?

These two are my favorite fables that are especially useful in understanding “partnering” among competitors in business. In the last decade or so the idea of competitors partnering has become de-rigueur.

The Ass, the Fox, and the Lion

The Ass and the Fox, having entered into partnership together for their mutual protection, went out into the forest to hunt. They had not proceeded far when they met a Lion. The Fox, seeing imminent danger, approached the Lion and promised to contrive for him the capture of the Ass if the Lion would pledge his word not to harm the Fox. Then, upon assuring the Ass that he would not be injured, the Fox led him to a deep pit and arranged that he should fall into it. The Lion, seeing that the Ass was secured, immediately clutched the Fox, and attacked the Ass at his leisure.

The Nurse and the Wolf

"Be quiet now," said an old Nurse to a child sitting on her lap. "If you make that noise again I will throw you to the Wolf."

Now it chanced that a Wolf was passing close under the window as this was said. So he crouched down by the side of the house and waited. "I am in good luck to-day," thought he. "It is sure to cry soon, and a daintier morsel I haven't had for many a long day." So he waited, and he waited, and he waited, till at last the child began to cry, and the Wolf came forward before the window, and looked up to the Nurse, wagging his tail. But all the Nurse did was to shut down the window and call for help, and the dogs of the house came rushing out. The wolf then ran with all haste and barely escaped the dogs with his life.

Discussion:

- 1) What is the “moral” or lesson of the Ass, Fox, and Lion fable?
- 2) What is the “moral” or lesson of the Nurse and Wolf fable?
- 3) To what kind of business situations do these fables apply?
- 4) What tools are used to prevent such outcomes in business partnerships?
- 5) Are these tools based on legal or ethical principles?

de rigueur *ADJECTIVE*: - Conforming to accepted standards: becoming, befitting, comely, comme il faut, correct, decent, decorous, nice, proper, respectable, right, seemly.