

Expectations on academic ethics...

The manner of ethical distortion in business is clear and predictable inevitably involving money. Many people in academe would be first to offer critical comment on business ethics, yet those same people seem forgiving of ethical failures in their own profession, or at least less critical. It has always been clear to me that the root of ethical distortion in academe is not money, but ideas and their ownership, as put by Goethe as long ago as 1823: “Questions of science are frequently career questions. A single discovery can make a man famous and lay the foundations of his fortune as a citizen.”

Ethical rigour in academe involves acknowledging sources of ideas. But in a modern day, with many more people have the time and interest and opportunity to contribute give rise to various key issues:

- ✓ Is the nature of the source critical, that is are academics expected to only know of ‘peer review’ work, regardless of fact that peer review is a poor process for ensuring intellectual integrity and intellectual substance. Or, should academics be bound by ethical rules regardless of the nature of that source?
- ✓ Further, should academics be judged on an absolute standard, or a relative standard, that is if work is not in the academic literature, should it be still acknowledged, or can the source be ignored as ‘inferior’? What then ‘private communications’?
- ✓ Further still, can academics be held to account and expected to be familiar with ideas not in academic literature, but nonetheless widely publicised in their profession? And if they choose to ignore those ideas believing only academics able to contribute in these complex areas, or believing that only peer reviewed offers sound material (despite peer review being proved a failure as regards protecting article integrity)...what should happen?

These areas are not canvassed or considered in any depth in academe but they are of profound significance in this day of the web and the input of ideas to human wisdom that now goes far beyond that dreamed of by even the most optimistic academic.

The position here is that:

1. Academics do not have a monopoly on intelligence and/or interest in the many serious issues that impact the world today, many of which are rooted in social science.
2. That academe is not particularly creative, nor uniquely insightful, and that its own internal politics and pecking orders frequently distorts opinions toward political deference rather than serious assessment of ideas, further it frequently becomes preoccupied with issues seemingly irrelevant/trivial to those outside (the ‘science wars’ for example).
3. Peer review does not guarantee article integrity.
4. That academics are accountable for sources, regardless.
5. Should academics choose to ignore significant sources, they ought to be condemned by peers and administrators.
6. Where funds solicited under dubious ethical circumstances then those funds should be recovered by the funding body. Academics do bemoan loss of rationality and standards in the modern world, perhaps they need set the standard and model and begin with tidying their own house.

One particular set of circumstances has involved my own work and communication with academics. I offer no judgement, but do lay out the facts of my involvement with Professor Graham Macdonald of Canterbury University, the Marsden fund of New Zealand and the Royal Society of New Zealand, allowing you to draw your own conclusions.

The background

Summary of the events surrounding communication with Professor Graham MacDonald of Canterbury University and the associated communications with those funding his research program.

- ✓ I noticed a substantial round of funding to the Macdonald's of Canterbury, some \$450,000 over three years. The project to assess the causality of minds in human affairs.
- ✓ Upon asking the question of the Royal Society of New Zealand I received the following reply.
 - "The Marsden Fund Council did receive a proposal from Professors Graham and Cynthia Macdonald this year entitled "Mental causation and explanation". It was referred to the Humanities panel and ultimately it was one of 79 proposals selected by the Council and recommended to the Royal Society for funding. Marsden Fund review processes include an assessment by at least three international referees as well as the members of the relevant panel before funding decisions are made."
- ✓ I have been working on this topic for near twenty years. And have established rigorous complete solution to this problem that has significant and far reaching consequences, especially in the area of mental health policy and support.
- ✓ My concern is this, it would appear no reference offered to my work in the application, now I do accept my work not 'peer reviewed', but that does not excuse such a failing, especially when I am a vigorous debater on the value of peer review, see my paper 'toward a better standard of judgement than peer review'. I pride myself on the intellectual depth and rigor of the thinking. I regard myself as an effective practitioner of theoretical social science – noting that theoretical physics is a noted aspects of physics, while theoretical social science is scorned, the reason as I have shown is the lack of tools and in particular third level conceptualisation tools able to lead the conceptualisation process. Physics uses mathematics ($E=MC^2$ was written before being empirically validated!) Using W Ross Ashby's cybernetics tools and combining them with my own analysis of variables, I have developed a third level set of tools able to lead the conceptualisation process in social science, and it is these that I have applied to the problem the topic of your funding round. As a crucial aspect of that development, I have also addressed the long standing problem of 'cause' what is it, and how do we understand it.
- ✓ As to background: I meet Graham Macdonald at the AAP conference of 2001 In Auckland, where I delivered a paper on the topic in question. And had some brief discussion with him on my approach and views. Later, in 2002, we exchanged a series of emails on philosophy generally, with me pressing the case that modern philosophy was focused on what past people said, and not on moving forward on real issues and problems to the benefit of humanity. During this exchange, it was stated and discussed that I ought visit Canterbury hold some workshops on this

and on my work on cause and application to minds and a general theory of the person. This dragged on. Last communication was as follows:

✓ “-----Original Message-----

From: Graham Macdonald [mailto:graham.macdonald@canterbury.ac.nz]

Sent: Monday, 28 July 2003 09:36

To: grl

Subject: Re: Philosophy development

Hi Graham,

sorry to have been out of touch; seem to have been travelling a lot, mainly to Oz to give papers, attend conferences, etc. Too much; and we are off to Connecticut for ten months sabbatical soon. Too much to do. But I have printed off the sample and will get back to you on it SOON. Will be interested in the Popper stuff.

best,

Graham”

- ✓ I made several attempts during 2003 to seek clarification if he intended to proceed, then gave it up when he did not reply.
- ✓ There was little evidence of interest in this topic during those exchanges, other than in some general manner, for the topic is interesting.

Should Graham MacDonald have made reference to my work in his application? Did he have an obligation to acknowledge my work?

I leave that for you to judge.

Should Marsden panel referees have known of my work and judged the proposal in light of that work?

- ✓ I have some 200 international universities on my dbase, with email links to philosophy departments, psychology, psychiatry, and theoretical physics. I have a system behind my web site for emailing communication to selected groups.
 1. All have received communications from me about my work, and on topics at site. I have been requested once to review a paper who stated ‘you have done some work on this’, details at my site, arising directly from this contact. So academe aware of the work.
 2. I have requested all contacted to place communication on staff and graduate students notice board, and have feedback that that has regularly been done. My contact is typically via the department secretary.
 3. Visits to my site have risen in three years from 30 to 40 per day, until last nine months average unique visitors have been 88 per day, largely international academics, with peaks for two months this year of over 110 per day.
 4. Claims of people not knowing of my work rate as little more than professional negligence, or laziness or arrogant neglect or some of all three.
 5. In addition in New Zealand I have had extensive contact with Philosophy departments in Christchurch, and Auckland, extensive contact with management department at Unitec. Auckland management department are well aware of my work, as is Auckland psychology department, all this contact going back for ten or more years.
 6. In addition I have had contact with all Vice chancellors, and exchanged some communication with VC from Waikato.

7. Claims that NZ universities were not aware of my work, again unfounded, they were also included in my communications, but I know gained little attention or respect. (In that regard, I was at first invited to deliver a seminar at the Auckland University Philosophy Department, this invitation then abruptly withdrawn under the most flimsy of pretext.)
8. Claims of essential 'peer review' quality carry little or no weight, especially after Alan Sokal (1996). Such claims also expose issue of academics believing they the only people able to think, or to do solid intellectual work. It is this 'old boy school', and the funding of those in the system when no effort was put into true assessment of my work that is part of this issue. The core subjective structure of peer review, its arrogance, its support of predisposed attitudes, and its old boy network status leave a very bad taste especially by supposed objective people when all they did was fund one of their own, who had reached decision on the project via dubious ethics and in disregard of the fundamental of research, to acknowledge your sources, regardless.
9. The referees could have known, out of arrogance, they declined to view and assess, that is negligence, and public money wasted as a result.

Concluding comment

The episode is distasteful, I feel distaste in drafting these words. It also reflects poorly on the Macdonald's, also on the Royal Society, and Marsden fund Committee and referees. But does highlight a weakness, an "Achilles heel" of academe, which in conjunction with ongoing publication and support of work that is clearly intellectual junk, is a significant contributor to the progressive decline in global respect for rationality.

Graham Little
January 2006