

Virtues between the vices

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Ethics is an often-misunderstood concept, but the great thinkers can help us gain both understanding and perspective affirms Dr Andrew Knight

We live in times of trouble: uncertainty over Brexit, fear of terror attacks, anxiety over fake news and lack of trust in professionals. As an antidote to the current moral panic, the great thinkers of the past can provide us with perspective on our current concerns and offer practical advice on how to live, both privately and professionally.

Understanding ethics

There are 2 popular misconceptions about ethics: first, that it is all about prescribing a goody two-shoes approach to life's problems, and second, that it is the exclusive domain of religion. Both of these are false.

Ethics is fundamentally about how we ought to live our lives. Every person, religious or not, is constantly navigating life by making moral decisions on a daily basis, ranging from whether they should refuse a lunch from a friendly contractor to making life-defining decisions, such as requesting when to turn off life-support for a partner.

If we value our profession because we think RICS is a power for the public good then we need to reflect more deeply on our values, who we are and what we want to achieve, both individually and collectively.

These are both moral decisions, and while religion provides guidance for some, ultimately ? as Jean-Paul Sartre famously stated ? we are free to choose and hence responsible for our own moral choices. Moral reasoning is therefore a necessary component of being human, and the choices we make throughout our lives, including the time we spend at work, define who we are.

Although we may try to separate work from home, we are morally accountable as individuals wherever we are. An important confusion often arises at this point between moral and legal accountability: in fact, what is legal and what is moral are often very different, as can be seen in the contrast between the greedy practices that led up to the 2008 financial crisis and the dearth of legal convictions since.

Public reputation

The professions, ours included, have taken a beating from the public and press over recent times. This should not surprise us. Professions claim a special status in society ? their membership, organised into professional bodies, has historically been given credentials by

the state in the form of charters, royal patrons and the right to postnominals.

At the centre of this special status are high-level expertise, codes of conduct and trust. And it's not just in professionals? respective areas of expertise that society expects integrity, because professions command wider authority: think, for instance, about who can and cannot countersign passport applications in the UK. However, from the mass murderer Dr Harold Shipman to the directors of Carillion, this pact has been broken, and even though the culprits are few the damage is significant to the reputation of the professions as a whole.

Carillion provided the world with a very visible case of how modern corporate culture seems to have diverged so markedly from the claims made by the professions that they are working for the public good. It is difficult to think how much more damning the House of Commons report on its collapse could have been. It stated: 'Carillion's rise and spectacular fall was a story of recklessness, hubris and greed,' a strong moral claim by any standard.

However, to be charitable, some employees may not have been driven by greed but may instead have found themselves in situations where moral dilemmas appeared unresolvable: what do you do when you are asked to act in a questionable way and refusal may result in job loss? The commercial world is untidy, and abstract concepts such as 'integrity' can be difficult to cash out in moral grey areas.

The good life

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle used the term 'eudaimonia' to describe the good or flourishing life. He writes about the practical nature of ethics, and how the good life is achieved through the exercise of the virtues. According to Aristotle, the virtues exist at a 'golden mean' between the vices. So the virtue of truthfulness in our self-expression, for instance, stands between the vices of boastfulness and understatement.

One strength of Aristotle's approach is that there are no absolutes: context is everything. Those who are wise adjust their actions to the situation and therefore exercise a whole set of virtues, from courage to patience. Developing these virtues is part of daily life and of cultivating excellence in character, but that does not mean this is a part-time activity.

If we value our profession because we think RICS is a power for the public good then we need to take a deeper interest in ethics generally, beyond the [Rules of Conduct](#) and beyond our own intuitions, to reflect more deeply on our values, who we are and what we want to achieve, both individually and collectively.

Dr Andrew Knight FRICS is Dean of the School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment at [Nottingham Trent University](#)

Further information

- Related competencies include [Ethics, Rules of Conduct and professionalism](#) [previously Conduct rules, ethics and professional practice]
- This feature is taken from the [RICS Construction Journal](#) (November/December 2018)
- Related categories: [Ethics and professional conduct](#)