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FREE, AS IN BEER

Ethics, Morals, and Olin

Michael Resnick
Contributor

Let's all agree on something: none of us want to do bad in the world with our engineering, and it would be nice if something good could come of it. This is not meant to be a politicised statement. Recently there have been conversations about the military's influence at Olin. That is not the conversation we are having here. This is not an opinion piece. This is about 1) the apparent, measured disconnect between our desire to have discussions and/or education about ethics in engineering and the lack of such discussion in classes and 2) the misunderstanding that good and bad caused by engineering are always easy to intuit.

Survey - tinyurl.com/Olin-Ethics-Survey

Last week a survey went out about "ethics" and "morality" in engineering at Olin. The survey defined these terms, for ease of communication and consistent interpretation, respectively, as "concern over whether something is wrong" and "concern over the extent to which something generates a net positive effect." Those

two, separate notions are one way to frame this discussion, and how I will be framing it here.

I said, "apparent, measured disconnect between our desire to have discussions about ethics in engineering and the lack of such discussion in classes," earlier because: 1) only 2 of the 57 (3.5%) respondents checked the box saying that there should be no discussion of ethics/morality in engineering at Olin, and 2) 2/3 of respondents have considered ethics and morals only on some or no projects.

The demographics of respondents featured a slight bias towards first-years and away from sophomores. 1/3 of respondents said they had not participated in a project that was morally fulfilling or meaningful to them. 1/2 of respondents said they never had an ethical question about a class project at Olin.

Why ethics isn't "common sense"

Yes, some ethical questions are often regarded as more common sense than others. However, there are reasons for the existence of ethics education and discussion, such as 1) without learning about ethics, you

may be generally less aware of ethical issues in your engineering projects, 2) there are also complex ethical issues to consider in engineering often, and 3) should you care to attempt to quantify, rather than qualify, well-being or harm resulting from something you engineer, the analytical process, social return on investment (SROI), is not necessarily intuitive; it requires practice, research, and education about the process.

Current state of ethics education at Olin

Currently, there is a 3-college collaboration course called, "Issues in Leadership and Ethics," taught by the presidents of the BOW schools, however, only 8 Olin students can sign up, they have to be seniors, and... one more catch... it did not run this year. Based on an informal survey of about 30 people conducted by going around the dining hall, it seems that people are, at best, only vaguely aware of its existence, and most do not know it exists.

Prompted, surveyed students mentioned, by percentage, that ethics and morality were discussed in some classes, such as UOCD (39%),

continued on next page

ADE (14%), Investigating Normal (11%), E4H, Design Nature, and PoE (5%), and SCOPE and Sustainable Design (3.5%). 21% said these topics were not discussed in any class.

Future state of ethics education at Olin

Respondents, by percentage, said that it would be a good idea to discuss ethics in: OIE (56%), an optional class, open to everyone, taught every year (51%), every class where projects are done (36.8%), a currently required first year class besides OIE (19%), a mandatory class (16%), some other venue (16%), and nowhere (3.5%).

Should we have more conversations? Where? What do you think we should do? How do you think about ethics? If you're in the dining hall, talk to the people at your table! Talk to your roommate/suitemates! Talk to people on your current project teams at your next meetings! If you're interested in these discussions,

consider joining the Think-Tank ("Meta-discussions about Olin") or Assumptions ("share thoughts, opinions, and media related to challenging assumptions that we as individuals, communities, cultures, and as a species make about ourselves and the world. it's quite broad.") mailing lists.

Quotes from the survey responses

"Ethics/morality are intricately intertwined with engineering, and yet at Olin, we only seem to discuss them when a passionate individual takes charge."

"[These discussions] ... might not fit in a class structure."

"I think most of it is pretty obvious and common sense, like don't make apps that objectify women or are mean to people"

"From [Olin's mission statement:] 'Olin College prepares students to become

exemplary engineering innovators who recognize needs, design solutions and engage in creative enterprises for the good of the world.' Definitions of 'good' may differ wildly between individuals but we can't seriously have a mission statement like that without also seriously delving into ethics and morals as an institution."

"It's very important to keep in mind that everyone's view on what is ethical is very different, and we should not be trying to influence other people's belief system because it doesn't line up with our version of what is ethical. I do however, believe that a class dedicated to teaching you how to maintain the ethics you already have even in the face of outside pressure is important."

"Not [talked about] enough at Olin, gets laughed at and shrugged off."

"Frankly, it pisses me off that you want to say that my ethics aren't good enough." -- ouch! :)

G C S - W h a t ?

Michael Costello *Contributor*

You might have noticed that the phrase "GCSP" is popping up much more frequently around campus. GCSP – the "Grand Challenges Scholars Program" – is an initiative started by the college to encourage and support students who are concerned about the world beyond the Olin bubble. Though GCSP began over

five years ago, it is only now becoming fully active. It's a fairly exciting time to be starting a program – Are you interested about global affairs? Sustainability? Social justice? Do you wish you had more chances to talk about these topics? Do you wish you had more time to think and learn about these problems? Do you already feel stretched-thin from your current coursework? Well, you are not alone. Your goals

are the goals of GCSP.

Essentially, GCSP is a framework for creating individualized learning plans centered on the major issues you want to solve. That is to say, the goal is to make it easier for students to focus on the issues – social, political, environmental, etc. – that feel meaningful and relevant, without adding tons of extra work to their existing schedules. We're still trying to figure out how to best

accomplish this; some of it involves already-underway curriculum integration (for example, modifying projects to be more relevant in the real world), while some of it involves nudging Olin's culture. Anyway, if you're excited about this space and want to learn more, there are some events coming up:

Interesting Conversations with Olin faculty, staff, and alums. GCSP has been holding these in EH1 on weeknights, or at SLAC, on a semi-regular bi-weekly basis for over four years, and they've always provided an excellent opportunity to discuss new ideas about people's lives at and outside of Olin. At one recent Interesting Conversation, Professor Jason Woodard brought homemade carrot cake and

we discussed, among other things, Jason's globe-trotting adventures and the democratization of higher education.

Council on Foreign Relations conference calls and discussions. Olin has access to the CFR's bi-weekly academic conference calls, which include 30-minute presentations from experts on given topics and questions phoned in from students. We'll have some snacks/refreshments, and after the call we'll keep the discussion going. We think this might provide a good space for students who want to get out of the bubble.

GCSP@Foundry Stand-Up. We're using the typical two-minute mini-pitch format of Stand-Up Fridays to give students a chance to talk about their goals for making

a difference. The prompt is "What will you do to change the world?" This is going to be a really exciting opportunity for people to share their ideas on topics they might not otherwise discuss.

With all of these events, the hope is that we can not only spur on conversations about the issues themselves, but also open up discussion of how the Olin community thinks and talks about these issues. If any of these events seem exciting to you, subscribe to gensp@lists.olin.edu for more information and updates. Also, if you'd like to get involved with the planning process, come to the student steering meetings on Mondays from 5:30 - 6:00 in CC210!

Service Updates at Olin

Kelly Brennan
Contributor

The Daily Table: Led by Emily Yeh

Want to help feed the low-income families? Volunteer at Daily Table in Dorchester! Daily Table is a nonprofit organization that sells affordable and healthy foods to people with low incomes. Volunteering times are flexible and transportation will be provided, courtesy of SERV!

Youth CITIES: Andrew Holmes

Andrew Holmes will be volunteering with Youth CITIES March-to-May Bootcamp on Saturdays from March 3rd to May 7th from 9am to Noon. He will be mentoring student

participants in starting a venture, analyzing impact in the community, and determining how to make it financially sustainable while driving local change.

eDisco: Led by Mary Martin, Doyoung Lee, Shreya Rangarajan, Adam Coppola, Annabel Consilvio

We have worked with Scofield school to run multiple workshops and are working on planning activities for the rest of the semester. If you want to participate or have ideas for lessons then join the mailing list or contact any of the leaders.

The Food Recovery Network: Led by Mackenzie Frackleton with GROW

The FNR is continuing to re-

cover food from the dining hall! The Olin group is looking for more drivers who are willing to help drive food to the Salvation Army of Framingham (35 Concord Street, Framingham). Contact Issac Vandor if you're interested!

Big Brother Big Sister: Olin and Babson College

Max Wei and Justin Kuni-mune have been continuing to meet once every 1-2 weeks. The first outing of the semester was to the Gullivan Housing Development, where all of the Littles live. Since then, they have been meeting at Babson as usual except for recently, when they took a field trip to go ice skating in the Boston Common.

Out of the Ashes

Leon Lam
Contributor

Chapter 3

[HOW MANY LIVES HAVE YOU TAKEN?]

“Seven hundred and twenty two counting both *draugr* last night,” you reply. Adrian sucks in a sharp breath.

“Two of them?”

You nod. “Strong and tough, but they die the same as everything else. Blessed silver works well, too.”

Your colleague shakes his head incredulously. “I saw one tear a dozen soldiers apart in seconds.”

“That does sound like something a *draugr* would do,” you say. “Especially if the squad was inexperienced. Speaking of which, you’ve seen combat before – have you killed anyone?”

“I—” his mouth moves wordlessly. “It was a blur, and there were so many... I can’t remember. Five? Ten? Too many. We found out later that their mages outnumbered us three to one.” he shudders. “Nothing compared to seven hundred, but—”

You shake your head. “One is too many.” Each kill is crystal clear in your memory, preserved like a fly in amber. Some of your victims were defiant, some resigned. Most were fearful. It didn’t matter in the end.

Nothing does.

“...Does it ever get easier?” your colleague asks.

You consider his question for a moment. “My Order considers violence a necessary evil. I find it...” you pause, looking for the right word.

Adrian scratches his chin. “Difficult?”

“I find it regrettable,” you say at last.

~

You soon find yourselves in the Jin Mansion’s shadow. Much like its smaller cousin, the building resembles a massive stone flower – but the similarities end there. Instead of white and green, the mansion’s exterior is a rich blue with miniscule script flowing up its walls in gilded vines – ancestral names, dates and accomplishments packed into swirling patterns of dazzling intensity.

Jin He, Tenth Day of the Sixth Month of the Year of the Wooden Monkey: Appointed Grand Prefect of Xishan...

Jin Bao, Third Day of the Eighth Month of the Year of the Wooden Rooster: Served with honor in the pacification of the Southern Rebellion...

The list goes on and on, the history and genealogy of an entire Great House transcribed on its seat of power.

“Did you see that?” Adrian whispers as you step over the threshold and hand your coat to a waiting servant. “The writing on the walls...”

You nod.

“If you would be so kind as to follow me, Honored Guests,” the servant says.

“The Lady of the House awaits.” Her voice is high and sweet, like the trilling of a caged songbird.

~

The interior of the mansion is as opulent as its exterior. You walk down corridor after corridor of priceless artwork – exquisite paintings and calligraphy, delicate vases and urns nestled in alcoves, intricate clockwork figurines and mechanisms that *whirr* and *tick* as they move...

You emerge into some sort of training hall, racks of practice weapons resting against bare walls. A staff-wielding woman spars with an imaginary foe in the middle of the room, striking and parrying with practiced grace.

Your guide knocks softly on the door, and Lady Jin turns to meet your gaze.

“Thank you, Mei,” she says in Reshanese, putting her weapon down. “You may take your leave now.” The servant bows and heads back into the corridor.

Both of you remain silent as the noble approaches you, bare feet gliding over lacquered wood. When she is ten steps away, you bow at the waist, and Adrian does the same a split-second later.

Lady Jin inclines her head ever-so-slightly as you straighten up. She looks somewhere between twenty and forty, but has ruled her House for over two hundred years. *Do not underestimate*

her, you have been warned. *You will not live to make such a mistake again.*

"Welcome, ambassadors." She speaks your tongue flawlessly, words crisp and precise with no hint of an accent. "I beg your forgiveness for the meager hospitality – you must be used to a higher degree of comfort."

Her false modesty appears completely sincere. *Is this an act, or does she truly believe her extravagant hospitality inadequate?* Neither option sits particularly well with you.

"Not at all, Your Grace." Adrian replies smoothly. "We – our lord included – were greatly impressed by the courtesies you have bestowed upon us. He is a strong advocate for closer relations between our two nations, and your hospitality lends much weight to his beliefs."

"It gladdens me to hear such," she says. "Of the matter we discussed yesterday..."

You nod. "It is done, Your Grace."

"My thanks," she replies. "The *jiangshi* – what do you call it? *Draugr*? – has killed my people for close to a month, despite my best efforts. For you to track and destroy it in a night... such a deed deserves recompense, wouldn't you say?"

You shake your head. "I would not presume to trouble you any further, Your Grace—"

She waves her hand, cutting you off. "It is no trouble at all. What is it you desire?"

"If I may be so bold, Your Grace," you say after a moment's consideration, "I would ask a boon of you – its nature and magnitude to be decided at a later date, perhaps?"

Lady Jin laughs, high and clear. "So practical! Much as I hate being indebted to another, I am a woman of my word... very well. I will oblige."

You bow again in thanks, and she goes on: "How fare your preparations for the banquet tonight?"

"They go well, Your Grace," Adrian replies. "We are eager to visit the palace and see its wonders."

"Ah! My humble abode is but a hovel in comparison to the splendor of the Imperial Court," Lady Jin says. As you and your colleague begin to raise differing opinions, she cuts you off with another wave of her hand.

"Save your breath," she says, a twinkle in her eye. "You may argue with me later tonight, if you please. I doubt you will, though – His Majesty the Son of Heaven has spared no expense in his hospitality..."

~~

Today, the Son of Heaven's mourning ends. Twelve months and two days of abstinence from official duties (a full year with one day more at the beginning and end, for the years of mourning are three in number), prayers and offerings of incense, burnings and burials and sacrifices, watery gruel and rough linen garb...

Death brings enough misery to the living – it seems strange that anyone should prescribe more. But it is not your place to question another's beliefs. And if anybody deserved mourning, you suppose it would be the previous ruler of Reshan.

Seventy years of age when she was taken by an assassin's knife, the Empress' death drowned an empire in the flames of civil war, pitting her two children against each other. Eventually, justice won out – in a three-day duel that boiled the seas and blackened the sky, the Son of Heaven cast his murderous sister down in a duel and crushed her armies... or so the story goes. History is a luxury of the victor, and fact is often less convenient than fiction.

Whatever the circumstances behind your presence in Reshan, your mission is clear. *Assist Lord Anselm in his quest to strengthen diplomatic ties between the two empires, you were told. Do so by any means necessary.*

~~

A soft knock on the door interrupts your train of thought, and the servant from before bows and glides across the room. She whispers something into Lady Jin's ear, and the noble frowns.

"No," she murmurs. "That is... I cannot in good faith demand such a thing of them. Tell him I will—"

The servant shakes her head urgently, muttering again. You make out the

words “Imperial Seal”, and Lady Jin lets out a heavy breath. “Very well,” she says, looking a few decades older. “Show him in.”

The servant bows hurriedly and leaves in a swish of skirts, almost running in her haste. Lady Jin looks at the two of you, sadness in her eyes.

“I would like to apologize,” she says, “for what is about to transpire.”

“Should we be concerned for our safety, Your Grace?” You ask, keeping your voice even and curling the fingers of one hand into a loose fist. Power swirls within you like a storm, howling for release, and thought/image/feeling flashes through your mind—

Strike first – only a split second – kill archers in the walls – back along the corridor – guards – kill them too – kill the servants, dead men tell no tales – retrieve the Principal – burn your way to the docks – strike now now Now NOW—

Lady Jin reels backward, raising an arm instinctively in a defensive gesture, but you quash the murderous impulse with an effort of will. *Not now*, you tell yourself. *Not until she makes her move.*

“I mean you no harm,” Lady Jin replies, the fear in her eyes fading into wariness. “But I must put you in a difficult position – His Majesty has decreed it so, and it is not my place to question his judgement.”

“Difficult? How so?” Adrian asks.

“The punishment for treason is fate worse than

death,” she says, “and His Majesty wishes for you to witness it first-hand. Here they come.” A corner of her mouth twitches in displeasure.

Boots *clunk* heavily across wooden flooring, and a courtier garbed in red with silver trim marches into the room. He is accompanied by a guard clad in gleaming steel from head to toe, and a stylized metal coffin floats serenely through the air behind the duo.

Mage.

“The Imperial Edict arrives!” The courtier cries. Lady Jin falls to her knees, pressing her forehead against the ground. You and Adrian bow but remain standing – Lord Anselm’s instructions were clear. The courtier may speak with the Emperor’s voice, but you will kneel only to the Emperor himself.

“His Majesty the Emperor, the Son of Heaven and Lord of Ten Thousand Years, has decreed that all who enter his palace must first witness the price of wickedness,” the courtier proclaims. “The Vessel of Penitance behind me contains a heinous traitor, arrested for crimes against Heaven too numerous to count – high treason, sedition, murder, rape, arson, theft... No amount of punishment is enough for such filth.”

You can hear hate in his voice, bitter and strident. “This ends the Imperial Edict.”

The coffin opens to reveal a trembling man – pale, hairless and naked from

head to toe. His arms, legs and torso are bound by leather straps, and his eyes are mad and unfocused as he struggles desperately against his bonds.

His mouth dangles open, a dark void stained with smears of deep red. Tongue and teeth have been removed, leaving only empty gums, and you hear the whistle of air escaping his throat as he tries to scream through mangled vocal cords.

“How long has he been in custody?” Lady Jin asks, rising to her feet. Her face is a shade paler than before, and a bead of sweat is forming slowly on her brow.

“Two hundred and six days,” the courtier spits. “Not long enough for the likes of it.”

“Two hundred and six days of flaying and bringing,” Lady Jin whispers. “Of flesh slowly pared away by the torturer’s knife. Two hundred and six nights of biomancy, renewing the body for the horrors to begin again at dawn.”

Adrian looks like he’s going to be sick. He stares at his boots, grimacing as his chest heaves violently.

You shake your head. In your five years of service, you have seen angry and frightened men do horrific things to their enemies. But this deliberate cruelty, the sheer premeditation and artifice and effort invested into the suffering of another...

I would not wish this on my worst enemy, you decide. What manner of twisted mind birthed such a punishment?

“Thus always to traitors,” the courtier proclaims triumphantly, and the armored guard steps forward. Gleaming scalpel blades slide from the tips of its gauntlets with a *snick*, and the captive’s struggles intensify as he recognizes the sound of impending agony. His eyes dart wildly about the room, but everyone avoids his gaze.

Everyone except you.

He looks pleadingly into your eyes, a wretched creature that was once human, now broken beyond repair by the tender mercies of the Imperial Torturer. The first incision splits his skin from groin to chin, and the captive convulses in his bonds as

bladed fingers begin peeling his skin away from his flesh. For a moment, the whistling of his neutered screams is the only thing you hear. Then you become aware of the pounding of your heart and an unfamiliar feeling stirring within your chest.

Something you thought you’d buried forever, in the training halls of your youth...

Emotion.

[WHAT DO YOU FEEL?]

[Sadness. The mission takes precedence over all else. You cannot damage

the goodwill between your two nations for the sake of one criminal.]

[Anger. No crime deserves such a punishment. You will not stand for this sick display of pain and suffering.]

[Determination. You have a duty not only to your nation, but to all humanity. Perhaps there is something you can do, some compromise that can be reached...? (Write-in)]

If you liked the story, please vote for your favorite option in the survey that will be sent out via email!

A Take-Home Exam

Aditi Joshi on behalf of the Honor Board

Contributor

Honor Board Release: Fall 2015

Background

Three students were taking a class together. Two exams worth a significant part of the grade were listed as part of the course grading. On the first take-home exam three students decided to discuss the exam over dinner before it was due. All three students were struggling with the final problem and independently decided to change their answers to that problem after the discussion in the dining hall. This was significant because the exam explicitly said no collaboration. When the professor received the

exam, all three had the same mistakes on the final problem – a phenomena the professor had never seen before.

Streamlined report

The professor decided to confront the students about what he had seen. All three students immediately acknowledged the conversation in the dining hall and changing their answers. A zero on the exam was approved as a sanction since the work submitted was not their own. In addition, the next exam was to be proctored to reduce the likelihood that the students would collaborate when there is a no-collaboration policy.

Discussion Question

When students are strug-

gling to answer a question on a test or exam, what can students do to make it easier on themselves to say, “I don’t know”?

Had the students not acknowledged the error in judgment and this gone to a full hearing, how would you have voted as a hearing panel member given the evidence presented?

Faculty members – In designing take-home exams, what kinds of problems are more or less likely to create a moral dilemma for students? That is, are there exam/test problems that make it easier to cheat/harder to do the right thing and are there exam/test problems that make it easier to do the right thing/harder to do the wrong thing? If yes, what do these problems look like?

Olin

Climate

Survey

Ellie Funkhouser

Contributor

This week, Student Affairs and Resources (StAR) is putting out a climate survey. It is not a two-question, ten-second survey. I'm not here to grovel to convenience or laziness. The survey is about the sexual and relationship climate at Olin. It takes about fifteen to forty-five minutes, with some variation - for example, many questions are "if yes to previous question"-style. The survey will be open for two weeks and then Jeremy Goodman will parse the raw data into anonymized results, which will be reviewed by a group of students, faculty and staff. This group will release statistical results to the community and recommended action items.

As you can guess, accurate surveys rely on a non-biased response distribution. It's to everyone's benefit if these results are as accurate as possible, because as we know from past experience, the survey will have an enormous bearing on Olin climate and policy.

Kate Maschan (now Kate Scully), who graduated last spring, conducted and published a survey on sexual misconduct at Olin. 19% of cis female respondents and

5% of cis male respondents identified being assaulted during their time at Olin; an additional 8% and 2% (respectively) were not sure if they had been. Non-cisgender students and alumni, lumped into one category to preserve anonymity, reported no assaults at the time the survey was done. This was two years ago; a lot has been done since then, and now we look to see quantitatively if we were able to change these staggering numbers.

Staggering is not an overstatement: one in four. Shockwaves rolled through the Olin community, often under the radar, on an individual scale. Kate founded the Peer Advocates to provide a trained and confidential resource for the Olin community. The Honor Board, StAR, the R2s, and many other student and administrative groups significantly reevaluated and reworked how they support survivors on campus and promote campus safety. Some examples of this are the increase of on-campus sessions about Title IX, active bystanding, and supporting friends; PA involvement in the consent discussions during first-year orientation; and the Sexual Respect Team's policy recommendations to the administration last semester.

I tell you all this to drive home the fact that this survey will do more than be numbers on a sheet - it will do more than we can imagine right now. It will motivate changes, like those I wrote about above, that uniquely address the needs of our current student body. It will bring light and air to experiences that, when held inside individuals, can be unbelievably isolating. It will tell us if things have improved since Kate's survey. If we are lucky, it will mobilize us to find ways we might support each other, look out for our friends, and empower ourselves.

The survey contains some heavy and potentially triggering questions. Stay tuned for an email from the PAs - we'll be opening up our rooms to provide spaces for questions, discussion, or just a safe, quiet place to step back from your busy life and get the survey done (plus snacks).

There is a lot I haven't gone into here about the months of research and discussion that created this survey. If you want to know more, good contact points are Alison Black (Asst. Dean of Student Affairs, Title IX Coordinator), Jeremy Goodman (Director of Institutional Research and Evaluation), or Gabrielle Ewall (student/PA, currently studying away).

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