

5b

Comments on Zwart: Professional ethics and scholarly communication

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Introduction

I appreciate professor Zwart as a brilliant scholar who seeks his intellectual challenges in overarching philosophical perspectives. However, when I read his paper I realized that our approaches to the topic of professional ethics are completely different. I expected at least three focus points in the tradition of the Reflective Equilibrium by Rawls (1971) and others in The Netherlands like Heeger (Van Willigenburg and Heeger 1989) and De Cock Buning (1998): (i) a spectrum of representative descriptions of boundary cases regarding professional communication by scholars, (ii) some moral intuitions, and (iii) finally a set of relevant ethical principles to bring the boundary cases to an ethical judgment. What is presented, however, are four unrelated parts, the former two dealing with intuitions and descriptions of circumstances and cases, and the latter two addressing ethical aspects.

Jurassic park

The author of Jurassic Park is cited when Zwart describes the historical change in academic freedom and communication. According to Zwart this description is false. If he is right, I wonder whether we should take serious notice of this apparent false description. The argument, however, does not come back in the rest of the text.

A case is described of a researcher who was pressured by a company that financed her research project. No indication is given for options in relation to a professional ethical frame of reference, nor in the text that follows. The case is left with an open end. Why?

The more favourable approach, in my opinion, is the one developed in the Science and Society programme of the Royal Academy of Science. From 100 codes of conduct Bout and De Cock Buning (1998) deduced a shared structure. This generalized frame became the leading concept in the code of conduct for biologists, medical practitioners and psychologists and for the Project on codes of conduct at Wageningen UR. We learned that the professional codes of conduct and their huge variety of more or less particular provisions, amount to four basic principles: *Integrity, Competence, Respect* and *Responsibility*. Therefore, when we return to the case of the researcher put under pressure by the funding company, one could 'solve' this case by analysing the problem as a consequence of improper implementation of the 'responsibility' structures. The university, i.e. the legal office of the university, should be the responsible party in deals with the industry. However, if one believes

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that the individual researcher must negotiate with the industry, one will end up in the uncomfortable situation of the described case.

Communication in a changing ICT world

Fundamental and challenging questions are raised by Zwart, such as: “What is the relevant definition of an author?” and “What is the relevant definition of a publication?” However, no suggestions regarding a possible answer are given.

Regarding the question of ‘true’ authorship, many attempts have been made in professional codes of conduct (e.g., by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors 1997). Most of them state that an author must meet several criteria. He or she must provide a substantial contribution towards (1) the idea and design of the project, (2) the analysis and interpretation of the data, (3) the drafting and reviewing of the intellectual content and (4) the approval of the final version for publication. The first three are operational aspects of the competence principle and the last one is related to the demand for responsibility and accountability.

Ethical styles in conflict

At this point, I expected a broad spectrum of relevant ethical notions that would give us various options to deal with the uncomfortable cases. Instead of such an analysis we received again a description of a new set of ethical notions, viz. the set of criteria used by Watson: competition, rivalry and ambition (as opposed to Merton’s altruism, solidarity and selflessness). Why doesn’t Zwart position these two different styles of ethics in ethical frames? These two styles may be entered in the scheme developed by Zweers (1995; 2000), who distinguishes five worldviews (see Table 1). Watson clearly fits into the ‘ruler’ position (aggressive language, technocratic optimism) and Merton takes the middle position (responsible stewardship, win-win pragmatism). From this conceptual perspective, one could very well position Watson and his criteria under the ruler position on the one hand, and at the same time position the agricultural practice (i.e. criteria of our host, Wageningen University) under the stewardship position on the other hand. Such an approach enables us to analyse better the distinctions and equalities within the same conceptual framework. Although still descriptive it would be descriptive in relation to an ethical/societal framework.

Table 1. Five types of worldviews, freely interpreted after Zweers (1995; 2000)

Types of worldview	Characteristics		
Commander	To control	Man against nature	Technocratic
Enlightened ruler	To manage	To improve	Accountable
Steward	In service of	Conservation	Win-win
Partner	To develop	Man and nature	Equality
Ecocentrist	To take part in	Man is nature	Empathy

Personally I doubt whether the Watson example is the relevant example. Watson explicitly chose to write a bestseller. He knows that the public likes to read about hidden conflicts. So he highlights these conflicts. His book is written as if it were a crime story. Actually, all professional codes of conduct agree with Merton’s approach and not with Watson’s perspective. The ethos that Watson seems to advocate serves,

on the contrary, as the one to be condemned. Again, I wonder which message Zwart wants to convey. Is he describing the anti-ethos? But does he advocate it? There is an intriguing absence of argument.

The virtue of self-denial

Zwart suggests that scientists aim for recognition and the satisfaction of recognition. He considers the Matthew effect unfair. He directs our attention to the eponymy. The validation of this analysis is not stated in empirical evidence, but is probably (at least) not contrary to his own experience. I doubt, however, the general validity of his analysis.

When I take my personal career as situational evidence, I come to quite a different conclusion. I received the honour of a PhD *summa cum laude* on a biological topic that only ten people in the world would appreciate. They did; and I was, and still am, satisfied. In line with this argument, I claim that there is no straightforward relation between the fame of the Nobel laureates in the domain of natural sciences and the number of people who understand their articles. In other words, one should be careful not to confuse satisfaction coming from professional colleagues and satisfaction coming from fame attributed to the scientist by media machinery. The last type of satisfaction depends upon one's character. Some prefer to become a public figure. I would like to consider this latter interpretation as a part of psychology and not as a part of professional ethics.

At the end Zwart cites Nietzsche to sum up some of the basic values of the individual scientist. As may be noticed, they all correspond well with the above-mentioned four principles that lie at the basis of professional codes of conduct. Although he clearly sympathizes with these statements of Nietzsche, he does not take the consequence to criticize Watson from this position, nor does he analyse the problem of justifiable authorship in this context, nor the various modes of publications in ICT. On the contrary, he comes up with a poetic statement that scientists are close to anonymity, which is only slightly true when one confuses public fame with recognition by one's colleagues.

Commenting upon a text is an easy job. Presenting an alternative is another story. I would like to take the opportunity to propose my answers to the cases presented by Zwart. I would place the cases in the context of the conceptual framework of 'professional ethics'. I would ask myself the question whether in a specific case the basic notions of competence, integrity, respect and responsibility are of any relevance to the actors in order to organize their behaviour professionally. From this perspective I can easily analyse the case of professional authorship according to the principles of *competence* (in order to grant an authorship one should be competent as to the manuscript, i.e. directly related to the research), *integrity* (no false games and hidden rewards should intervene in the list of authors) and *responsibility* (all authors should take full responsibility for the presented manuscript).

The case of internet publications can be analysed by *competence* (some professional provisions should be made to guarantee the competence of the authors) and *responsibility* (the internet publisher must somehow organize his responsibility for the quality of the publications).

The professional approach against contractual pressure is guided by the principles of *responsibility* (the responsible actor is not the researcher but the legal representative of the research institute) and *integrity* (everyone should guard his/her own role).

The topic of scientific satisfaction comes simply down to a proper acknowledgement of mutual *respect*. Providing options to guarantee that persons who deserve respect will meet respect should be obvious in a professional research setting.

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