

Education of Ethics: A Response to Diego Garcia

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very honored and delighted to be invited to present my thoughts at the Fourth COMEST meeting, where the world leaders on ethics of science and technology convene to discuss what I take to be one of the most pressing tasks for humankind in the early twenty-first century—devising a way to govern scientific and technology progress in such a way that they really benefit humankind. And I am doubly delighted to be able to respond to the insightful paper by Professor Diego Garcia.

In his paper, Professor Garcia stressed the importance of education of ethics of science and technology in that it fosters, or should foster, the mindset of 'deliberation' and not 'indoctrination' or 'pure description'. And it is not possible to overestimate the importance of this point he is making. What Professor Garcia is saying is that one should not aim at just imposing a set of normative ideas on the students, no matter how much one believes that to be true, and one should also not avoid making any normative judgments whatsoever, believing that anything can be right or wrong and that no definite answers can be given. To subscribe to either side would fall into the trap of thinking that the questions of value admit of no real answers: One either believes in one set of values mindlessly, or one does not believe anything at all. Either way ethics itself becomes impossible. Normative statements become 'true' and 'objective' simply because it is imposed perhaps by force (in that case they don't have the binding force that only comes with freely given assent), or they can admit of no truth nor objectivity at all. The normative then ceases to be normative.

Unfortunately, such kind of thinking is still prevalent in many educational circles today. Believing that questions of value admit of no objective answers, the typical attitude of policy makers in educational matters is something like: We should impose or instill one set of values on the students, or something like: Let's forget about all this 'moral education' and focus more on the technical side of education, one that produces results! But this way of thinking has become obsolete in the face of the rapid advances of science and technology in today's world. These advances are so deeply connected with our values and indeed our

senses of who and what we are as human beings, that we cannot simply avoid tackling seriously the questions of values that inevitably follow from these advances.

So, my more concrete proposal would be that one finds a way to nurture this kind of deliberative thinking that avoids the trap of absolutism and relativism, and one can only do that in a system of educational program that encourages free, informed, and rational enquiry. Students should be given the opportunity to explore questions of value on their own, with the sense of seriousness of really desiring to know the truth of the matter while realizing that the method of finding this truth is utterly different from the method of empirical science. Another thing is that we should all support attempts to set up a kind of formal training program on ethics of science and technology, for without educating the public on this issue, it is hardly conceivable that the goals and ideals of deliberative ethics that Professor Garcia talked about so wonderfully would materialize.

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Having said all this, what I would like to contribute further is on the issue of how an educational program in ethics of science and technology should be implemented. Right now my colleagues at Chulalongkorn University and I are trying to push forward a new degree program on bioethics. The project, called ASEAN-EU LEMLIFE, is a collaborative project supported by the European Commission through the ASEAN-EU University Network Programme (AUNP). The main objective of the Project is to develop a program of study in bioethics as well as teaching material, and the eventual aim is to convince enough number of people so that the degree program actually come into being.

There are many challenges in such a program of study. Firstly, it has to be interdisciplinary. And within the institutional setting of a large and diverse university like Chulalongkorn, this is a real challenge. This is so because Chulalongkorn consists of many different "Faculties", each of which is assigned an academic discipline and after some time these Faculties developed into highly autonomous organizations within the university itself. So an interdisciplinary program such as this one would find no 'home' since no Faculty would want to claim it as one's own.

I think a way to answer this challenge is to set up a new and independent unit within the university to take care of this task. If the departmentalization of the university used to reflect the departmentalization of knowledge as it existed in the past, then in order to reflect today's much more fluid structure of knowledge the organization of the university needs to be more fluid too.

Secondly, in the climate where universities have become 'global businesses', the program has to convince people that it can survive on its own. More specifically, it has to demonstrate that it can attract enough number of students who would be willing to pay the fees.

However, I don't think this challenge is too difficult to meet. For one thing, one can perform a kind of 'customer or market survey', so to speak, in order to find out about the potential market in the area. And the hypothesis is that the demand for ethics of science and technology is in fact overwhelming. It just is a function of the advances in science and technology. As for attracting the students, one needs to bear in mind that good students will be attracted to good programs. So quality is very importance indeed. One thing a program can do to ensure quality is to become international. Universities do not exist in a vacuum, and they need to form networks among themselves and students and teachers should be given opportunities to move around so as to expand their horizons and their experiences.

Here I find the newly created European degree programs very interesting. What these programs are doing is that they exist *across* a number of institutions in many countries. This is to link up various centers of excellence together to create a larger network which entails even more excellences. It also creates a wider pool to select the good students, and the students themselves have wider choices. So Chulalongkorn, for example, could link up with other universities in the region and create a degree program organized with these consortia. This will also combat the problem of shortage of qualified teachers in the field too.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now faced with a difficult and important challenge—how to devise a program of study in ethics of science and technology that does justice to the deliberative ideal that Professor Garcia talked about, and how to devise the best institutional setting which would enable the program of deliberative ethics to develop to the fullest extent. Thank you very much for your attention.