



Ethics and Excuses: The Crisis in Professional Responsibility

Banks McDowell

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Rarely discussed in courses on ethics is the topic of excuses, but in McDowell's view, excuses offer the most illuminating way to understand the true nature of ethical problems in the professions. He looks at excuses that professionals give when accused of acting unethically, and asks, when are they valid and when not? Problems of professional ethics are really problems of compliance, he argues, not ignorance of expectations. The study of excuses can help us understand what these problems are and offer insights into ways to solve them. Banks maintains too that our ethical expectations may need overhauling, given substantial changes that have occurred in how professionals do their work today. They can be easily persuaded that what they are doing is not unethical; it depends on the excuses they give themselves as well as others. Professionals know what's expected of them, but social and economic pressures make compliance difficult. Professionals in all fields, who struggle to be both successful and ethical, will find the book challenging, provocative, and yet sympathetic and reassuring too. It will also be an important resource for graduate students in courses exploring the relationship between business and ethics.

Excuses may be ways of avoiding professional responsibility, says McDowell, but they may also be the way in which general ethical principles are adapted to particular contexts. They may also indicate that ethical codes need to be reformulated to adapt to changes in how professional services are delivered. Specialization, urbanization and the systematic breakdown in community relationships, the globalization of the economy, system, and market pressures for success—for all these reasons, professionals today face problems much different from those faced by their counterparts earlier in the century. Excuses also raise the problem of whether any system of voluntary compliance, like professional ethics, can function when the decision on whether an excuse is valid or invalid rests with the actor, who can rationalize almost any self-interested action he or she might take. McDowell explores these issues and others in a fresh, readable style, with numerous anecdotal examples, and with evidence from many sources that the crisis is real and demands quick but lasting remedies.

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