



Opportunities and pitfalls for ethical analysis in operations research and the management sciences[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 September 2007

Accepted 11 December 2008

Available online 30 December 2008

Keywords:

Business policy

Decision making/process

Group decisions

Philosophy of OR

ABSTRACT

Operations research (OR) is basically concerned with the relationship between scientific modelling and the application of models in social contexts and social practice. This problematic is also central in core domains of the management sciences (MS). At the level of the relevance criteria for models, and insofar as the specification of goals belongs to the OR/MS domains (which is at least partially the case), these research fields inherit some of the basic, enduring questions concerning prudence, art and science. New ethical challenges must be addressed to promote the understanding of the interplay between social science, institutional design, and expertise. It will be argued that efficiency questions—which lie at the heart of the OR/MS problematic—are best understood against a background of ethical questions. The specificities of the field of ethics, it will also be argued, result in a number of pitfalls.

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1. Introduction

In social contexts, efficiency norms are mingling with other kinds of norms: institutional and legal rules, ethical demands, as well as various implicit codes which determine mutual expectations. Thus, there is no hope for purely exogenous "efficiency" criteria to circumscribe optimal decisions without taking such dimensions into account. This has consequences for the nature of expertise or applied analysis

about social interaction: we cannot dispense with the connection between the goals of collective action and the individuals's beliefs, normative systems and desires. Rather, we must theorize this connection in an explicit manner, whatever the field of expertise.

But ethical research is not necessarily congenial to the methodology of operational research (OR) and the management sciences (MS). While the OR/MS field has amply demonstrated its concern for plural evaluative criteria and its permeability to contextual social demands, the classical norm in OR/MS is widely felt to be *efficiency*, not ethical adequacy, although there has been a marked move in the discipline in recent years toward defining the goodness of results and processes in terms of overall optimality, which normally involves ethical tests. We may note that in OR, efficiency is not usually viewed as something which conflicts with ethics. Quite simply, it does not refer to the same category of problems, and many researchers think that we should alternatively endorse one viewpoint or the other one. The same remark applies to a large part of economics and applied social mathematics.

[☆] This study takes place on the methodological side of the ongoing work concerning the role of principles in institutions and inter-institutional dialogue. The financial support of the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (DELICOM project, JJC-05, <http://epi.univ-paris1.fr/delicom>) is gratefully acknowledged. I have also benefited from discussions at the INSEAD workshop on Ethics and Operations Research (Fontainebleau, April 25–26, 2003) and from discussions with Alexis Bienvenu, Maria Bonnafous Boucher, Céline Froissart and Myriam Goujjane about corporate ethics. Finally, the author thanks two referees for their very useful comments.

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But ethics, just like OR, deals with the relationship between evaluative criteria and actions. Expertise generally speaking is the theatre of conflicting aims and even, in some cases, conflicting rationality claims.¹ This is a good reason for experts to enter the field of ethics, because the following question naturally comes up: what are the criteria which can be useful to strike the good balance between the claims or preferences of the different actors? This is a typical ethical question. Indeed, it is the general form of many ethical problems in pluralistic contexts where all existing criteria for evaluation (each of them entertained by one individual at least) cannot be satisfied simultaneously. I will consider the reasons to believe that specialized ethics can be relevant in a field such as OR/MS (Section 2). Then I will try to identify the level at which ethics can and should be brought in (section 3).

2. The relevance of specialized ethics

2.1. Scientific legitimacy and ethics

Brans and Gallo [3] describe OR/MS as “the science of modelling human affairs, the science of decision aid for decision-makers, the science of management of human system”. Given such an ambitious conception of the field, which makes apparent its essential connection with human values and purposes, it is hardly surprising that ethical concerns should come to the forefront. And yet, the specialized literature on ethics in OR appears to be haunted by a felt tension between scientific legitimacy and the need to incorporate ethical evaluation. This question is not obviously relevant. After all, the topic of ethics is a field of research in its own right. I suspect the question is motivated by the picture of ethics as a feeling-bound exercise which is conveyed by applied ethics when it goes apart from research in moral theory (and other allied systematic normative sub-disciplines or transversal fields such as social choice theory, normative economics and normative political theory). The practice of applied ethics in institutions, as distinct from philosophical research on applied ethical matters, is often closely associated with the quest for practical results, ranging from the promotion of a good atmosphere at work to large-scale objectives such as social cohesion. And sometimes, such results are achieved through the impact of discourse on feelings. Hence it comes as no surprise that ethics might be perceived, from the outside of the philosophical discipline, as an occasion for preaching or trying to express feelings of various sorts.² This might be considered a problem, although we should note, after Hans Albert, that moral intuitions which are strongly connected with our feelings do play a role in the examination of our moral

conceptions—a role which is similar to that of perception in the examination of cognitive conceptions, if we allow that conceptions of both kinds have a close relationship to the subject’s immediate experience.³

The alleged contrast between the demands of scientific OR/MS and those of ethics is often presented as a stylistic one: while OR/MS experts must be rigorous in their OR/MS expertise, they are not supposed to be as rigorous in the appreciation of the ethical side of their activity. Here, there must be room for discussion and open-ended questioning. Such is often the fate of transversal or background ethical questions in various professions. The typical scenario is that there is a definite set of difficult ethical questions which are regularly encountered by a body of professionals in their practice. Although they appreciate the importance of such questions, they cannot concentrate on them in a professional manner. For example, teachers do regularly have problems with evaluative rigor and equity in grading; but not all teachers have the statistical and ethical skills required to handle such problems properly. Industrialists may have qualms about their ecological responsibility, but not all of them have a significant background in philosophy or biology.

In the case of ethics, it must be allowed that the relevance of the subject is not strictly connected with academic achievements, although the interest in ethical questions is surely best served by up-to-date information about academic work. Ethics is part of human affairs generally speaking and it can surely be discussed with clarity and relevance, in many contexts, without going into technical details or very elaborate philosophical argument. The field of ethics harbours discussions which exhibit varying degrees of inevitable complexity or technicality.

Ethics is often recognized as a place for continuing dialogue about difficult, sometimes unanswerable, questions.⁴ The process of dialogue matters in this respect and its study is high on the agenda in several disciplines which are of relevance to ethics. For example, ethical concerns and dialogue, when they are organized in a corporate or institutional framework, give to the usually ignored stakeholders (or usually silent participants) opportunities to express themselves and put forward their own values and interests. From the point of view of OR/MS practitioners, concern for all the affected parties can be described as an “external” perspective on ethics, which goes beyond the “internal” concerns about rigor in professional activity or other qualities which directly pertain to the researcher’s activity (Brans and Gallo [3]). Of

¹ See Parrochia [1] and Raes [2].

² Philosophers, on the other hand, are sometimes criticized by fellow philosophers and others, for their failure to take feelings seriously in the study of situations in which feelings and emotions are in fact extremely important. Some theorists make constructive efforts in this direction; see Elster [4] and Livet [5]. More subtly, moral theories are sometimes criticized for describing what are really matters of feelings as matters of reasoning. This was the object of a specific line of inquiry in Pareto’s sociology. For a recent example, see the eloquent critique of Rawls’s theory of justice in Blackburn [6].

³ Albert [7], p. 319. Even a rationalist and anti-intuitionistic approach like Rawls’s, in moral theory, leaves room for an important role of a number of basic moral intuitions (as evidence by the methodology of reflective equilibrium we’ll mention later on). A well-articulated synthesis of possible methodological choices in moral theory is offered by Smith [8].

⁴ To be sure, this deliberative view of ethical debate does not accommodate all conceptions of ethical counselling. For example, ethicists with definite claims about virtues or the good life might be tempted to promote a conception of ethics which places less emphasis on dialogue, even though it fully recognizes the connection between, say, ethics, rationality, and persuasion. The association of ethics and open dialogue, here, is intended to capture a fact we regularly observe. In pluralistic societies, engaging in ethical activity is often associated with a shared commitment to promote open dialogue.

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