

CORPORATE SEPARATISM: HOW THE LACK OF INTEGRATION IS HARMFUL &  
WHAT CAN BE DONE TO FIX IT

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When looking at the current state of our corporate world, it is easy to notice just how specialized the work force is. Many people claim that this is birthed out of a need for efficiency and division of labor. It is this efficiency that is believed to be the main driver of our economy and the main reason that we have broken up our educational system into what it currently is. This begs the question, what do we lose? In many ways, we lose the big picture as our intelligence is relegated to an exceedingly small portion of the overall vision. If we can get people to see the bigger picture, then it might be possible to see a better ethical culture within industry. We see an ever-growing pushback against this as many people have come to see the value of interdisciplinary studies; however, there is still much that needs to be done about the topic. When analyzing the current corporate stance on separatism, issues arise with this narrow-sided view: the lack of responsibility that comes with separatism, and the intellect drain that comes with a lack of interdisciplinary interactions. With this, not only is there strain on the corporate entity, but also on the interactions between peers within this corporate environment.

Separatism does not aim to be a corrupting force in its essence but tries to be a source of efficiency and innovation. According to Van De Poel and Royakkers, Separatism is the “notion that scientists and engineers should apply the technical inputs, but appropriate management and political organs should make the value decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Basically, Separatism is asking an organization to completely separate the technical from the ethical, where the process of the engineer is without critical thought, and critical thought is left up to the management. From this definition, I believe it becomes rather clear on why this could already have the potential for

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<sup>1</sup> Van De Poel, Ibo and Lamber Royakkers, *Ethics, Technology, and Engineering: An Introduction*, Wiley-Blackwell. (UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011), 337.

danger within an organization. If there is a lack of this ethical thought when an engineer or scientist is creating something, then it would be possible to quite horrible acts to occur within the system. Of course, this is in a very extreme sense; however, the fact that this could happen, means that it should be looked at in its entirety. In other words, “engineers can only be held responsible for the technical creation of their product.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when looking at managers, they are responsible to “establish the objectives for engineering projects or products”<sup>3</sup>, but are not there for the actual creation of the product. If one were to read into this statement further, than this lack of responsibility can be rather alarming. What this could translate to is that the engineers will not take responsibility for a product’s harm as they were told they didn’t have to, and management does not take any responsibility for the product as they were not there for its creation. This creates a sort of black hole of responsibility where no one steps up to the plate.

If there are so many issues that can arise with Separatism, one must ask why it is still such a common practice within our industries. I believe it can be boiled down to a sense of tradition that can be found within the workplace. According to Smith, “we can see the professions as traditions of coordinated conduct cutting across social and national boundaries and consisting in various evolved ‘practices.’”<sup>4</sup> When looking at the cultural practices of the United States, we see that there has been a very large need for specialization. This makes sense as we need people who are experts on a specific topic. It also seeks to wonder if there is the potential to

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<sup>2</sup> Van De Poel and Royakkers, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Van De Poel and Royakkers, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, John-Christian, "Strong Separatism in Professional Ethics", *Professional Ethics: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 3-4 (1994): 118.

take this too far. The most extreme form of this, according to Smith, is “a metaethical position of *professional relativism*, a particular brand of cultural or class relativism where there is logical independence of professional norms from universal norms.”<sup>5</sup> This case is extremely interesting as it can be seen as not so out of the question any more. If we look at certain industries like the one located in Silicone Valley, we see this as there is a complete split between their version of ethics from the natural world, especially when it comes to privacy. For these companies, it can be quite relative as they believe they are doing the best of what they have. If there was more interdisciplinary interaction and learning with the companies, then it is possible that not just intelligent choices will be made, but also ethical choices.

Of course, the best way that Separatism can be avoided within the framework of industry is to start the education of interdisciplinary principles early on. According to Kneller, education of philosophy can be considered “to be the attempt to work out a systematic framework of concepts and values which will assist in the selection and judgment of educational goals and policies.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this, we can see how this education could assist with the building of ethical reasoning within science and engineering student. In situations where there is used, it would also assist with the critical thinking of students, which would in prove to be especially useful to how they work through technical issues. Because of this, it is extremely important for an educational institution to implement these. In these piece by Kneller, he presents two opinions of ethics education as one side argues that “ethics and educational theory are inseparable, since

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, 122.

<sup>6</sup> KNELLER, GEORGE F, "PHILOSOPHY, EDUCATION AND SEPARATISM", Educational Theory 12, (1962): 35.

any discussion of educational ends must inevitably take place within the realm of moral discourse”<sup>7</sup>, while the other side argues that “that the ends and means of education, though entailing moral choice, can be entirely determined within the educational experience itself”.<sup>8</sup> When looking at this, it presents the basic question of if we should actively incorporate ethics into educational curriculum, or if it is already presented through its situation, and we do not need to focus on it. It is clear from the past actions of engineer, with examples like city planning that marginalizes the disadvantaged, and current issues, like the lack of privacy that companies have been exploiting, the thesis of it coming naturally is completely negated. That is why, if we need a major change in how industry is run, there must be a major change in how education is performed.

Something that I do find quite interesting and is a topic that I feel like is relevant to the subject of Separatism, is the idea of value education. According to the article by Rani, value education should be taught as it “is an investment in individual capability and self-responsibility and its products, therefore, promises significant value to society.”<sup>9</sup> I think that this is a worth while venture, and it something that I believe people get confused with ethics education; however, I do still have some problems with this. Namely, the fact that it puts such a large focus of values instead of ethics. In my experience and through what I have gained in my Engineering Ethics class, values seem to be quite subjective as they can change between groups. That is why

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<sup>7</sup>Kneller, 38.

<sup>8</sup>Kneller, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Rani, Uma, "Role of Integrated Value Education in the Age of Globalism: A Review", *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing* 7, no. 8 (08, 2016): 859.

there should be more of a focus on ethics education within interdisciplinary education, as it will help more with subjective reasoning than virtue signaling. This would in turn, create an environment where people would be a little more accepting to changing Separatism.

In conclusion, when Separatism was first implemented, it was not meant to be harmful to industry. It was meant to be something that promoted efficiency. This has morphed, however, into something that creates a lack of responsibility within an organization. We see this today as so many companies are committing unethical acts due to this disconnect from society. One answer that we can turn to is education as it allows for the creation of more ethical scientists and engineers. If we successfully do this, then these ethical engineers and scientists can help create a more ethical world.

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