

# Reflections on ethics and morality

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**R**egion 9, or the Latin American Region, as the members of this region prefer to call it, covers a vast territory from the Rio Grande, the border between the United States and Mexico, to Tierra del Fuego on the southern tip of the American continent. The region comprises many countries, most of which are Spanish-speaking and have many economic, social, religious and cultural similarities. These similarities are important when speaking about ethics.

Ethics is defined as the science of moral behavior of individuals in society. In other words, it is the science of a specific form of human conduct. If we analyze the etymological roots of the words, we find that morality derives from the Latin word "mores," which means "habits," and ethics derives from the Greek word "ethos," which means "way of being" or "character." So, originally "ethos" and "mores," way of being and habits, are defined as a mode of conduct

that is learned from society rather than by natural disposition. This is an important fact to set the premises of this article:

- ◆ Ethical or moral behavior is not based on a universal and invariable code. In extreme cases we may be faced with the fact that what is morally acceptable in one society may not be in another.

- ◆ Although my personal and professional experience is in my own country, Mexico, most of what I say here applies as well to other countries in Latin America due to the social and cultural similarities.

- ◆ Society is in constant evolution, and changes in the "way of being" or "habits" of individuals evolve accordingly.

**PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS.** In Mexico, ethics, as a philosophical subject, is a compulsory course in high school, but, to the best of my knowledge, no ethics in engineering courses are taught at the university level. Professional engineers are expected to behave ethically, according to the rules of society and, I guess, the individual's own conscience. As an

educated person, the engineer is expected to distinguish objectively between right and wrong and act accordingly. This does not imply that engineers, or any reasonably well-educated person for that matter, will always choose to act rightly; it only implies that if the person chooses to act wrongly, that person will do so knowingly. If this assumption is right, then it can be argued that specific courses in professional ethics at the university level are not really necessary, but they should be available as continuing education courses for those wishing to acquire a deeper knowledge of the subject.

Mexico is undergoing a radical process of change. In an effort to attract foreign investment, open markets for Mexican-produced goods and create competition, the Mexican government has signed free trade agreements with the United States, Canada, Chile and other countries and has initiated the process to privatize, deregulate and unbundle former state monopolies like the telephone company, the electric utility and oil-related industries like petrochemical plants, natural gas transportation and distribution systems, all of which, as we know, employ a significant number of engi-

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neers. Along with investment, transnational companies bring a different business culture. This, of course, is not new, but the government decision to privatize large state-owned industries has accelerated the speed with which changes are being made. These changes have a direct and significant effect on the national economy, and they also have a considerable impact on the social and cultural environment.

**EFFECT OF TECHNOLOGY.** In addition, technological advances in telecommunications and transportation mean that we are living in a world growing smaller. It is a world in which the lifestyles and therefore the way of being or "ethos," at least of the upper and middle classes where engineers are supposed to belong, are becoming more alike.

The IEEE as an international organization has been very successful in promoting the advancement of electrotechnology for the benefit of mankind.

It is my belief that the Institute can also make a great contribution to society by promoting professional ethics in the practice of engineering.

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