



Doing the Right Thing: Ethics in Science

Scientific American Editors

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Doing the Right Thing: Ethics in Science by the Editors of Scientific American

Most of us have probably had those discussions, either in a classroom setting or otherwise, where a hypothetical situation is given and you're asked to choose between two or more unsatisfying options. If you follow option A, five people die; if you follow option B, one person dies. What do you do? Option B looks like the lesser of the evils, but then there's a wrinkle. Option B requires you to actively murder the one person to save five. Now what do you do? Making ethical decisions involves more than listening to an inner moral compass, a feeling in the gut of what's right and wrong; and questions of ethics in science are becoming increasingly complex, especially as technology encroaches upon even our most private cellular spaces. In this eBook, *Doing the Right Thing: Ethics in Science*, we cover a wide range of areas in science and medicine where complicated ethical questions come to bear, beginning with the first section, "Genomics." In "Are Personal Genome Scans Medically Useless," Sally Lehrman examines the value, or lack thereof, in the information obtained from direct-to-consumer genotyping tests, a field that exploded in the '00s. The middle sections are devoted to ethics in research, where informed—and ethically sound—choices are the basis of many scientific studies. Sections 2, 3 and 4 analyze the challenges unique to three areas, respectively: medical, pharmaceutical and basic research. Medical studies often reveal more information than researchers are looking for, and two articles, "The Ethics of Scan and Tell" and "Reporting Unrelated Findings in Study Subjects," examine questions of responsibility toward study subjects. Later, Charles Seife ferrets out doctors' financial ties to pharmaceutical companies in "Is Drug Research Trustworthy?" and Katherine Harmon calculates "The Cost of Misconduct" to the taxpayer. Finally Section 6, "Ethics and the Mind," analyzes the process of how we resolve moral conflicts when we make decisions. The interaction between reasoning and emotion is poorly understood, as seen in both "Anguish and Ethics" and "When Morality Is Hard to Like," but studies show that the emotional and memory regions of the brain are more active when confronted with difficult moral questions. These decisions are usually made after great inner struggle – think again of option B. What would you do?

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