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## Ethics discussion:

This discussion around ethics training may have arisen from a petition filed by WEAT and TAWWA, but the WUOLAC Committee has been discussing a clear lack of ethics within the industry over the last year. We have discussed the issues surrounding licensing exams, asked questions around instructors providing information about tests to students, and how to report instances of cheating. Clearly indicating there are questions to be answered and guidance to be provided.

I have had this discussion on operator ethics and morals multiple times over my time in the industry. A common narrative has emerged from opposition of providing ethical training often citing that ethics are innate. That we all know not to lie, cheat, steal, or kill. I pose that the idea that ethics are innate to a person's behavior alone is a fallacy. An individual's ethics are a combination of biological predispositions and learned behaviors through observation and experience.

Systematic research into the Origin and Development of Moral Sense published in the Frontiers in Psychology compiled and analyzed the results from numerous studies on the topic and found that "...moral sense is found to be innate in humans; individuals can naturally respond morally to various dilemmas. As seen among children and young infants, moral sense naturally exists... it can be socially nurtured through social

interactions and exposure to various environmental factors. Various research studies were reviewed in this systematic review to obtain a consensus on how moral sense emerges and develops. From the systematic review, the moral sense is found to be innate. However, moral development is fostered by social interactions and environmental factors.”

The paper goes on to state, “[Dawkins et al. \(2019b\)](#) also confirm the innate nature of morality: at least four socio-moral principles prematurely guide children’s reasoning and expectations, such as fairness, avoidance of harm, support for the group and respect for authority. In support of this perspective, [CK-12 Foundation \(2016\)](#) states that young children from the age of one to three learn many things through exposure. For instance, they are able to portray various responses that they learn from their superiors. Additionally, a significant change occurs when young children reach adolescence. Adolescents show much interest in their friends and peers. At this stage, these individuals are still learning how to manage their emotions ([Lerner et al., 2015](#)). Their peers’ interactions greatly influence them [CK-12 Foundation, 2016](#). Adolescents begin to form intimate relationships during this phase. Thus, through interactions with social peers, people learn and develop their moral judgement. This proves that moral development is socially progressive rather than naturally developmental: Interpersonal relationships and the socio-

cultural context are decisive as they influence and modify the moral sense. Therefore, it is not possible to consider the function regulated only by the natural development of the human mind. From the above emerges the constructivist perspective. According to this, each person gives meaning to their own experience and takes actions in relationships based on a set of personal premises and beliefs, which derive from their specific position in the interactive situation, from their previous experiences with relationships. There is no single, universally applicable set of moral requirements; rather, moral requirements are diverse and apply to different people according to their own experiences, emotions and motivations, and socio-cultural context ([Brink, 2003](#))."

This research reinforces the idea that the expression of ethics are not innate but a combination of biological and sociological pressures. Since this is so, people can have differing perspectives on ethical dilemmas due to differences in social experience. Therefore, if our goal is to have a unified ethical expectation for Water and Wastewater Operators, then we should be providing clear guidance and training to support that expectation. This should provide guidelines in accordance to regulations and then challenge participants with scenarios to clarify grey areas and challenge participants to ask why and how.

As pointed out above, an innate part of ethical development is a respect for authority. New additions to our industry see senior operators and trainers as an authority in the field. How many new operators being trained have been provided guidance from a tenured operator or superior that was misguided or use the phrase, “this is how we have always done it”? How many of us have encountered SOPs that have not been vetted against Regulations or Manufacturer User Manuals, Sampling points or procedures, variability in training, lack of guidance on filling out documentation, and generally respecting authority (which as we just heard was a base principle for morality) all lead people to be victims of circumstances and have a lack of awareness. By not regularly reinforcing our expectations as the leaders in the industry, we perpetuate the lack of awareness around them. By educating all across the industry, we could increase peer-to-peer accountability and awareness.

For those who would like to yield the responsibility of teaching ethics to Human Resources, I would challenge you to think about the small municipalities who do not have an HR department or those whose HR department have no understanding of ethics in the context of our field.

In summation, I believe that it is our responsibility as leaders to guide the direction of our licensed people's understanding of ethics in this field.

I propose a course that covers theory of ethics and morality in the industry and then challenges participants on scenarios in the final hour. Topics to discuss include:

- Code of Conduct
- Conflicts of interest
- Bribery and Corruption
- Falsification of Records
- Whistleblowing and Reporting Mechanisms
- Regulatory Compliance and QA/QC of Procedures and Practices
- Ethical Decision-Making and Ethical Dilemmas

Citation:

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