Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "What Job You Can Accept"

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What Job You Can Accept

I

Due to an unforeseen family emergency, Gerald Wahr needs a job fast, and one is available--with a company whose business Gerald opposes. Should he try for the job at the pesticide company, given that both he and his farmer father think that pesticides harm the environment and are bad for farming--a belief which Gerald's chemical engineering training has only reinforced? If not, as the case puts it, his family may lose its farm.

Unfortunately, there is no real solution for the person who needs a job but has moral objections to the job he's able to get. If Gerald is sufficiently dismayed by the pesticide industry, it will obviously be impossible for him to work in it. So he has to think out his options. There is no reason stated in the case why he couldn't get a job at McDonald's in order to tide the family over the crisis caused by his father's illness. Maybe the money isn't good enough, but the point is that there doesn't seem to be any absolute reason why Gerald has to work as a chemical engineer, rather than something else altogether, in order to pay the medical bills until the crisis is over.

Gerald's position is a bit strange. His fondness for his father has led him to adopt his father's dedication to the cause of anti-pesticides. He intends to follow his father into farming, and has apparently studied engineering specifically to learn enough to prove his point against pesticides: "to fight fire with fire," as his father puts it. He seems to have no other interest in chemical engineering, and does not intend to practice the profession but use his knowledge as a propaganda tool. Given all this, it is difficult to understand how he could even consider taking the job in question.

II

His friends make three arguments. Allen says that if Gerald doesn't take the job, someone else will, which is obviously true; but evidently Gerald's immediate problem is not how to stop the pesticide industry from making pesticides, but only to avoid helping them do it. (When it is time to stop the industry, he will join an environmental group, become active in farm politics, etc). From a strictly utilitarian point of view, however, there is something to be said for Allen's advice. For given that the pesticides will be made anyway, and given that eventually Gerald intends to challenge the industry, it might be the case that his position as critic would be strengthened if he first works in the industry and gets to know it 'from the inside.' So in view of his long-term goals, Gerald might consider swallowing his distaste and taking the job. Bob suggests that Gerald might be able to subvert the company from within, by 'slowing things down a little,' and Don raises the possibility of introducing reforms. Assuming that these are legitimate options, and that their success can't be entirely ruled out, Gerald would have to balance the (no doubt high) unlikeliness of either strategy succeeding, against the certainty that he will be helping the industry do something he opposes, namely, produce pesticides.

However both Bob's and Don's suggestions are dishonest, and would involve deceiving the employer Pro-Growth. So there is a question whether Gerald can follow this advice. In addition Bob is advising Gerald to do a poor job at Pro-Growth, which will not help Gerald's future employment, if he should seek any, as an engineer. Don at least is advocating that Gerald act openly, through internal reforms; but Bob is advising Gerald to accept the job even though Gerald not only knows he does not share the goals and objectives of Pro-Growth, but actually has the deliberate intention to subvert these goals. Few companies would hire a person with such an intention, claiming the right to hire only employees who are dedicated to the company's success as the company defines it. While it is true that Gerald could take the position that his opinions, even regarding his company's products and policies, are his own business, so long as he performs his job diligently, Bob's advice is that he not perform his job diligently, but the reverse. Were Gerald to accept the job with the intention to subvert Pro-Growth's goals, he could be accused of a kind of employee fraud. (There might be an analogy with a person who took a job in order to spy out trade secrets and reveal them to a competitor).

IV

Therefore, it is important for Gerald to consider his situation before he puts his qualms aside and goes for the interview. Should he anticipate that the interviewer will not ask him about his opinions, and should he then volunteer what they are? Or if he is asked, how will he reply? He might say that his opinions are not the company's business, and see what happens. Or he might say that he does have reservations about pesticides, but that he intends to perform the work required to the best of his ability nonetheless (if this is true). If Gerald were truly honest, he'd explain his opinions, since he wouldn't want the company to hire him under false assumptions. On the other hand, Gerald may well be fearful that any indication of a reservation on his part would kill his chances for job. He needs the money, and to this point he's apparently willing to put his objections to pesticides aside, in the interests of family finances. In that case, he might as well put aside honesty also and lie to the interviewer. At a pesticide company, you make pesticides. If you're willing to work at a pesticide company even though you don't like to make pesticides, you're contradicting yourself if you're not prepared to tell them you want to make pesticides: he who wills the end, wills the means. If Gerald gets the job he'll probably have to lie sooner or later, (suppose they find out about his farm background and ask him to pitch the product to farmers?) unless he thinks he can successfully stay in the closet all his life. So why not get used to it?

IV

To what extent should there be a match between one's ethics and one's job selection? This general question can't be answered other than in terms of cliche. You shouldn't accept jobs which grate on your conscience. Some people don't have consciences, and will take any job, including executioner. They are lucky. Other people have to work things out as best they can, including being willing to compromise sometimes if necessary, but hopefully not too much. Many people have jobs they don't like, or even detest, but they manage to perform at standards nonetheless. The employer is interested in the employee's job performance; the employee must consider his/her duty to him/her own conscience. It's not easy to find a job these days which might not worry our conscience at some point. Dow Chemical used to make napalm; Westinghouse ran a polluting nuclear bomb factory; electric companies cause acid rain; AT&T admitted discriminating against women; Upjohn

makes a medication that, according to 60 Minutes and the British government, turns people into murderers; even Kellogg's has been accused of anti-trust violations and of putting too many raisins in the Raisin Bran! Must one seek a morally pure company? If not, it's a question of how bad you take the company to be. No doubt some people have no problems with pesticides but would never work for a company which tolerates sexual harassment in the workplace. In that sense, ethics is the art of knowing what you want to fight and where you are willing to compromise.