

**ETHICISTS' AND NONETHICISTS' RESPONSIVENESS
TO STUDENT E-MAILS:
RELATIONSHIPS AMONG EXPRESSED NORMATIVE
ATTITUDE, SELF-DESCRIBED BEHAVIOR, AND EMPIRICALLY
OBSERVED BEHAVIOR**

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Abstract: Do professional ethicists behave any morally better than other professors do? Do they show any greater consistency between their normative attitudes and their behavior? In response to a survey question, a large majority of professors (83 percent of ethicists, 83 percent of nonethicist philosophers, and 85 percent of nonphilosophers) expressed the view that “not consistently responding to student e-mails” is morally bad. A similarly large majority of professors claimed to respond to at least 95 percent of student e-mails. These professors, and others, were sent three e-mails designed to look like queries from students. Ethicists’ e-mail response rates were not significantly different from the other two groups’. Expressed normative view correlated with self-estimated rate of e-mail responsiveness, especially among the ethicists. Empirically measured e-mail responsiveness, however, was at best weakly correlated with self-estimated e-mail responsiveness; and professors’ expressed normative attitude was not significantly correlated with empirically measured e-mail responsiveness for any of the three groups.

Keywords: attitude-behavior consistency, ethics, experimental philosophy, moral psychology, morality, social psychology.

1. Introduction

Approximately half of American ethicists appear to believe that professional ethicists behave, on average, at least a little morally better than do socially comparable nonethicists. (For survey results on this question, see Schwitzgebel and Rust 2009.) Until recently, however, no direct empirical research on this issue was available. Real-world moral behavior is somewhat difficult to study, and professional ethicists are a sophisticated and thinly distributed group.

A few studies from our laboratory suggest that ethicists do *not* behave better than do socially comparable nonethicists. In one study, we examined the rates at which philosophy books dealing with ethics were missing from leading academic libraries compared to similar nonethics books in

philosophy. We found that ethics books were actually more likely to be missing (Schwitzgebel 2009). Another study started from the background assumption that voting in public elections is a civic duty, and it examined public records of voter participation in five U.S. states. We found that ethicists and political philosophers voted at the same rate as did non-ethicist philosophers and professors in departments other than philosophy (although political science professors did vote about 10 percent to 15 percent more often than other professors; Schwitzgebel and Rust 2010). In another study we found ethicists to behave no more courteously than nonethicists at conferences of the American Philosophical Association, as measured by the number of times audience members talked over a speaker or commentator, the amount of door slamming during a session, and the amount of trash and cups left behind (Schwitzgebel et al. 2012). Still another study suggests that ethicist participants at American Philosophical Association conferences are just as likely to avoid paying conference registration fees as are nonethicists (Schwitzgebel forthcoming).

In this article, we examine the rates at which ethicists and two professorial comparison groups responded to e-mails from students, on the assumption—evidently shared by most professors (see below)—that failing to respond to e-mails from students is morally bad. This study extends our research into a new domain of behavior, one that is personal—between a professor and a student—rather than public and impersonal.

We also measured participants' normative attitudes about responding to student e-mails, and we asked the participants to estimate the proportion of student e-mails they responded to. Thus, in contrast with our previous research, the present study allows us to compare directly measured behavior with expressed normative attitudes and self-reported behavior. Of particular interest, perhaps, is the question whether ethicists show more consistency or less consistency than do other professors between their expressed normative attitudes and their directly measured behavior. At least regarding e-mail responsiveness, are ethicists more likely or less likely than other groups to act on the norms they espouse? Arguably, attitude-behavior consistency is both an intellectual and a moral virtue. And arguably it is just the sort of virtue that practical moral reasoning, if effective, should support.

Why should we care whether ethicists behave any morally better, or any more consistently with their espoused norms, than do socially similar nonethicists? One reason concerns the efficacy of ethics education. If courses in ethics tend to improve moral behavior or at least to increase attitude-behavior consistency, one might expect that professional ethicists, who are much exercised in the kind of study at the center of such courses, would tend to show excellent behavior or at least greater attitude-behavior consistency. If professional ethicists are no better in either

respect, that creates a *prima facie* (though perhaps resolvable) empirical challenge for those who would advocate ethics instruction for its effects on behavior.

A second reason—and our main reason for conducting this research—is that examining the moral behavior and attitude-behavior consistency of ethicists can help shed empirical light on the psychological determinants of moral behavior. On the “booster” view of philosophical moral reflection, habits of philosophical moral reflection will tend to improve overall moral behavior. Boosterism of this sort has been historically influential in philosophy; one can see various qualified versions of it in, for example, Plato (1961), Aristotle (1962), Kant (1998), and Mill (2003) and also in twentieth-century moral psychology, especially in the tradition of Kohlberg (1984). The booster view might be advocated at various levels of specificity, ranging from the most general, according to which abstract philosophical moral reflection improves moral behavior in general, to the very concrete, according to which philosophical moral reflection about some single, imminent behavioral choice will tend to improve moral behavior on that particular occasion. The possibility that the relationship between moral reflection and moral behavior plays out differently for different issues (e.g., voting versus personal relationships to students) is part of what recommends the multipronged approach we have taken to this issue across our various studies.

Negative results—and our results are, as you will see, negative—create a *prima facie* empirical challenge for boosterism about the behavioral effectiveness of philosophical moral reflection. If philosophical moral reflection is morally beneficial, why don't professional ethicists seem to be improving morally as a result of their presumed expertise in it? We do think that this question admits of several potential responses consistent with boosterish views (e.g., ethicists are not in fact more expert, or ethicists tend to start out with deficient moral intuitions and use intellectual tools to improve to average, or some forms of philosophical moral reflection are morally improving and some are morally worsening and they cancel out on average), but on the face of it negative results would seem to fit more naturally with various “scoffer” views about the relation between moral reflection, attitudes, and action. A scoffer might hold that philosophical moral reflection is primarily post-hoc rationalization of particular antecedently held moral beliefs (e.g., Posner 1999; Haidt 2001, 2012), or, alternatively, that it is primarily post-hoc rationalization of one's behavioral inclinations (e.g., Nietzsche 1998; Knobe and Leiter 2007), or that philosophical moral reflection is enervating and tends to undercut one's spontaneous moral inclinations (e.g., Baier 1985; Williams 1985). For the purposes of our study, it's worth noting that these three scoffer views seem to differ in their predictions about attitude-behavior consistency. The rationalization-to-behavior view might predict a higher correlation between attitude and behavior, or at least to one's opinions about one's

behavior, than do the other two views. Perhaps, even, the view that intellectualism is enervating might predict that philosophical reflection would tend to *reduce* attitude-behavior correlation. We don't pretend to be able to sort out the full implications of such models here; no doubt they can be developed in a variety of directions. (For further discussion of these models see Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013.) Our point is only to gesture to the types of issues upon which this experimental study might begin to cast some light.

A note about the ethics of our own study. The study involved deceiving hundreds of philosophers and other professors, since we posed as undergraduates seeking e-mail responses from professors. Some scholars think that any sort of deception in human research is to be avoided (Erikson 1967; Baumrind 1985). We do not share that view: deception can sometimes be justified in scientific research when no significant harm is brought to the participant (see also the ethics code of the American Psychological Association). We took care to keep our e-mails brief so that reading and responding to them would consume no more of the recipient's time than would reading and considering an invitation to participate as a research subject in an ordinary psychological study. We also used a coding procedure, involving unique tracking numbers and the division of data among different computers in different locations, that prevented us from learning which individual e-mail recipients responded and which did not respond to the e-mail messages that we sent, thus protecting the privacy of respondents and especially nonrespondents. All aspects of our research were approved in advance by the Human Research Review Board at the University of California at Riverside. One might still believe our deceptions unethical, and might regard the above excuses as merely post-hoc rationalization on our part. That would of course fit nicely with the type of pessimistic view about intellectual moral reflection that our research appears to support.

2. The First E-mail

Recipients

Our first e-mail was sent to 937 recipients: 334 ethicists, 317 nonethicist philosophers, and 286 professors in departments other than philosophy ("nonphilosophers"). Recipients were drawn from tenure-track faculty at university departments in five U.S. states: California, Florida, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Washington. Philosophers in the target departments were classified as "ethicists" if any of the following terms or their cognates appeared in the area of specialization information on their academic homepage: "ethics," "moral," "political," "law," "policy," "race," "feminism," "women," and "justice." We excluded from analysis philosophers who did not list areas of specialization, philosophers listing "action" or

“religion” among their specializations but no other ethics-related terms, and professors with unlisted or invalid e-mail addresses. Nonphilosophers were sampled proportionately from faculty directories at the same universities. We also noted gender and whether recipients were at a “research-oriented” university (having a Ph.D. program in philosophy, plus CalTech) or at a “teaching-oriented” university.

Message

The first e-mail was sent in April to May 2008. E-mails were sent in small batches and were checked against spam filters at Yahoo, Google, U.C. Riverside, and Stetson University. The sender was “J.R. <hi5university@yahoo.com>” and the subject line was “Office hours?” The body of the e-mail read as follows:

Dear Prof. [last name]:
 Could you please let me know your office hours this term?
 Thanks!

Results

We treated as a reply any response other than an automated reply. The main results are presented in table 1. Although we found a small trend toward a higher response rate among ethicists, that trend did not approach statistical significance.¹ Professors at research and teaching

TABLE 1. Response rates to e-mail 1

	Total number of e-mails sent	Total number of replies	Response rate
Ethicists	334	197	59.0 percent
Nonethicist philosophers	317	184	58.0 percent
Nonphilosophers	286	156	54.6 percent

TABLE 2. Response rates to e-mail 2

	Total number of e-mails sent	Total number of replies	Response rate
Ethicists	224	120	53.6 percent
Nonethicist philosophers	227	113	49.8 percent
Nonphilosophers	218	118	54.1 percent

¹ $\chi^2(3) = 1.3, p = .51.$

institutions also did not detectably differ in response rate (59.8 percent versus 55.8 percent).² There was a marginally significant tendency for men to respond at a higher rate than women (59.2 percent versus 52.7 percent).³ However, this trend was not confirmed by subsequent data (presented in sections 3 and 4 below).

Some professors replied by giving their office hours; others explained why they did not have office hours (e.g., on leave); still others responded with an inquiry about who was asking. Among respondents who stated their office hours, all three groups claimed approximately the same number of office hours per week: 3.1 hours per week for ethicists versus 3.3 for nonethicist philosophers and 3.4 for nonphilosophers.⁴ (As one might expect, professors at teaching-oriented institutions claimed more office hours than those at research institutions: mean 3.8 hours versus 2.4 hours.)⁵ These data are of secondary interest to our hypothesis, to the extent that professors can choose how many office hours to hold per week and choosing to hold more office hours might reflect a morally praiseworthy higher level of availability to students.

Discussion

Although we hoped that the message would be interpreted as being from a student, and many respondents, to judge from their replies, did so interpret it, the replies from some recipients of this message suggest that not all were convinced. The lack of a name other than "J.R." and the "spammy"-sounding e-mail address "hi5university@yahoo.com" understandably raised some suspicions. Also, some recipients who subsequently learned about our study suggested that there is no obligation to reply to e-mails about office hours, since students in one's courses can find one's office hours on the syllabus and people who are not students in one's course have no right of access to one's office hours; consequently, they suggested, declining to reply does not reflect any less well upon professors than does replying. We are not entirely persuaded by this reasoning but we attempt to address these concerns in the messages of the second and especially the third e-mail studies. One of the reasons we chose the topic and vague sender information we did was to avoid explicit deception. The person who sent the e-mail was indeed "J.R.," and simply requesting office hours is not tantamount to any statement about the identity of the person doing the requesting. In the second and third e-mails we resorted to more straightforward deception.

² $\chi^2(2) = 1.5, p = .22.$

³ $\chi^2(2) = 3.0, p = .08.$

⁴ ANOVA, $F(2, 294) = 0.65, p = .52.$

⁵ $t(494) = 8.81, p < .001.$

3. The Second E-mail

Message

The second e-mail message was sent almost one year later, in March to April 2009, to a mostly overlapping group of recipients (224 ethicists, 227 nonethicist philosophers, and 218 nonphilosophers, excluding bounce backs). The sender was “Ryan Harrison” (<ryharrison89@gmail.com> or <raharrison89@gmail.com>), the subject line was “Declaring a major,” and the body of the text was:

Dear Prof. [last name]:
 I’m thinking about declaring a major in [major]. Do you know who the department’s undergrad advisor is?
 Thanks so much!
 Ryan Harrison

The “major” field was completed with the name of the department with which the professor was affiliated (philosophy or otherwise), which we hoped would give the e-mail a less spammy feel. Again, any nonautomated response, regardless of content, was coded as a reply.

Table 2 displays the main results. Again, there is no statistically detectable difference among the groups.⁶

Neither institution type nor gender was significantly predictive (research versus teaching, 51.5 percent versus 53.2 percent; male versus female, 53.0 percent versus 53.6 percent).⁷ Overall, recipients were marginally less likely to respond to e-mail 2 than to e-mail 1 (52.5 percent versus 57.3 percent).⁸

Results

The results for e-mail 2 appear to confirm our findings for e-mail 1: the groups did not differ, overall, in their responsiveness. In discussion, however, a number of recipients indicated that they felt no obligation to respond, since information about the major advisor is widely available from other sources. Perhaps this explains the slightly lower response rate, despite the somewhat less spammy-seeming sender and content. Again, we the authors are not entirely convinced that it isn’t somewhat morally better—somewhat kinder or more generous of one’s time—to respond to e-mails of this sort than to ignore them; but in light of such concerns we decided to create a more personal-seeming third e-mail. Also, we decided to expand the pool of recipients for the third e-mail, giving us more power

⁶ $\chi^2(2) = 1.0, p = .60.$

⁷ $\chi^2(1) = .27, p = .60; \chi^2(1) = .02, p = .90.$

⁸ $\chi^2(1) = 3.71, p = .054.$

to detect small differences in response rate. And finally, since part of the explanation for the mediocre response rates to the first two e-mails may have been that some were sent to professors no longer actively involved in teaching at the university (though still with valid e-mail addresses), we collected information as to which professors were scheduled to teach undergraduate courses in the upcoming term.

4. The Third E-mail

Recipients

We examined course catalog information for professors at the target universities in the original five-state pool and divided recipients into two groups: group 3A included only recipients scheduled to teach an undergraduate-level course in the upcoming term (Fall 2009); group 3B were recipients either not scheduled to teach an undergraduate course in the upcoming term or for whom teaching information was unavailable. From the original five-state pool, 392 recipients fell into group 3A and 517 fell into group 3B. We then expanded group 3A by adding 601 recipients from other states, selected and sorted in the same manner as for e-mail 1. A similar proportion of ethicists, nonethicist philosophers, and nonphilosophers belonged to groups 3A and 3B (approximately two-thirds in group 3A for all three professor types: 67.8 percent of ethicists versus 68.7 percent of nonethicist philosophers versus 64.6 percent of nonphilosophers).⁹ Due to a programming error, some professors received an e-mail containing incorrect name information; these professors have been excluded from the above numbers.

Message

The third e-mail was sent several months after e-mail 2, in July to August 2009, always before the beginning of the recipient's school term. The sender was "Kati Sanchez," and the e-mail address was "katisanchez11@gmail.com" or a similar address with a different two-digit number.

Recipients in group 3A—those scheduled to teach in the fall term—received an e-mail different from the one received by those in group 3B. For recipients in group 3A the subject line of the e-mail was "Question regarding your fall course" and the text was:

Dear Professor [last name]—

I was planning to take your fall course, [class]. However, due to some unavoidable family obligations, I will not be able to attend the first two or possibly three class meetings. But the course sounds interesting, I'm a good student with

⁹ $\chi^2(1) = 2.30, p = .32.$

a 3.6 GPA, and I'm willing to put in a little extra work to get up to speed. Do you think it would be possible to succeed in your class, despite those missed days? Or should I register for a different class?

Thanks for your time responding to this!

Kati Sanchez

The [class] field was completed with the name of an undergraduate course the professor was scheduled to teach in the coming term. In general, we filled [class] with the lowest-level class the professor was scheduled to teach.

For group 3B the subject line of the e-mail was "Teaching next term?" and the text was:

Dear Professor [last name]:

Will you be teaching any lower division classes next term or in the next year? A friend of mine took a class of yours a while back and highly recommended you as a teacher, but I didn't see any introductory level classes of yours in next term's course schedule. I'm a new transfer student into [university], starting in the fall.

Sincerely,

Kati Sanchez

Results

Table 3 displays the main results for e-mail 3. As with e-mail 1, but not e-mail 2, ethicists showed a statistically nonsignificant trend toward higher response rates than nonethicists.¹⁰ In section 5, we consider whether the aggregate results of all three e-mails suggest a higher response rate for ethicists.

TABLE 3. Response rates to e-mail 3

		Total number of e-mails sent	Total number of replies	Response rate
Version 3A	Ethicists	307	212	69.1 percent
	Nonethicist philosophers	363	241	66.4 percent
	Nonphilosophers	316	196	62.0 percent
Version 3B	Ethicists	156	101	64.7 percent
	Nonethicist philosophers	176	103	58.5 percent
	Nonphilosophers	185	110	59.5 percent

¹⁰ Version 3A: $\chi^2(2) = 3.50$, $p = .17$; Version 3B: $\chi^2(2) = 1.54$, $p = .46$; combined: $\chi^2(2) = 2.56$, $p = .29$.

Neither institution type nor gender was predictive.¹¹ Recipients were a bit more likely to respond to version 3A than to version 3B: 66.4 percent versus 60.7 percent overall.¹² Response rates were significantly higher to e-mail 3A than to e-mails 1 and 2, and response rates to e-mail 3B were significantly higher than to e-mail 2, but not than to e-mail 1.¹³ The somewhat different response rates for the various e-mail messages might reflect differences in the plausibility of the messages and the extent to which they seem to call for reply, and for e-mail 3A they might also reflect a difference in the recipient pool (since it was limited to professors scheduled to teach in the upcoming term). Despite these differences in message and recipient pool, however, variability in response rates between versions is only moderate, from a minimum of 52.5 percent for e-mail 2 to a maximum of 66.4 percent for e-mail 3A.

5. Combined Measures

The simplest combined measure, but the least statistically conservative (because it treats all trials as statistically independent), compares the total percentage of replies to all e-mails from the three groups. This measure yields total response rates of 61.7 percent for the ethicists, 59.2 percent for the nonethicist philosophers, and 57.7 percent for the nonphilosophers—a trend that does not reach statistical significance despite 3,109 total trials.¹⁴ An alternative statistical approach examines the mean response among those professors who received all three e-mails (182 ethicists, 178 nonethicist philosophers, and 165 nonphilosophers). The mean number of responses was 1.78 for the ethicists, compared to 1.67 for the nonethicist philosophers and 1.78 for the nonphilosophers—again not detectably different.¹⁵ We conclude that ethicists are not detectably more likely to reply to e-mail messages of the sort we sent, though we cannot rule out a small, statistically undetected difference of up to about 5 percent.

One potential source of concern is the possibility that some of our e-mails were going to unmonitored e-mail addresses—technically valid addresses (so that we received no bounce-back message) but de facto unchecked by the respondents. The combined data of the three e-mail studies, plus the survey study described in section 6 below, speak against this interpretation of the mediocre response rates to our e-mail messages. Among the 525 professors who received all three of our e-mails, 488 (93.0 percent) either responded to one of our e-mail messages or took the electronic version of our survey (described later) by following a link sent

¹¹ Research versus teaching, 63.7 percent versus 66.5 percent, $\chi^2(1) = 1.28$, $p = .26$; male versus female, 65.0 percent versus 63.1 percent, $\chi^2(1) = .25$, $p = .62$.

¹² $\chi^2(1) = 4.78$, $p = .03$.

¹³ χ^2 , all p 's $< .01$ except e-mail 3B versus e-mail 1, $\chi^2(1) = 1.61$, $p = .21$.

¹⁴ $\chi^2(2) = 3.44$, $p = .18$.

¹⁵ ANOVA, $F(2, 522) = 0.81$, $p = .45$.

to them by e-mail. We therefore conclude that almost all our e-mail addresses were actively checked by our e-mail recipients.

As we mentioned in sections 2 and 3 above, some recipients of the first two e-mail messages, when they learned about our study, asserted that such messages do not call for response. No recipient has so far expressed this view about e-mail 3, and we hope that most readers who agree that professors have a general obligation to respond to most e-mails from students will agree that e-mail 3A is among those that call for reply. If the mediocre response rates to e-mails 1 and 2 were primarily due to the fact that those messages did not call for reply, then we should expect that many professors who did not reply to either of those two messages would still have replied to e-mail 3A. However, among the 262 professors who received e-mail 1, e-mail 2, and e-mail 3A, only 35 (13.4 percent) showed that N-N-Y pattern of response—not much different from the 12.5 percent one would expect were professors evenly distributed among the eight possible reply patterns. We agree with those who would say that e-mail 3A compels response more than do e-mails 1 and 2, but professors' response rates don't appear to show much sensitivity to such differences in message content.

One might think that many professors would be either consistent responders or consistent nonresponders. We did not find this pattern in the data. Among the 525 professors who received all three e-mails, only 52 (9.9 percent) replied to none of them and only 115 (21.9 percent) replied to all three. Most professors showed intermediate patterns of responsiveness, with 145 (27.6 percent) replying to one message and 214 (40.6 percent) replying to two messages. Ethicists were similarly intermediate in their responses (9.9 percent, 25.3 percent, 41.8 percent, and 23.1 percent for zero to three responses, respectively).¹⁶ Professors who replied to e-mail 1 were more likely to reply to e-mail 2 (56.5 percent versus 45.5 percent), and professors who replied to e-mail 2 were more likely to reply to e-mail 3 (68.5 percent versus 59.0 percent).¹⁷ We would describe those effect sizes as moderate, however. If our messages are representative, most professors, including most ethicists, show a pattern of inconsistent, mediocre response to e-mails from students.

6. Self-Reported Normative Attitude and Self-Reported E-mail Responsiveness

Survey Questions

Most of the professors in the original five-state voting data pool (980 total: 337 ethicists, 329 nonethicist philosophers, and 314 nonphilosophers) also

¹⁶ $\chi^2(6) = 2.07, p = .91$.

¹⁷ $\chi^2(1) = 7.09, p = .008; \chi^2(1) = 5.71, p = .02$.

received a survey questionnaire concerning “professors’ moral attitudes and behavior.” The survey methodology and results are presented in detail in Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013. Among the twenty-five to twenty-eight survey questions, two concerned e-mail responsiveness. Part 1 of the survey began as follows:

Please indicate the degree to which the action described is morally good or morally bad by checking one circle on each scale.

We recognize that it may be difficult to rate moral goodness and badness on a numerical scale, that different moral goods may be incommensurable, and that the goodness or badness of an action can vary with context. We encourage you to set aside such concerns as best you are able, interpreting the questions below as straightforwardly as possible. You are also welcome to clarify your answers, raise objections to the wording of the questions, etc., in the margins.

There followed nine prompts concerning theft, professional society membership, blood and organ donation, vegetarianism, voting in public elections, not staying in regular contact with one’s mother, charitable donation, and (as the eighth prompt) “not consistently responding to student e-mails.” Each prompt was followed by a nine-point scale with “very morally bad” at one end point (coded as 1) and “very morally good” at the other end point (coded as 9). The 3, 5, and 7 points were labeled as “somewhat morally bad,” “morally neutral,” and “somewhat morally good,” respectively.

Part 2 of the survey asked respondents to self-report their behavior on the same issues covered in part 1 (except theft). Question 22 of the survey asked: “About what percentage of student e-mails do you respond to?” This question was followed by “enter a percentage” and a blank field.

The survey was sent in February to March 2009 (between e-mail 1 and e-mail 2). Recipients received up to five communications, four by e-mail and one by traditional post, until they either completed the survey or opted out of further communications. Overall response rates to the survey were very good by social science standards, with nonphilosophers moderately less likely to respond (perhaps unsurprisingly, given the philosophical nature of the survey): ethicists’ response rate was 58.8 percent, nonethicist philosophers’ 63.2 percent, and nonphilosophers’ 53.2 percent).¹⁸ Professors who responded to our “student” e-mail communications were more likely to complete the survey (also unsurprisingly, given that four of the five survey communications were by e-mail), though the difference was again only moderate: 62.0 percent of those who replied to

¹⁸ $\chi^2(2) = 6.68, p = .04$.

e-mail 2 (the e-mail closest in time to the survey) completed the survey, compared to 53.3 percent of those who did not reply to e-mail 2.¹⁹

Expressed Normative Attitude

The large majority of respondents rated “not consistently responding to student e-mails” on the morally bad side of the scale (i.e., 1 to 4 on the nine-point scale). The size of the majority was similar among the three groups: 82.6 percent of ethicists rated it as morally bad, compared to 83.4 percent of nonethicist philosophers and 84.9 percent of nonphilosophers.²⁰ The mean response to the normative question was 3.29, near the “somewhat morally bad” label of the scale. Nonphilosophers rated not responding a little morally worse on average than did philosophers (3.05 versus 3.36 for ethicists and 3.42 for nonethicist philosophers),²¹ but we are unsure whether this difference was due to scaling differences among the groups (philosophers possibly more likely than nonphilosophers to reserve the end points for more extreme moral and immoral actions), nonresponse bias (since a smaller percentage of nonphilosophers than philosophers responded), or a genuine difference in group opinion. (For further discussion of these issues see Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013.) Seven respondents out of 566 (1.2 percent) rated not consistently responding to student e-mails on the morally good side of the scale. The remainder—15.2 percent of respondents—rated it as morally neutral.

Self-Reported Behavior

All groups of respondents self-reported very high rates of e-mail responsiveness. Of all respondents, 50.5 percent claimed to reply to 100 percent of student e-mails, 67.4 percent claimed to reply to at least 98 percent of student e-mails, and 83.6 percent of respondents claimed to respond to at least 95 percent of student e-mails. Even independently of the response rates to our three e-mail messages, which may be unrepresentative as measures of overall response rate to student e-mails, such high estimates seem implausible. In informal polling of student audiences, we have found few advanced students who say that such estimates match their own experience in attempting to communicate with professors. Although survey nonresponse bias may explain a part of these results, since (as we described above) there was a moderate positive relationship between survey responsiveness and responsiveness to our e-mails, that modest relationship cannot go very far in explaining such extreme responses. As displayed in table 4, the three groups differed little in their self-reported

¹⁹ $\chi^2(1) = 4.96, p = .03$.

²⁰ $\chi^2(2) = 0.37, p = .83$.

²¹ ANOVA, $F(2, 563) = 5.19, p = .006$.

TABLE 4. Self-reported rates of responsiveness to student e-mails

	Percentage claiming 100 percent responsiveness	Percentage claiming at least 95 percent responsiveness
Ethicists	49.5 percent	81.5 percent
Nonethicist philosophers	47.7 percent	83.1 percent
Nonphilosophers	55.1 percent	86.7 percent

TABLE 5. Relationship of expressed normative attitude toward "not consistently responding to student e-mails" and self-described behavior

	Percentage reporting at least 98 percent responsiveness to student e-mails		
	If said bad not to respond	If said not bad not to respond	differential
Ethicists	74.2 percent	25.9 percent	49.3 percent
Nonethicist philosophers	67.9 percent	46.7 percent	21.2 percent
Non-philosophers	73.7 percent	60.0 percent	13.7 percent

e-mail responsiveness. The trend toward higher self-reported response rates among nonphilosophers did not approach statistical significance.²²

Relationship of Expressed Normative Attitude and Self-Reported Behavior

Among professors who rated "not consistently responding to student e-mails" on the morally bad side of the scale, 67.5 percent claimed to reply to at least 98 percent of student e-mails. In contrast, among those who did not rate "not consistently responding to student e-mails" on the morally bad side of the scale, only 43.0 percent of professors self-reported at least 98 percent responsiveness.²³ As displayed in table 5, ethicists showed a much stronger relationship between their expressed normative attitudes and their self-described behavior than did the two other groups.²⁴ If the behavioral self-reports are to be trusted, ethicists show much higher attitude-behavior consistency than do the other groups.

²² $\chi^2(2) = 2.01$, $p = .37$; $\chi^2(2) = 1.73$, $p = .42$.

²³ $\chi^2(1) = 27.72$, $p < .001$.

²⁴ Permutation test, reshuffling group labels: 0.6 percent of ten thousand samples met or exceeded ethicists' 49.3 percent differential; overall correlation between expressed normative attitude on the 1-to-9 scale and self-reported response rate ($-\log(101-x)$ -transformed) was .38 for ethicists, .24 for nonethicist philosophers, and .13 for nonphilosophers; a significant between-groups difference using Fisher's r -to- z conversion.

Relationship of Self-Reported Behavior and Measured Behavior

The behavioral self-reports, however, are not to be trusted. Self-reported e-mail responsiveness was only modestly related to measured e-mail responsiveness. The correlation between individuals' ($-\log(101-x)$ -transformed) self-reported percentage responsiveness and their observed percentage responsiveness was $r = .14$ ($p < .001$)—generally considered a “low” correlation in social science research. For ethicists, the correlation was so low as to be only marginally significant with this sample size ($r = .13$, $p = .08$). Both among recipients as a whole and for ethicists in particular, self-reported e-mail responsiveness predicted 2 percent of the variance in measured responsiveness. (The untransformed correlations are similar.) Another way of looking at the issue is this: professors who claimed to reply to at least 98 percent of student e-mails replied to an average of 64.3 percent of the e-mails we sent, compared to a 57.4 percent average response rate for professors who claimed to reply to fewer than 98 percent of student e-mails.²⁵ By this measure, the only subgroup showing a statistically significant relationship between self-described behavior and measured behavior was the nonphilosophers: 65.8 percent versus 53.0 percent, a 12.8 percent differential.²⁶ For ethicists the corresponding percentages were 66.7 percent versus 58.7 percent, an 8.0 percent differential.²⁷

Relationship of Expressed Normative Attitude and Measured Behavior

Using a suite of correlations, χ^2 tests, and t-tests, we found no statistically significant relationships between expressed normative attitude and measured behavior, whether we analyzed the e-mails individually or looked at professors' individual percentage responsiveness, whether we considered attitude as a dichotomous variable or treated it as a continuous variable (looking at overall rating on the scale of 1 to 9), and whether we considered all professors as a group or broke the responses down by subgroup. Despite the substantial relationship between expressed normative attitude and *self-reported* behavior among ethicists, the relationship between expressed normative attitude and measured behavior was statistically insignificant for all three groups. For example, the average reply rate to our e-mails for professors who rated not consistently responding to student e-mails on the bad side of the scale was 62.5 percent; for those who rated it as neutral (or good) the response rate was 60.6 percent, only a 2.1 percent differential, with a 95 percent confidence interval of -5.2 percent to 9.0 percent (for ethicists 64.8 percent versus 60.8 percent, CI -9.0

²⁵ $t(339) = 2.26$, $p = .02$.

²⁶ $t(100) = 2.58$, $p = .01$.

²⁷ $t(104) = 1.46$, $p = .15$.

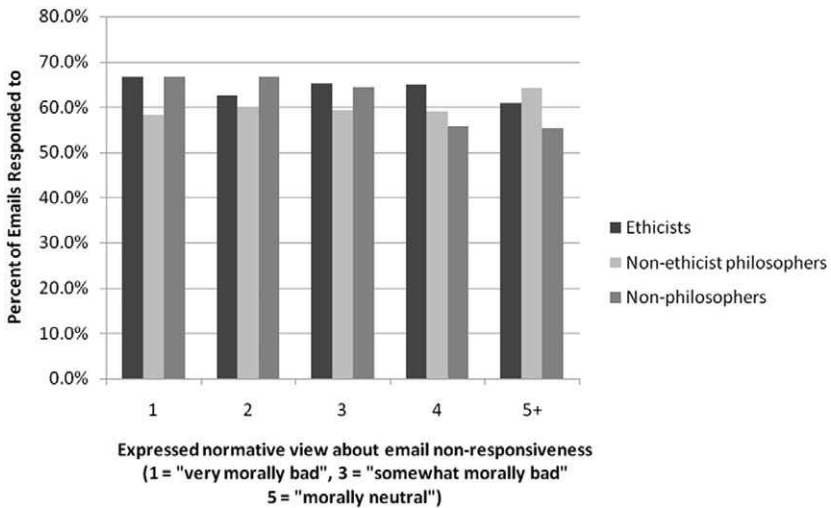


FIGURE 1. Relationship between expressed normative view about “not consistently responding to student e-mails” and responsiveness to e-mails 1–3, by group; declining bar height from left to right reflects correlation between behavior and expressed normative view

percent to 17.0 percent).²⁸ Figure 1 displays another way of looking at the data.

Given the size of the confidence intervals, we cannot rule out the possibility of undetected moderate differences. For the groups combined, there may have been up to a 9 percent undetected population responsiveness differential between those rating nonresponsiveness on the bad side of the scale versus those not doing so. Indeed, some weak relationship between attitude and behavior seems both a priori likely and supported by the direction of the trends. But the absence of a statistically detectable effect is nonetheless striking. In social psychology, correlations are a standard measure of attitude-behavior consistency. Several recent meta-analyses suggest average attitude-behavior correlations, across studies, of about $r = .30$ to $.50$ (Kraus 1995; Cooke and Sheeran 2004; Wallace et al. 2005; Glasman and Albarracín 2006). Had a correlation of that size been present in our data, we would have had ample power to detect it. In contrast, the correlation we find between professors' measured e-mail reply rates and their expressed normative attitude on the nine-point scale is only $r = .05$ ($p = .24$; converting negative to positive to indicate consistency; for ethicists $r = .07$, $p = .36$). Less than 1 percent of the variance in

²⁸ $t(134) = .53$, $p = .60$; $t(46) = 0.62$, $p = .54$.

measured reply rate is explained by our respondents' expressed normative attitudes.

7. Conclusion

Overall, we found no statistically significant difference between ethicists' and nonethicists' responsiveness to three e-mails that were designed to look as though they were sent by students. On the assumption that it is morally better for professors to respond to student e-mails, and on the assumption that at least one of our three e-mail messages was such that it was morally better to respond to it than to ignore it—that is, kinder, more generous, more dutiful—this finding appears to fit with our previous research suggesting that ethicists, on average, behave no morally better than do other professors (Schwitzgebel 2009 and forthcoming; Schwitzgebel and Rust 2010; Schwitzgebel et al. 2012; Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013). In support of the background moral assumptions of this study, we note that the large majority—about 83 percent—of survey respondents from all three groups of professors (ethicists, nonethicist philosophers, and nonphilosophers) rated “not consistently reporting to student e-mails” on the morally bad side of our nine-point scale.

We recognize, of course, the limited scope of the behaviors so far studied: e-mail responsiveness, returning library books, voting in public elections, courtesy and registration free-riding at professional conferences. We also recognize that any observational study, like the present one, that does not involve random assignment into experimental groups risks being tangled with confounding factors. For example, perhaps ethicists are more likely to teach large classes than are other professors, and perhaps professors teaching large classes respond to a lower percentage of student e-mails because they are inundated and overwhelmed. We see no reason, however, to think that such confounding factors would overall tend to disadvantage ethicists and thus mask an underlying disposition among ethicists to be more responsive to student e-mails. For example, in our experience, “Introduction to Philosophy,” typically taught by nonethicists, tends to enroll at least as many students as do introductory ethics classes. Furthermore, as evidence of the moral nonsuperiority of ethicists accumulates across a variety of different measures, it becomes increasingly implausible to suppose that each noneffect is explained by undiscovered confounds that mask ethicists' real moral superiority.

Ethicists, nonethicist philosophers, and professors in departments other than philosophy all reported very high rates of responsiveness to student e-mails, with a majority of respondents reporting that they respond to 100 percent of student e-mails and 84 percent of respondents reporting that they respond to at least 95 percent of student e-mails. For various reasons, such response percentages would seem, antecedently, to be unrealistic. The actual measured responsiveness to our three e-mail

messages was about 60 percent. It could plausibly be argued that response rates to our three messages substantially underestimate the actual e-mail responsiveness of professors, since all three of our messages came from unknown senders using noninstitutionally affiliated e-mail addresses (e.g., "gmail.com"). On the other hand, however, it could be argued that response rates to our three messages, especially the first two, could be expected to overestimate responsiveness, since they admit of very quick reply and thus are less likely to be set aside for later reply and subsequently forgotten. We also emphasize that professors, especially those teaching large courses, do not always know the names of all their students, much less the names of all their potential and upcoming students, so if they aim to adhere to the norm of consistently replying to student e-mails they should be willing to examine e-mails with plausible subject lines like "Office hours?" "Declaring a major," and "Question regarding your fall course" even if the sender's name is unfamiliar. Also, in our experience, it is not uncommon for students to use non-edu addresses in corresponding with their professors. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, even if professors are legitimately somewhat less responsive, across the board, to messages from unknown senders, regardless of topic, this would seem to have no direct bearing on the main issue of our research, which is the *relative* e-mail response rates of ethicists compared to those of other professors.

We see no particular reason to regard respondents' very high estimates of their response rates as deliberately deceptive. The more plausible interpretation, we think, is that most professors lack self-knowledge about their rates of e-mail responsiveness. Neglected e-mails, we suspect, are typically forgotten, and because forgotten unlikely to figure in one's estimates of responsiveness. Generally speaking, people rarely notice their thoughtless rudeness unless someone is bold enough to mention it. This epistemic failing is perhaps also a moral failing: if professors have an obligation to respond to e-mails from students, then arguably they also have a further obligation to track whether or not they are meeting the first obligation, so that if they are not meeting the first obligation they can take corrective measures. If this is correct, then the present study offers not just one measure of morality, e-mail responsiveness, but two: e-mail responsiveness *and* meeting one's moral obligation not to be deluded about one's level of e-mail responsiveness. Professors remain far short of ideal by either measure, ethicists no less so than the others.

Although normative attitude as expressed by response on our scale was substantially related to *self-reported* rates of e-mail responsiveness, especially among ethicists, normative attitude was virtually unrelated to objectively measured e-mail responsiveness. For all three groups of professors, response to our normative question about the morality of responding to student e-mails was almost entirely unpredictable of actual response to our three e-mail messages. We were surprised by this result. Psychologists

have tended to find that expressed attitude is typically at least moderately predictive of measured behavior—and when it is not, it is often either because the measure of behavior is one-shot and not closely connected to the measured attitude, in cases of implicit bias, or because perceived social pressure is high (see Kraus 1995; Wallace et al. 2005). Such factors do not appear to explain the nonrelationship in the present case.

We think that even many cynics about the value of philosophical moral reflection ought to expect people to show a certain amount of attitude-behavior consistency—that's what post-hoc *rationalization* is all about, right? On the booster view of the attitude-behavior relationship, people rationally endorse norms and shape their behavior to fit them; according to the scoffer rationalization-to-behavior view, people know their behavior and then rationalize their way into self-congratulatory normative attitudes. In either case, attitudes and behavior should be at least somewhat aligned. Professors either think about whether responding to student e-mails is important and shape their behavior accordingly, or they notice their patterns of responsiveness or nonresponsiveness to student e-mails and adopt a matching normative view. Responders should tend to condemn the nonresponders as shirking their duties, while nonresponders should tend to regard themselves as under no obligation to respond. Our data, however, suggest that this is not the case. On the face of it, the data might seem to support a view on which normative attitude is almost entirely unrelated to real-world practical behavior, both among ethicists and among nonethicists—a model, that is, on which reasoning and behavior have little connection in either causal direction.

It is possible, of course, that either our measure of normative attitude or our measure of actual behavior is poor. We acknowledge this possibility, yet we also note that psychologists tend to find moderate attitude-behavior consistency even with relatively crude measures on both sides, measures fairly similar in complexion to our own. A more interesting possible explanation of our nonfinding involves combining the post-hoc behavioral rationalization model of attitude-behavior consistency with our suggestion above that professors have little self-knowledge of their actual rates of responsiveness to student e-mails. Post-hoc rationalization will not succeed in aligning attitudes and behavior unless the rationalizers know what their behavior is. Otherwise, it will align normative attitudes with false opinions about one's behavior. And we do indeed see alignment between expressed normative attitude and self-reported behavior, especially for the ethics professors. In the present case, then, perhaps professors' normative views about e-mail responsiveness are to a substantial extent rationalized post-hoc to fit their inaccurate and radically optimistic self-assessments of their own responsiveness. In other words, they have shaped their normative attitudes to match their self-flattering illusions. If this is indeed the case, it seems to be especially so for the ethicists: they showed by far the strongest relationship between expressed normative

view and self-reported behavior, and (unlike nonphilosophers) they showed no statistically significant relationship between self-reported behavior and actual behavior. This interpretation of our data would also harmonize with recent work suggesting that the order of presentation of hypothetical moral scenarios has a larger influence on philosophers', especially ethicists', judgments about related moral principles than on nonphilosophers' judgments—a finding that suggests that philosophers may be more likely than other professors to opportunistically recruit general moral principles in support of post-hoc rationalizations (in this case, post-hoc rationalizations of experimentally manipulated scenario judgments; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012). Expertise in ethics might be, to a substantial extent, expertise in post-hoc rationalization of opinions arrived at by largely unwelcome psychological mechanisms.

It is far too soon, we think, to say that such a starkly negative view of philosophical ethics is compelled by the psychological data. In fact, we would reject such a view in any strong form. Yet it would nicely explain the results of this study.

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