



Carl Mitcham, Lille, and the Emergence of Engineering Ethics in France

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SPT 2021

Technological imaginaries

Lille

Titre : Carl Mitcham, Lille, and the emergence of engineering ethics in France.

From *imaginaire technique et éthique sociale* (1997) to “Technological Imaginaries” (SPT 2021) : Engineering Ethics at The Catholic University of Lille

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In France, engineering ethics was first taught at the Catholic University of Lille, within what was then the Centre for Contemporary Ethics. In the early '90s, the Catholic University of Lille was a federation of 6 faculties and 36 schools of higher education, including five engineering schools. "Engineering ethics" as a curriculum content did not exist in France, neither had there been any research on the topic. There were no references to anything such as a "code of ethics" for engineers. The expression "engineering ethics" was itself hard to translate. In the field of medical ethics, a few courses were given here and there, and also in the field of business ethics, strongly influenced by US MBA programs. The awareness of the need to consider ethics was also growing in social work, coming from a need expressed by social workers themselves.

The Catholic University of Lille was a few years ahead of most French public state universities as far as the teaching of ethics is concerned. One of the reasons for this is that it had become an important issue for Catholic universities. After eight years of discussions with university Presidents, John Paul II published *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, in 1990, suggesting the inclusion of ethical training in all teaching programs.

Another reason for Lille being ahead was the presence of the Medical Ethics Centre (in existence since '84 and still going) and the Interdisciplinary Christian Reflection Centre, since the '70s, which became a secular Economics ethics centre. Following the Pope's invitation, Michel Falise, President of the Lille Catholic University announced that ethics education should be prioritised. This was a challenge in a country that could be described as "a catholic country with a secular culture" or "a secular country with a catholic culture".

When Michel Falise handed over the Presidency, after 12 years, he created the Contemporary Ethics Centre with the aim of turning a « natural » concern for ethics into an academic discipline which had to prove relevant outside the Catholic world.

The creation of CREI (Centre de recherche en éthique de l'ingénieur / the engineering ethics team) happened in a specific educational, historical and spiritual context, but it didn't grow out of a demand from professionals (unlike in the field of social work), neither did it develop into a mimetic isomorphism (like most ethics courses in business schools) nor was it born out of a macro-social concern like medical ethics. It started in a particular context, but also from the insight of one man. In 1991, Bertrand Hériard Dubreuil, back from completing a Masters in STS in the US, offered to trial an engineering ethics course with graduate engineers who took a MBA Program at the Catholic University. Soon after, CREI became the third team of the young Contemporary Ethics Centre (alongside the Medical Ethics Centre and the Economics Ethics Centre). In 1997, Bertrand published *Imaginaire technique et éthique sociale* based on his Masters thesis: it became the first French essay on engineering ethics. CREI activities grew and developed. In 1998, following a two-year seminar with practising or retired engineers and teachers from the engineering schools' faculty members, CREI published a first-ever textbook, *Ethique industrielle*. The team grew from 2 to 4 permanent members. In the meantime, Michel Falise, founder of the Ethics Centre, and Johan Verstaeten, from the Leuven Catholic University, in Belgium, had started a European Ethics project. CREI, in charge of the engineering ethics task group, edited, in 2001, *Technology and Ethics: A European quest for responsible engineering*, the first example of a European book on engineering ethics (That's how we met Martin Meganck, who included engineering ethics issues in Steen Christensen's very first editorial project).

In 2001, CREI became the 'Ethics of Technology Center' (a title I disagreed with) and organized, together with the Philosophy Institute at Louvain-la-Neuve university (in Belgium again, and again Catholic) an international conference on "technical complexity". The book that came out of the conference was released in 2007.

Before talking about Carl Mitcham, I'd like to say a few words about TU Delft, *The place in Europe where engineering ethics, ethics education in engineering, and research on ethics education flourished at the very beginning of the 21st century.*

While Dutch philosophers were in contact with their US counterparts, through SPT, a few European academics interested in engineering ethics education began meeting with Henk Zandvoort, leader from 1998 onwards of a Working Group at the '*Société Européenne pour la formation des ingénieurs*'. They gave speeches on ethics at *SEFI* annual meetings, contributed to special issues edited by Henk. That's where we connected with Eddie Conlon from Dublin IT.

After the 1998 STP workshop in Delft on the "empirical turn in the philosophy of technology", a US-Europe Workshop on engineering ethics was organized in 2002 in Delft, then the first Workshop on the Philosophy of Engineering in 2007. The second one was in London, and it was followed the biannual FPET conferences: European and US scholars got to know each other better and were joined by Japanese scholars, and many Chinese scholars too. The conference papers were published in Peter Vermaas's collection at Springer POET: "Philosophy of Engineering and Technology"

But what about Carl Mitcham ?

Actually, it is a long story, but I will make it short. Bertrand first met him at the only conference organised in France on “knowledge and ethics of engineers” in 1992,\$. There he heard a selection of extraordinary philosophers and humanists from France and abroad who had something to say about ethics in engineering, such as Carl, but also Daniel Cérezuelle, Friedrich Rapp, Gilbert Hottois. A few years later, in the middle of our European Core Material Project, en route to Bordeaux or Germany, Carl visited CREI in Lille. This was a major turning point because he made us feel that what we were doing was meaningful. He helped us convince some scholars to join our project, agreed to write the afterword of *Technology and Ethics*, and suggested interviewing Joseph Rotblad (which was done by Sally Wyatt). He also invited us to present papers at the launching conference of Caroline Whitbeck’s Online ethics centre, and helped me publish mine in *Technology and Society*. Carl served as keynote speaker at the conference on complexity we organized in 2001. The conference proceedings, released in 2007, opens with his chapter. He also invited Bertrand to write the article about “engineering ethics in Europe” for the Encyclopedia of Science Technology and Ethics that he (Carl) was editing in 2005.

Ten years later, in 2015, when it was time to reedit the Encyclopedia, there was no longer an engineering ethics teams at the Catholic University of Lille. I had left the university in 2014 after 20 years.

My three colleagues had long since left in 2004-2005, during my maternity leave. The University Chaplain, Patrick Simonnin, also a Chemist engineer, shared the teaching of engineering ethics with me. He has been my only colleague – a part-time one – within the Ethics Department interested in the ethics of engineering, for ten years.

This decade was, for me, an intense time of national and international activities especially around FPET, and also around Steen Christensen's enthusiastic projects and Peter's collection. I intensified my collaboration with engineering student associations and trade unions, conducted research on social responsibility, on the professional trajectory of engineers in search of meaning, and on engineering students' professional orientation.

How to conclude ?

In order to develop, a research agenda not only needs relevant ideas, but also dedicated people and a supportive context. As I have set out in previous works, the variation in the development of engineering ethics as a research subject, between different places, depends on cultural factors: professional ideologies; and the way "ethical" issues are discussed in general in a specific society. It also depends on structural factors: it was not by chance that CREI was created in a Catholic university – *but* it could not have grown there, for three reasons: the fragile status of research in Catholic Universities in France; the fragile status of sectorial ethics as a research topic and the position of engineering schools (Catholic as well as State) outside the university system. The ETHICS Lab might prove able to support a research agenda on technology ethics. It has managed to organise this wonderful conference. But developing engineering ethics teaching is likely to remain a difficult task...

Moreover, what I want to stress today is that my personal research agenda on engineering ethics (still active) was made possible thanks to people, relationships ... and friendships. Since 2005, Steen's energy Carl's support were essential to enable the discussion on engineering ethics started in Lille to continue – their friendship too were essential. Thank you to both of them.