

SES13-2013-000040

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the SES13 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

The ethical responsibilities of professional physicists

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Sometimes ethical deliberations are viewed as leading to entirely subjective conclusions. Moreover, there is a perception that there are as many different conclusions as there are participants in the deliberation. However, in the context of professional ethics, and particularly in the context of scientific ethics, there are standards that can and should form the basis for the examination of ethical issues. There are several Statements formally adopted by the American Physical Society that directly address the responsibility of physicists to the community of scientists and to society at large. An understanding of the meaning of these statements and of the reasons for their existence can help turn a nebulous discussion into one grounded in concrete principles. Nevertheless, applying principles of ethics is fundamentally different from applying principles of science, and we have to accept the possibility that a given deliberation may produce multiple defensible outcomes.