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## Three Comments on Ethics

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## THREE COMMENTS ON ETHICS

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Newsletter #6 from the Humanistic Mathematics Network leads me to make several comments.

Peter Hilton and Jean Pederson, on page 99, recall Henry Whitehead's advice "never to accept in your own work a result which you could not yourself prove". This was appropriate advice at that time, especially for young differential topologists, a field in which Henry excelled. But there are other considerations-PH may recall a furious argument between two mathematicians only one of whom (I. Kaplansky) supported the Whitehead principle.

How is it today? There is a vast literature, not always carefully written, on differential topology; it would demand much time to check everything one might use. On finite group theory, the classification of finite simple groups now runs to about 10,000 pages, some due to Geoffrey Mason not yet published (it is held that they can be simplified). Using the classification theorem, one may be able to prove other interesting results about finite simple groups by showing that they hold in every case. If I find such a new result, does PH think I should check all 10,000 pages before publishing?

Incidentally, Professor S. Abhyankhar (Purdue) has just presented in our seminar such a result depending on the classification theorem.

On page 45, Robert P. Webber hopes to design an ethics course for the junior or senior

level, and asks for material, complaining that he has not found much. I suggest that this is in the nature of the situation. Those cases of fraud in science tend to arise in other sciences (for example, cold fusion or genetics engineering) where the financial rewards can be much greater. Doctored data is not prevalent in mathematics, because the custom is to write out the proof right there in the published paper. In one class session, one can consider the ethical problem of giving correct proofs (and that of acknowledging errors). I doubt that this - or other items - can fill up a course. There are better versions of math for poets.

On page 49, Gian-Carlo Rota, under the rubric "The Story of a Misunderstanding", mounts a covert attack on Logical Positivism and its ilk. To be sure, there is too much adulation of Wittgenstein today, but logical positivism died long ago (Alonzo Church, in a review in the *Journal of Symbolic Language*, killed the second edition of A.J. Ayer's "Logic, Truth and Language"). But something positive is left - Carnap and others pointed out that many of the traditional questions of metaphysics, prominent in Germanic literary philosophy, are simply meaningless questions. Rota does not fully describe his own predilection for some of these philosophies. Many of them fall under the famous description: A philosopher is a blind man in a dark cellar looking for a black cat - which is not there.

The precision which we enjoy in mathematics should and can transfer to aspects of philosophy.