

**Are Ethicists Any More Likely to Pay Their Registration Fees
at Professional Meetings?**

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April 10, 2012

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Abstract:

Lists of paid registrants at Pacific Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association from 2006-2008 were compared to lists of people appearing as presenters or chairs on the meeting program those same years. These were years in which fee payment depended primarily on an honor system rather than on enforcement. 74% of ethicist participants and 76% of non-ethicist participants appear to have paid their meeting registration fees, not a statistically significant difference. This finding of no difference survives scrutiny for several possible confounds. Thus, professional ethicists seem no less likely to free ride in this context than do philosophers not specializing in ethics. These data fit with other recent findings suggesting that on average professional ethicists are no morally better behaved than are professors not specializing in ethics.

Key words: ethics, morality, moral cognition, cooperation, free riding

Abstract word count: 128 words

Manuscript word count: 2,909 words plus references and one figure

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1. Introduction.

It is sometimes suggested that professional economists behave more self-interestedly and less cooperatively than do non-economists, perhaps because of their exposure to or attraction to standard models of economic rationality (Frank, Gilovich, and Regan 1993). The empirical question is still unresolved, but evidence seems to favor the conclusion that economists will tend to behave more self-interestedly than non-economists at least when placed in explicitly game-like situations that invite the application of formal economic models (Marwell and Ames 1981; Carter and Irons 1991; Frank, Gilovich, and Regan 1993; Yezer, Goldfarb, and Poppen 1996; Selten and Ockenfels 1998; Laband and Beil 1999; Frank and Schultze 2000; Frey and Meier 2003; Bauman and Rose 2011).

Ethicists tend to favor normative models that encourage more cooperative choices – for example, acting on a maxim that one can will to be a universal law (Kant 1785/1998) or acting to promote general happiness (Sidgwick 1874/1907). One might therefore wonder whether professional ethicists' behavior would be complementary to that of professional economists – more cooperative and less self-interested, at least in situations that explicitly call forth the ethicist's special expertise. Recent evidence suggests not (Schwitzgebel 2009; Schwitzgebel and Rust 2009, 2010; Schwitzgebel, Rust, Huang, Moore, and Coates forthcoming). However, the issue remains open.

The American Philosophical Association used to rely primarily on an honor system for the payment of meeting registration fees. However, due to perceived non-compliance in the mid-2000s – lots of attendees not registering, creating financial challenges for the APA – this policy

was changed. Starting in late 2008, the APA has attempted to increase registration compliance by releasing meeting room information only to paid registrants. Participating in a professional conference while failing to pay the registration fee for the conference would appear, on the face of it, to be a morally objectionable form of free riding. Since ethicists and non-ethicist philosophers participate in APA meetings in similar roles, patterns of non-compliance are a potentially interesting behavioral measure, perhaps especially during the honor-system period. Non-compliance cannot be justified by claiming that registration fees are exorbitant: Since the mid-2000's, pre-registration for APA members has been \$50-\$60 (somewhat more for non-members and for on-site registration; \$10 pre-registration for students). See Section 4 for a brief discussion of other arguments for morally justified non-compliance.

The research question of this article is: Were professional ethicists less likely than other philosophers to free-ride at APA meetings in the period when the honor system collapsed? For vividness, we might imagine ourselves on a hotel mezzanine in 2007, looking at a registration line full of good citizens/suckers waiting to pay their fee. Those philosophers hurrying past, probably hoping that the others will assume they have already paid – are they disproportionately unlikely to be specialists in ethics? Or are they about to lecture on the nature of virtue and universal law?

2. Method.

I obtained from the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association a complete list of every person who paid registration fees to participate in the Pacific Division meetings from 2006 through 2008, the final three years of the honor system. (The APA has no general national meeting, but rather three divisional meetings, with the Pacific the most popular

among philosophers not involved in the job market.) Before this list of registrants was shared with me, the names were encrypted according to a formula unknown to me so as to preserve individuals' privacy. (Rigorous controls for preserving privacy were required both by the APA and by my home institution's ethics review board.) Separately, a research assistant and I generated a list of people appearing on the 2006-2008 Pacific Division meeting programs. That second list was then encrypted, by another research assistant, according to the same formula as was used on the list of paid registrants. Finally, the two encrypted lists were compared by computerized search. A person who appeared on the meeting program but not on the registration list for a given year was coded as a free-riding non-registrant. (Occasionally, someone may appear on the program and then fail to attend, for example due to a health crisis. To judge from personal experience attending meetings, this is relatively rare. I treat such non-attendance as noise unlikely to differ between ethicists and non-ethicists.)

List matches were based on encrypted all-caps surname and first initial only. To reduce the likelihood of errors in computerized list matching, program participants were excluded from analysis if their surname was among the 100 most common U.S. surnames; if there was more than one person on the program with the same last name and first initial; if the person's name contained a space, a non-alphabetic character such as dash or apostrophe, a mid-word capital other than after "Mac" or "Mc", or a letter with a diacritical mark; or if her full first name was not listed on the program (since someone listed as "H. Mark Goodalot" might register informally as "Mark"). Simple misspellings seem likely to be infrequent in the databases, since the registrant's name as spelled in the databases would appear in the same form on the draft program and on her nametag, giving an opportunity and motive for correction. I assume a maximum

noise rate of 10% from all sources. We will see a confirmation of this maximum noise estimate in the results section.

The following variables were used as predictors of free riding:

Ethicist. I coded all participants as either “ethics”, “non-ethics”, or “excluded”, based on the title of the presentation(s) they were giving, commenting on, or chairing. This coding was done before registration results were known. I excluded topics on the disciplinary boundary between ethics and non-ethics (philosophy of action, religion, gender, or race, unless an focus on ethical dimensions was evident from the title). I also excluded sessions on issues in the profession (e.g., teaching and technology) and chairs and commentators on mixed sessions. If a participant appeared more than once on one year’s program, that participant was counted as an ethicist if any of her participation was coded as ethics. If a participant had more than one non-excluded year of participation (22% did), only the first year of participation was included in the analysis, to improve the independence of the trials, and that participant was coded as an ethicist if at least 50% of her non-excluded years of participation were as an ethicist.

Gender. Gender was coded based on first name. Gender-ambiguous names were excluded from gender analysis, as were names whose gender associations were not obvious to the U.S. coders (11% of the total).

Program role. All participants were classified as speaking, commenting, or chairing. If a participant appeared more than once on the program, her highest-level role was used (speaking > commenting > chairing).

Main program. The “main program” is organized by the divisional Program Committee and generally runs from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. “Group sessions”, typically with lighter attendance, start around 6 p.m. Participants in more than one session were coded as main program

participants if they participated in any role in the main program. Daytime “mini-conferences” were treated as part of the main program.

Colloquium session. Within the main program, sessions were classified as either colloquium or non-colloquium. Talks in “colloquium” sessions are generally submitted and blind refereed. Non-colloquium sessions are generally invited. Participants in more than one session were coded as colloquium participants if their highest-level role was in a colloquium.

Institutional prestige. All participants were classified as either affiliated with an institution with a philosophy Ph.D. program ranked in the 2006 Philosophical Gourmet Report or as not so affiliated. If a participant was affiliated with a ranked Ph.D. program, that person was further classified either as a graduate student in that program or as faculty.

3. Results.

Ethicists vs. non-ethicists. Classification as an ethicist was not predictive, either negatively or positively, of appearance on the list of paid registrants. Overall, 74% of ethicists appeared to have paid their registration fees, compared to 76% of non-ethicists (556/750 vs. 671/885; $Z = -0.8$; $p = .43$; 95% CI for difference -6% to 3%). This general conclusion appears to survive when the other predictors are taken into account, as I will now explain.

Gender. Gender was not predictive of registration: 75% of men appear to have registered, compared to 76% of women (804/1076 vs. 286/376, $Z = -0.5$, $p = .60$). Thus, although ethicists were more likely to be women (34% vs. 19%, $p < .001$), this factor did not appear to have had a confounding influence on ethicists’ registration rates. For this and all other predictor variables, possible confounds have also been examined by regression analysis, as reported below.

Institutional prestige. Institutional prestige was also not predictive of registration: 73% of faculty from ranked PhD programs registered, compared to 75% of participants not affiliated with a ranked PhD program (presumably also mostly faculty) (350/480 vs. 732/976, $Z = -0.9$, $p = .40$). However, within ranked PhD institutions, faculty were less likely to have paid registration fees than were graduate students: 73% vs. 81% (350/480 vs. 145/179, $Z = -2.1$, $p = .03$). This difference might be explained by the lower fees for graduate students (see above), although the fees were probably not much lower as a proportion of total participant income. Excluding graduate students from the analysis does not materially affect the main results, with registration rates at 74% for ethicists vs. 75% for non-ethicists ($Z = -0.6$, $p = .53$).

Program role. There was a marginally significant trend for people whose only program role was as a chair to be less likely to have registered than were people with a speaking or commenting role: 71% vs. 76% (243/340 vs. 984/1295, $Z = -1.7$, $p = .09$). However, ethicists and non-ethicists did not detectably differ in their rates of chairing (19% vs. 22%, $Z = -1.6$, $p = .11$). People who appeared on the main program were more likely to have paid their registration fees than were people appearing only on the group program: 77% vs. 65% (1044/1352 vs. 183/283, $Z = 4.4$, $p < .001$). Among those on the main program, people whose highest-level role in the program was in a colloquium session were more likely to have paid registration fees than those whose highest-level role in the program was in a non-colloquium session: 81% vs. 74% (520/645 vs. 524/707, $Z = 2.8$, $p = .004$). And among colloquium participants, the ones who appeared as speaker, and thus who had a paper selected through the Pacific Division refereeing process, had the highest rate of registration of all groups: 86% (211/244).

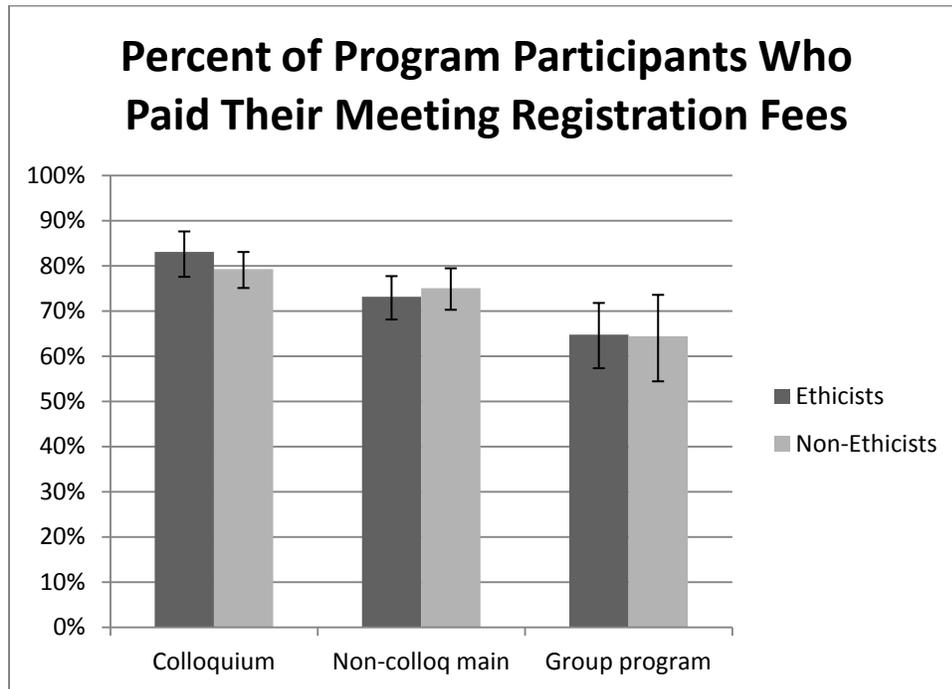
The previous paragraph reveals a pattern in which likelihood of registering appears to correspond with something like debt to the APA Program Committee. Furthermore, maybe

faculty, when selected for the program, feel less debt to the program committee than do graduate students. If so, then all detected effects could be explained by this one factor. One might guess that people not appearing on the program at all would be least likely to have registered, so that the overall non-compliance rate would exceed 25%, but unfortunately there seems to be no way to test this hypothesis directly.

These results are encouraging in that they suggest sufficient data quality and statistical power to detect effects where they exist, including a likely maximum noise level (for missed registrants) of about 14% (the complement of the 86% match rate for colloquium speakers). However, this data pattern also raises the possibility of confounds, since ethicists and non-ethicists were not equally distributed among the program participation groups. Ethicists were more likely than non-ethicists to appear only on the group program: 24% vs. 12% (179/750 vs. 104/885, $Z = 6.5$, $p < .001$). And among participants appearing on the main program, ethicists were less likely than non-ethicists to have their highest level of participation in a colloquium session: 39% vs. 54% ($Z = -5.2$, $p < .001$). Thus, it is possible that differences in program role are masking a real tendency for ethicists to be more likely to register. One way to address this possible confound is to divide the data into subgroups. Doing so, we continue to see no effect. Among colloquium participants only, 83% of ethicists registered, vs. 79% of non-ethicists (187/225 vs. 333/420, $Z = 1.2$, $p = .24$, 95% CI for difference -2% to 10%). Among main program non-colloquium participants 73% of ethicists registered vs. 75% of non-ethicists (253/346 vs. 271/361, $Z = -0.6$, $p = .55$, 95% CI for difference -8% to 5%). Among participants appearing on the group program only, 65% of ethicists registered vs. 64% of non-ethicists (116/179 vs. 67/104, $Z = 0.1$, $p = .95$, 95% CI for difference -11% to 12%). These results are

displayed in Figure 1. This and other potential confounds have also been examined through regression analysis, to which I now turn.

FIGURE 1: Ethicists' and non-ethicist philosophers' likelihood of having paid Pacific Division APA meeting registration fees, by participants' session type. Error bars represent one-proportion 95% confidence intervals.



Regression analyses. As a further check for confounds, I ran a forward stepwise binary logistic regression, testing the following dummy variables (with the unmarked groups as the reference groups): ethicist, female, highest-level role as chair, only on group program, highest-level role in colloquium session, faculty at ranked institution, graduate student at ranked institution, and two-way interactions of ethicist by each of the other dummies. Three variables achieved significance at an alpha level of .05 and were thus included in the final regression equation: participation only in the group program (negatively predictive: $\beta = -.53$, $p = .001$), highest-level role in colloquium session (positively predictive: $\beta = .35$, $p = .01$), and highest-level role as chair (negatively predictive: $\beta = -.34$, $p = .02$) – results that accord nicely with the general findings from the simpler analyses above. Regression analysis also confirmed the central finding that being an ethicist was not only non-predictive of likelihood of having registered, and furthermore delivered a small estimated effect size: In a single-step logistic regression predicting registration from group, colloquium, chair, and ethicist, ethicist was non-predictive, with a logistic regression coefficient of $\beta = .03$ ($p = .78$; 95% CI for β -.20 to .26).

4. Conclusion.

Ethicists were no more likely to have paid their conference registration fees for the Pacific Division APA from 2006-2008 than were non-ethicist philosophers. Among both ethicists and non-ethicists, approximately three-quarters of participants listed on the meeting program also appeared on the list of paid registrants. The remaining one-quarter appear to have been free riders, taking advantage of the lack of registration enforcement to escape contributing to the cost of hosting the meeting, despite appearing on the meeting program.

While such free riding might be economically rational according to standard rational choice theory, it is probably a violation of one's moral obligations. The present results thus fit with several other recent findings that suggest that professional ethicists are, on average, no morally better behaved than are socially similar non-ethicists.

In conversation I've heard various arguments for registration skepticism. The two most common are (i.) that registration is not morally required if the registration line is long, and (ii.) that the APA is unworthy of monetary support. The first argument might be a good argument against the moral duty to register *at the beginning* of the conference, before one attends one's first session. One might still register mid-conference after the lines have calmed. The second argument might justify declining to pay in excess of what is necessary to host the conference, but in fact the APA's modest registration fees don't even cover the entire cost of the conference (which is subsidized from annual APA membership fees and other sources). It also seems, to me, a suspiciously self-serving form of purism that declines, on moral grounds, to pay participation fees to an imperfect organization and yet does not decline the professional advantages of appearing on the program hosted by that same organization. Doubtless, sophisticated arguments can be mounted on both sides of the question; that's what we philosophers are good at! I don't claim to have closed the issue. Nor would I claim that non-registration is a grave sin or wrong in all cases. Furthermore, even if registration is in general *not* morally preferable to non-registration, the empirical results might still be interesting. For example, the results might be interpreted as revealing that ethicists are no better than non-ethicists at detecting the non-obligation to register.

It is also sometimes suggested to me in conversation that professional ethicists should not be expected to behave any differently than anyone else – that their job is only to theorize about

morality, not to live it. This has always seemed to me an odd view. Carried to its logical conclusion, it seems to imply that we should expect ethicists who advocate vegetarianism, such as Peter Singer (1975/2002), to eat cheeseburgers at the same rate as everyone else. The conflict between advocating vegetarianism in print and consuming large amounts of meat in person seems sharper than does the conflict between lecturing on the need to act on universalizable maxims, or on the virtues of honesty and generosity, or on how to support a well-functioning society, and sneaking past the registration line to do so. But one might have thought that in a substantial range of cases there would be *some* conflict, some felt pressure of irony. As far as I can see, though, any conflict either isn't felt keenly enough to influence behavior or is masked by other influences.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association for providing access to their data, anonymously encoded, on my request. However, this research was neither solicited by nor conducted on behalf of the APA or the Pacific Division. Special thanks to Dom Lopes, Anita Silvers, and Linda Smallbrook. For help in preparing and coding the data, thanks to Karen Xu at the Statistical Consulting Collaboratory and to Justin Coates and Monique Wonderly.

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