

# Creating Humble Economists: A Code of Ethics for Economists

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From the movie, *Inside Job*, one gets the sense that economists are ethically challenged because they take payments for writing papers that say what the funders of their research want them to say. This paper takes issue with that and suggests that the more serious ethical problem of economics has little to do with the funding of economic research. It has to do with lack of humility. It argues that economists have a tendency to convey more scientific certainty in their policy positions than the theory and evidence objectively would allow. Too many economists are willing to make seemingly definitive scientific statements about policy based on models, that they know, or should know, are highly imperfect. To deal with that problem, this paper suggests that applied economists should see themselves as engineers, not as applied scientists. It argues that doing so is important because engineering has a broader and more humble methodology than does science. Because applied economists are essentially engineers, the paper argues that an Economist's Code of Ethics can be closely based on the National Society of Professional Engineer's Code of Ethics.

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## Creating Humble Economists: A Code of Ethics for Economists

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From the movie, *Inside Job*, one gets the sense that economists are ethically challenged because they take payments for writing papers that say what the funders of their research want them to say. The sense conveyed by the movie is that economists are for sale. In my view, that is far from the case; economists are not for-hire any more than a similar group of academic experts, and probably significantly less than many, since, by academic standards, economists tend to be well paid. The money given to economists by groups that support the policy positions they are espousing, either in the form of honoraria for a talk, payment as a director or consultant to the company, or funding for research, is seldom the reason economists are supporting their policy positions. The causal link generally goes the other way around. Thus, while I support reasonable, minimally invasive measures that increase transparency of funding, I see such measures as having little effect on the ethical failings of the economics profession. Economists will espouse the positions they espouse whether or not the funding takes place. If academic economists were primarily interested in the money, they could earn significantly more income by leaving academia and entering into business or finance. Money, or biased support of research, in my view, is not the most serious ethical issue facing the economics profession. The ethical problem of economists is deeper.

The more serious ethical problem of economics has little to do with the funding of economic research on either the right or the left. It has to do with lack of humility. By this I mean that we economists have a tendency to convey more scientific certainty in our policy positions than the theory and evidence objectively would allow. Too many economists are willing to make seemingly definitive scientific statements about policy based on models, that they know, or should know, are highly imperfect. It was that tendency that I (Colander et al, 2009) criticized the profession for in the recent crisis. Back in 1927, Lionel Robbins (Robbins, 1927) argued that “what precision economists can claim at this stage is largely a sham precision. In the present state of knowledge, the man who can claim for economic science much exactitude is a quack.” Despite the advances economic science has made, that remains true today. Yet, all too often economists allow lay people and policy makers to believe that our policy suggestions have far more scientific foundation than a neutral objective observer would give them.

Good economists recognize our tendency to do this, but too often allow other individuals and other economists to convey their findings and policy views in ways that make those views seem far more scientifically grounded than they are. This tendency is exacerbated by an ethical failing in the reporting profession, which, when looking for a good story, will gravitate to economists who most overstate the conclusions of policy. A newspaper article concluding with “This finding is at best suggestive, and goes far beyond what one can say with scientific certainty.” does not endear a reporter to his editor. Thus, not only are economists as a group not humble enough, what lay people are presented as economist’s policy recommendations are often the policy recommendations of the least humble economist. In summary, my argument is that lack of humility in conveying the limitations of their results is the most serious ethical problem facing economists; it played a much larger role in causing the recent financial crisis than did the type of payments highlighted by *Inside Job*. Thus, and any new code of ethics for economists should deal with that humility problem.

## *Applied Science vs. Engineering*

How does one go about creating a humble economist? I don't have a complete answer to that, but one step toward doing so would involve a change in the self-image of applied economists. Currently applied economists see themselves as applied scientists. My argument in this paper is that that needs to change. Applied economists should see themselves as engineers, not as applied scientists, as Howard Wolowitz's, rather than Sheldon Cooper's or even Leonard Hofstadter's. That change in self image would be an important step toward creating a more humble economics profession, and would bring about major changes in their method, which would contribute toward creating a more ethical economics profession.

To many economists I suspect that my argument that most economists should see themselves as engineers, not applied scientists will seem strange. Isn't engineering just applied science? My answer is no, it isn't; if anything science is applied engineering. Engineering and applied science can be distinguished by their primary goals and methods.

The primary goal of science is finding the truth--understanding for the sake of understanding. Science is about finding the truth. Its methods are consistent with that goal, and those methods have evolved into relatively formal prescriptions about methods that guide and limit scientists in their work. Back of the envelop calculations, value judgments, guestimates, heuristic models, rough generalizations from case studies, common sense observation, and fudge factors are not the methods to establish scientific truths. The scientific method requires rigorous analysis, and precise conventions to counter individual's tendency toward fast pattern completion. A set of conventions about how to do empirical analysis, how to develop models, the appropriate level of statistical significance of empirical work such as appropriate t values, the appropriate structure of experiments such as randomized, double blind, placebo controlled experiments, become part of its method.

Doing good science is costly and time consuming, but the amount of time or effort it takes to resolve an issue is not a considered a legitimate consideration in establishing a scientific result. A scientific truth is timeless, and if your goal is true understanding, then anything less than the methodological gold standard is not good enough to establish the truth. Applied science involves the translation of scientific findings to solve real world problems and, in principle, it holds itself up to the same standards as does science since the primary goal is scientific understanding. Applied science has science and the scientific method at its core.

Engineering is different than science. The primary goal of engineers is solving a specific problem with available resources, and an engineering solution can only be judged relative to its cost. Whereas the scientific method does not allow shortcuts to save time and money, the engineering method does. Engineering is by nature applied, and it has no scientific core, or general formal methodological prescriptions based on the scientific methods. Billy Vaughn Koen, (2003) who has written what appears to be the current standard methodological treatise for engineering defines the engineering method as "*The strategy for causing the best change in a poorly understood or uncertain situation within the available resources.*" He describes an engineer as an individual who solves problems using engineering heuristics. He argues that an

engineer makes no pretence of having found the truth, or having found the “correct” model.<sup>1</sup> An engineer focuses on finding solutions that work, and uses whatever methods he finds best leads to finding a solution to the particular problem he is trying to solve. In the engineering field, there are no rigid prescriptions guiding method.

Engineering uses science when appropriate, but where science does not have an answer to a part of the question that is needed to come to a policy recommendation, an engineer finds the best answer it can, and uses that. An engineering method might involve back of the envelop calculations, input from other specialties, guestimates, and individual judgment—whatever is needed to provide the best answer an engineer can provide to the problem he or she is trying to solve. In providing an engineer’s recommendation, an engineer follows the weakest link principle—and presents his or her recommendation with no more certainty than he has in the weakest link of the analysis needed to arrive at a solution.

This difference in focus between applied science and engineering means that the engineering method can differ significantly from the applied science method. If a rule of thumb seems to work in similar cases, it will be incorporated even though it has no scientific foundation. If arriving at a policy recommendation involves making value judgments, the engineering method makes what it believes are reasonable value judgments. There is no need to shy away from them. If the data don’t exist that meet appropriate levels of statistical significance, or if it doesn’t seem cost effective to collect and analyze the data to that level of precision, the engineer uses the best data he or she can to arrive at the cost he or she believes appropriate.

I am not arguing that engineering uses an “anything goes” methodology. Acceptable heuristics, which is what engineers call methodology, develop endogenously within the engineering profession about what approaches are acceptable and which aren’t. These state of the art methods change over time (which is why “state of the art” is an important concept in any engineering methodology) and are developed by the engineering specialists in a particular field. Acceptable heuristics can differ in different branches of engineering, and there is no overarching methodological requirement, other than “what seems to work.”

I am fully aware of the ambiguity of the term science, and I agree that, in principle, it makes no difference whether someone calls him or herself an applied scientist or an engineer — it is just a name. But, as I hope I have made clear above, the method that an applied researcher uses matters a lot, both in how an applied researchers goes about his or her research and in how he or she presents research findings. To the degree that self-classification affects method, it makes a big difference.

My argument is that most economists (and most applied natural scientists as well) are actually engineers, who, in practice often go about their research (and should go about their research) using an engineering method. The problem I see is that they don’t use it enough, and they don’t make it clear to others that they are using an engineering method, not a scientific method. Their self-classification as applied scientists leads them to contort their methodological

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<sup>1</sup> Koen argues that the engineering method, which he calls a universal method, predates the scientific method, and that scientific method is simply an application of the engineering method when the research goal is finding the truth, rather than to solve a particular problem.

approach to attempt to make it seem to fit a scientific method, and to present their research findings and conclusions as scientific truths, not as rough and ready engineering insights that can be useful in looking at particular problems. Seeing oneself as a scientist undermines the humility the actual practice of applied economics warrants.

Presenting findings as scientific findings give those findings an aura of validity that goes beyond the method used. An example of what I mean can be seen in econometric findings, which are often presented as having met scientific standards, when in fact, the findings are often rough and ready engineering estimates based on reasonable proxies. Since even the reasonable proxies are often highly imperfect, the empirical results should be seen as highly questionable regardless of the statistical precision of the analysis. To present results as meeting a 95% confidence interval can lead nonspecialists to have more confidence in the results than is warranted. Economists data mine, and choose models based on analytic tractability, not appropriateness to the process. That all makes sense, but to present results of work that uses these reasonable ad hoc engineering methods as scientific results, and not as engineering results, does not.

My argument is that most applied economics involves many of the same pragmatic methods as does engineering. But we economists tend to be less open about our actual methods because they seem to violate scientific methodology. We see applied economics as applied science, which places scientific models and scientific facts at the center of our analysis. For example, we justify a DSGE modeling strategy because it is more “scientific” than other modeling strategies even though it is forcing our macro models into a form that intuitively doesn’t fit the macro reality. With sufficient gyrations, DSGE models can be made to fit, but from an engineering standpoint it is unclear what one has gained from the analytic contortions necessary to do so, and the loss of not using models which can better capture the likely problems faced by a macroeconomy. Similarly, with standard macro models.

An engineer’s approach to modeling such a complex system as the macro economy would likely focus much more on statistical models and methods of pulling patterns out of the data. It would explore a wide variety of formal models to gain analytic insight, and then would integrate the many variety of models with the statistical models to interpret the patterns. That would involve a fundamentally different way of doing macro and of thinking about macro problems. Similarly, with micro. Economists focus much of their applied micro policy discussion on Pareto optimal solutions even though we know that all actual policies will violate Pareto optimality. We can contort our micro policy models designed to provide Pareto optimal solutions to provide insight into non-Pareto optimal solutions, but, generally, that contortion comes at a cost. It means that we spend less time discussing other models that better fit not Pareto optimal solutions, but “reasonable person solutions” that more closely reflect society’s value judgments. An engineering applied microeconomics would likely have an entire branch devoted to measuring society’s value judgments and integrating those judgments into applied policy instruments. Our scientific applied micro leaves the topic almost totally undiscussed.

My interest in this paper is not in how economist’s research methods and applied economics would change if economists saw themselves as engineers; it is in how economists view of themselves and presentations of their findings would change if they saw themselves as engineers. My argument is that the economists as engineer would be much more humble in their presentation of results than the economists as applied scientist. Because the engineering method

is by nature pragmatic and unjustified, and makes no claim to being the truth, an engineer would tend to be more modest about his work. Accepting that economists are engineers, not applied scientists, would take economic policy out of the realm of science, and put it in the realm of engineering or art, where uncertainty reigns, and where the need for judgments is explicitly acknowledged. Debates in economic policy would move outside of economics, and the role that economic models would play would change.

Applied economists as engineers would not claim scientific status for our policy pronouncements, and heuristics would develop to compare various policy pronouncements of different economists. Those heuristics would recognize that the judgments underlying policy pronouncements are subject to legitimate debate, and that debate about nuance would tend to make our make our policy pronouncements more humble.

## **A Code of Ethics for Economists**

My goal in this paper is not to make the argument for economists seeing themselves as engineers; I have dealt with that in another paper. (Colander, 2011) My goal in this paper is to explain how seeing ourselves as engineers, not applied scientists, would help us arrive at a code of ethics for economists. My hypothesis is the following: If it is true that economics is essentially engineering, then a code of ethics for engineers should nicely translate into a code of ethics for economists. I believe it does so. To demonstrate that, I went to the National Society of Professional Engineers and found their code of ethics. (<http://www.jenmdse.net/MSE/pd/NSPECodeofEthics.pdf>). I then did a global change of the word "engineer" to "economist", and arrived at the following code, which I believe would make a good first stab at a code of ethics for the economics profession.

### *Code of Ethics for Economists (Adopted from the Code of Ethics for Engineers)*

#### **Preamble**

Economics is an important and learned profession. As members of this profession, economists are expected to exhibit the highest standards of honesty and integrity. Economics has a direct and vital impact on the quality of life for all people. Accordingly, the services provided by economists require honesty, impartiality, fairness, and equity, and must be dedicated to the protection of the public health, safety, and welfare. Economists must perform under a standard of professional behavior that requires adherence to the highest principles of ethical conduct.

#### **I. Fundamental Canons**

Economists, in the fulfillment of their professional duties, shall:

1. Hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.
2. Perform services only in areas of their competence.
3. Issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner.
4. Act for each employer or client as faithful agents or trustees.

5. Avoid deceptive acts.
6. Conduct themselves honorably, responsibly, ethically, and lawfully so as to enhance the honor, reputation, and usefulness of the profession.

## **II. Rules of Practice**

### **1. Economists shall hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.**

- a. If economists' judgment is overruled under circumstances that endanger life or property, they shall notify their employer or client and such other authority as may be appropriate.
- b. Economists shall approve only those economics documents that are in conformity with applicable standards.
- c. Economists shall not reveal facts, data, or information without the prior consent of the client or employer except as authorized or required by law or this Code.
- d. Economists shall not permit the use of their name or associate in business ventures with any person or firm that they believe is engaged in fraudulent or dishonest enterprise.
- e. Economists shall not aid or abet the unlawful practice of economics by a person or firm.
- f. Economists having knowledge of any alleged violation of this Code shall report thereon to appropriate professional bodies and, when relevant, also to public authorities, and cooperate with the proper authorities in furnishing such information or assistance as may be required.

### **2. Economists shall perform services only in the areas of their competence.**

- a. Economists shall undertake assignments only when qualified by education or experience in the specific technical fields involved.
- b. Economists shall not affix their signatures to any plans or documents dealing with subject matter in which they lack competence, nor to any plan or document not prepared under their direction and control.
- c. Economists may accept assignments and assume responsibility for coordination of an entire project and sign and seal the economics documents for the entire project, provided that each technical segment is signed and sealed only by the qualified Economists who prepared the segment.

### **3. Economists shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner.**

- a. Economists shall be objective and truthful in professional reports, statements, or testimony.

They shall include all relevant and pertinent information in such reports, statements, or testimony, which should bear the date indicating when it was current.

- b. Economists may express publicly technical opinions that are founded upon knowledge of the facts and competence in the subject matter.
- c. Economists shall issue no statements, criticisms, or arguments on technical matters that are inspired or paid for by interested parties, unless they have prefaced their comments by explicitly identifying the interested parties on whose behalf they are speaking, and by revealing the existence of any interest the economists may have in the matters.

**4. Economists shall act for each employer or client as faithful agents or trustees.**

- a. Economists shall disclose all known or potential conflicts of interest that could influence or appear to influence their judgment or the quality of their services.
- b. Economists shall not accept compensation, financial or otherwise, from more than one party for services on the same project, or for services pertaining to the same project, unless the circumstances are fully disclosed and agreed to by all interested parties.
- c. Economists shall not solicit or accept financial or other valuable consideration, directly or indirectly, from outside agents in connection with the work for which they are responsible.
- d. Economists in public service as members, advisors, or employees of a governmental or quasi-governmental body or department shall not participate in decisions with respect to services solicited or provided by them or their organizations in private or public economics practice.
- e. Economists shall not solicit or accept a contract from a governmental body on which a principal or officer of their organization serves as a member.

**5. Economists shall avoid deceptive acts.**

- a. Economists shall not falsify their qualifications or permit misrepresentation of their or their associates' qualifications. They shall not misrepresent or exaggerate their responsibility in or for the subject matter of prior assignments. Brochures or other presentations incident to the solicitation of employment shall not misrepresent pertinent facts concerning employers, employees, associates, joint venturers, or past accomplishments.
- b. Economists shall not offer, give, solicit, or receive, either directly or indirectly, any contribution to influence the award of a contract by public authority, or which may be reasonably construed by the public as having the effect or intent of influencing the awarding of a contract. They shall not offer any gift or other valuable consideration in order to secure work. They shall not pay a commission, percentage, or brokerage fee in order to secure work, except to a bona fide employee or bona fide established commercial or marketing agencies retained by them.



### **III. Professional Obligations**

#### **1. Economists shall be guided in all their relations by the highest standards of honesty and integrity.**

- a. Economists shall acknowledge their errors and shall not distort or alter the facts.
- b. Economists shall advise their clients or employers when they believe a project will not be successful.
- c. Economists shall not accept outside employment to the detriment of their regular work or interest. Before accepting any outside economics employment, they will notify their employers.
- d. Economists shall not attempt to attract an economist from another employer by false or misleading pretenses.
- e. Economists shall not promote their own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession.

#### **2. Economists shall at all times strive to serve the public interest.**

- a. Economists are encouraged to participate in civic affairs; career guidance for youths; and work for the advancement of the safety, health, and well-being of their community.
- b. Economists shall not complete, sign, or seal plans and/or specifications that are not in conformity with applicable economics standards. If the client or employer insists on such unprofessional conduct, they shall notify the proper authorities and withdraw from further service on the project.
- c. Economists are encouraged to extend public knowledge and appreciation of economics and its achievements.
- d. Economists are encouraged to adhere to the principles of sustainable development in order to protect the environment for future generations.

#### **3. Economists shall avoid all conduct or practice that deceives the public.**

- a. Economists shall avoid the use of statements containing a material misrepresentation of fact or omitting a material fact.
- b. Consistent with the foregoing, economists may advertise for recruitment of personnel.
- c. Consistent with the foregoing, economists may prepare articles for the lay or technical press, but such articles shall not imply credit to the author for work performed by others.

**4. Economists shall not disclose, without consent, confidential information concerning the business affairs or technical processes of any present or former client or employer, or public body on which they serve.**

- a. Economists shall not, without the consent of all interested parties, promote or arrange for new employment or practice in connection with a specific project for which the economist has gained particular and specialized knowledge.
- b. Economists shall not, without the consent of all interested parties, participate in or represent an adversary interest in connection with a specific project or proceeding in which the economist has gained particular specialized knowledge on behalf of a former client or employer.

**5. Economists shall not be influenced in their professional duties by conflicting interests.**

- a. Economists shall not accept financial or other considerations, including free economic designs, from material or equipment suppliers for specifying their product.
- b. Economists shall not accept commissions or allowances, directly or indirectly, from contractors or other parties dealing with clients or employers of the economist in connection with work for which the economist is responsible.

**6. Economists shall not attempt to obtain employment or advancement or professional engagements by untruthfully criticizing other economists, or by other improper or questionable methods.**

- a. Economists shall not request, propose, or accept a commission on a contingent basis under circumstances in which their judgment may be compromised.
- b. Economists in salaried positions shall accept part-time economics work only to the extent consistent with policies of the employer and in accordance with ethical considerations.
- c. Economists shall not, without consent, use equipment, supplies, laboratory, or office facilities of an employer to carry on outside private practice.

**7. Economists shall not attempt to injure, maliciously or falsely, directly or indirectly, the professional reputation, prospects, practice, or employment of other economists. Economists who believe others are guilty of unethical or illegal practice shall present such information to the proper authority for action.**

- a. Economists in private practice shall not review the work of another economist for the same client, except with the knowledge of such economist, or unless the connection of such economist with the work has been terminated.
- b. Economists in governmental, industrial, or educational employ are entitled to review and evaluate the work of other economists when so required by their employment duties.

c. Economists in sales or industrial employ are entitled to make economics comparisons of represented products with products of other suppliers.

**8. Economists shall accept personal responsibility for their professional activities, provided, however, that Economists may seek indemnification for services arising out of their practice for other than gross negligence, where the economist's interests cannot otherwise be protected.**

a. Economists shall conform with state registration laws in the practice of economics.

b. Economists shall not use association with a noneconomist, a corporation, or partnership as a “cloak” for unethical acts.

**9. Economists shall give credit for economics work to those to whom credit is due, and will recognize the proprietary interests of others.**

a. Economists shall, whenever possible, name the person or persons who may be individually responsible for designs, inventions, writings, or other accomplishments.

b. Economists using designs supplied by a client recognize that the designs remain the property of the client and may not be duplicated by the economist for others without express permission.

c. Economists, before undertaking work for others in connection with which the economist may make improvements, plans, designs, inventions, or other records that may justify copyrights or patents, should enter into a positive agreement regarding ownership.

d. Economists' designs, data, records, and notes referring exclusively to an employer's work are the employer's property. The employer should indemnify the economist for use of the information for any purpose other than the original purpose.

e. Economists shall continue their professional development throughout their careers and should keep current in their specialty fields by engaging in professional practice, participating in continuing education courses, reading in the technical literature, and attending professional meetings and seminars.

## **Discussion**

In adapting the code, I specifically only changed only the terms “engineer” and “economist”, and made no other changes. What was amazing to me is how little I saw that seemed inappropriate to me. In fact there was only one statement in the entire code that I found objectionable, and that was Statement 7-a.<sup>2</sup>This is in stark contrast to other codes of ethics that I

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<sup>2</sup> The statement is “Economists in private practice shall not review the work of another engineer for the same client, except with the knowledge of such engineer, or unless the connection of such engineer with the work has been terminated.” That statement provided more protection than I would believe is appropriate. But I see this as

explored for other groups such as lawyers or for sub groups of economists who have developed explicit codes. I even have more differences with George DeMartino's short "Economist's Oath" than I do with this engineer's code of ethics. For example, I would question DeMartino's paragraph in his Oath about "exposing oppression" and "giving voice to the needs and aspirations of the dispossessed", and his statement in favor of pluralism. It is not that I necessarily disagree with ethical sentiments behind these statements, but I have serious problem with their ambiguity and the way in which they may be interpreted. What if one believes that other's theoretical perspective is wrong? Then I would believe that one has a responsibility to point that out, and not be pluralistic. Similarly, how are we to say what "oppression" is, or what a "self-serving" argument of the privileged" is. In my view, any code of ethics should avoid such areas of ambiguous interpretation as much as possible. What was amazing to me is how well the engineer's code of ethics comported with my implicit code. This consistency of code exists even though the engineering profession operates quite differently than the economics profession in that engineering is generally private, and economics academic or public. But the sentiments conveyed were consistent with the methodology I see appropriately for economists.

Let me now turn to the question: Would adopting a variation of an engineering code of ethics make a difference? In practice, I suspect not, simply because I don't see codes of ethics as significantly affecting behavior. But were economists to accept that they were engineers, not scientists, and change their methodology and presentation of research results accordingly, it would make a major difference. To demonstrate the differences it would make, below I suggest some places where I believe economists would be required to change what they do to meet this ethical code.

- Rule II 1a (If economists' judgment is overruled under circumstances that endanger life or property, they shall notify their employer or client and such other authority as may be appropriate.) should have led the economists developing financial derivative models to warn the public. (It was this ethical failing that we highlighted in Colander et al. 2009)
- Rule II 2a. (Economists shall undertake assignments only when qualified by education or experience in the specific technical fields involved.) should have stopped many economists from making pronouncements about policy as economists, rather than making pronouncements as private individuals, which they are free to do.
- Rule II 2b. (Economists shall not affix their signatures to any plans or documents dealing with subject matter in which they lack competence, nor to any plan or document not prepared under their direction and control.) should stop economists from advocating policy solutions outside of their specific area of expertise.
- Rule II 3a (Economists shall be objective and truthful in professional reports, statements, or testimony. They shall include all relevant and pertinent information in such reports, statements, or testimony, which should bear the date indicating when it was current.) should lead economists to emphasize a bit more than they do how much economic theory changes over time, and does not reflect scientific truth, but rather engineering truth.
- Rule II 3c. (Economists shall issue no statements, criticisms, or arguments on technical matters that are inspired or paid for by interested parties, unless they have prefaced their

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inappropriate for both economists and engineering. There should, in my view, be a general presumption that others will review and criticize one's work and no requirement that the person be informed that that is happening.

comments by explicitly identifying the interested parties on whose behalf they are speaking, and by revealing the existence of any interest the economists may have in the matters.) would catch the funding issues that *Inside Job* highlighted.

- Rule II 4a. (Economists shall disclose all known or potential conflicts of interest that could influence or appear to influence their judgment or the quality of their services.) goes beyond Rule 3c and places a restriction on broader conflicts of interests that often are more important than financial ones.
- Rule III 1b. (Economists shall advise their clients or employers when they believe a project will not be successful.) is another important rule that would affect many economic consulting jobs, where it seems all too often economists come up with conclusions that fit the client wants to hear—conclusions that are sometimes referred to as “stadium project” conclusions because in studies these projects tend to have much bigger positive impacts than they have in practice.
- Rule III 6 (Economists shall not attempt to obtain employment or advancement or professional engagements by untruthfully criticizing other economists, or by other improper or questionable methods.) would call into question some of the comments by some economists about other economist’s proposals.

I could go on, but these examples should make my point. Adoption a variation of the Engineer’s Code of Ethics would have a much broader reach than would DiMartino’s Economist’s Oath, or would a code trying to deal with the ethical problems highlighted by *Inside Job*. Perhaps the aspect I find most appealing about the engineering code of ethics is that it expresses a humility about one’s goals. It makes no sweeping claims about goals, but rather focuses on economic engineer’s individual actions. In my view such an individual action oriented code creates a professional ethic that is stronger than a more inclusive than a code that deals with moral judgments such as “opposing oppression” and “giving voice to the needs and aspirations of the dispossessed” By being limited about the nature of the code, we can be more humble. In a well known passage Keynes wrote that “If economists could manage to get themselves thought of as humble, competent people on a level with dentists, that would be splendid.” I never quite understood Keynes’ dentist allusion, but I would suggest if we could replace “dentist” in the quotation with “engineer”, that would indeed be splendid.

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