Professional Ethics

- In many professions whose professionals hold the power to harm people, holding those professionals to a high ethical standard is important.

- Examples of ethical standards in different professions:
  - Doctors: Hippocratic Oath, Code of Medical Ethics from the American Medical Association
  - Lawyers: licensed through a bar association in the state that they practice. Each bar association has a set of rules of professional conduct e.g. Oregon State Bar’s Rules of Professional Conduct
  - Politicians
    - The US Office of Government Ethics establishes standards of conduct for the executive branch
    - The US House of Representatives and Senate also have their own bodies for enforcing ethical conduct
  - Mechanical engineers: Follow American Society of Mechanical Engineers
  - Professors follow the code of conduct from the university
  - Bankers follow a code of conduct
  - Police and first responders
  - Chefs

- What happens if a professional fails to adhere to these rules of conduct?
  - Loss of license, criminal prosecution, other disciplinary action

- What are the benefits to having a code of conduct for a profession?
  - Sets up the expectations for how people are to behave; sets up common ground for everyone in the profession
  - Increases public trust in the profession
  - Justifies disciplinary action by the governing body

- What are the drawbacks?
  - Could be misused – perhaps for personal publicity
  - Provides false sense of security / trust if there is no enforcement
  - Rules and regulations can slow things down
  - Code of conduct needs to be updated regularly otherwise the rules may not make sense

Technology Related Professional Ethics

- In technology-related fields, there are also various forms of professional ethics e.g.
  - Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (Computer Science)
Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Code of Ethics (Electrical Engineers)

- A crucial difference between these codes of ethics and ones, for example, from the fields of law and medicine is that obeying the ACM and IEEE codes is voluntary for computing professionals.
- No significant way to hold computing professionals accountable to these codes of ethics e.g. can’t lose your job by violating these codes.
- How important is this difference?
  - Very important – erodes public trust
  - Gives the illusion to the public that computing professionals are held to the same standard as doctors and lawyers
  - Nothing in the code of conduct that requires a computing professional to not act in their own self-interest
  - Doesn’t hold the profession’s work to any standard
- How can you personally hold computing professionals accountable to their professional codes of ethics?
  - You can stop using the products of a company (may not be an option for some people)
  - Govt intervention
  - Just fix it yourself (e.g. open source projects)
  - Public protest / public shaming
  - Lawsuit
- Is this (code of conduct) an effective way to make companies and computing professionals behave ethically?
  - Hard to know if they are following the code
  - Companies can get away with not following it (e.g. due to public ignorance of technological issues)
  - But better than not having a code of conduct
- In some respect, such statements are as much about public relations as they are about ethics, so they should be taken with a grain of salt.