

# Glossary of Basic Ethical Concepts

(Thierry Senechal, 2022)

## Adaptive challenges

Challenges that are complex and ambiguous and may be volatile or unpredictable.

Adaptive challenges require adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership is based on the principles of shared responsibility and continuous learning.

1. Solutions to this type of challenge usually require people to learn new ways of doing things or to
2. Change their attitudes, values, and norms and
3. Adopt an experimental mindset
4. These challenges are difficult to identify and easy to deny.
5. They require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to accomplishing goals.
6. People often resist while acknowledging the existence of adaptive challenges.
7. When solving adaptive challenges, leaders need to think systemically to understand the whole array of actors involved.
8. They must understand the root causes, which will require time and energy.
9. Solutions require experiments and new discoveries, can take a long time to implement, and cannot be implemented by decree. Trust is essential.

## Applied Ethics

Applied ethics deals with issues in private or public life that are matters for ethical judgments. The following are important terms used in making moral judgments about particular actions.

*Obligatory:* When we say something is ethically “obligatory” we mean that it is not only right to do it, but that it is wrong not to do it. In other words, we have an ethical obligation to perform the action. Sometimes the easiest way to see if an action is ethically obligatory is to look at what it would mean NOT to perform the action. For example, we might say it is ethically obligatory for parents to care for their children, not only because it is right for them to do it, but also because it is wrong for them not to do it. The children would suffer and die if their parents did not care for them. The parents are thus ethically “obligated” to care for their children.

*Impermissible:* The opposite of an ethically obligatory action is an action that is ethically impermissible, meaning that it is wrong to do it and right not to do it. For example, we would say that murder is ethically impermissible.

*Permissible:* Sometimes actions are referred to as ethically permissible, or ethically “neutral,” because it is neither right nor wrong to do them or not to do them. We might say that having plastic surgery is ethically permissible because it is not wrong to have the surgery (it is not impermissible), but neither is it ethically necessary (obligatory) to have the surgery. Some argue that suicide is permissible in certain circumstances. That is, a person would not be

wrong in committing suicide, nor would they be wrong in not committing suicide. Others would say that suicide is ethically impermissible.

*Supererogatory:* The fourth type of ethical action is called supererogatory. These types of actions are seen as going “above and beyond the call of duty.” They are right to do, but it is not wrong not to do them. For example, two people are walking down a hallway and see a third person drop their book bag, spilling all their books and papers onto the floor. If one person stops to help the third person pick up their books, but the other person keeps on walking, we somehow feel that the person who stopped to help has acted in a more ethically appropriate way than the person who did not stop, but we cannot say that the person who did not stop was unethical in not stopping. In other words, the person who did not help was in no way obligated (it was not ethically obligatory) to help. But we nevertheless want to ethically praise the person who did stop, so we call his or her actions supererogatory.

### **Circles of Concern Strategy**

A strategy designed to help students and adults become more aware of those for whom they *don't* have empathy, and designed to widen their circles of concern. It's referred to in the program to concretize what John Rabe and his associates did in Nanjing when they expanded their own circles of concern –from taking care of family and friends in Nanjing to eventually creating an International Safety Zone for the Chinese citizens left behind.

### **Duty-Based Approach**

The duty-based approach, sometimes called deontological ethics, is most associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), although it had important precursors in earlier non-consequentialist, often explicitly religious, thinking of people like Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who emphasized the importance of the personal will and intention (and of the omnipotent God who sees this interior mental state) to ethical decision making. Kant argued that doing what is right is not about the consequences of our actions (something over which we ultimately have no control) but about having the proper intention in performing the action. An ethical action is one taken from duty, that is, it is done precisely because it is our obligation to perform the action. Ethical obligations are the same for all rational creatures (they are universal), and knowledge of what these obligations entail is arrived at by discovering rules of behavior that are not contradicted by reason.

Kant's famous formula for discovering our ethical duty is known as the “categorical imperative.” It has several different versions, but Kant believed they all amounted to the same imperative. The most basic form of the imperative is: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” So, for example, lying is unethical because we could not universalize a maxim that said, “One should always lie.” Such a maxim would render all speech meaningless. We can, however, universalize the maxim, “Always speak truthfully,” without running into a logical contradiction. (Notice the duty-based approach says nothing about how easy or difficult it would be to carry out these maxims, only that it is our duty as rational creatures to do so.) In acting according to a law that we have discovered to be rational according to our own universal reason, we are acting autonomously (in a self-regulating fashion), and thus are bound by duty, a duty we have given ourselves as rational creatures. We thus freely choose (we will) to bind ourselves to the moral law. For Kant, choosing to obey the universal moral law is the very nature of acting ethically.

## **Ethics**

Ethics provides a set of standards for behavior that helps us decide how we ought to act in a range of situations. In a sense, we can say that ethics is all about making choices, and about providing reasons why we should make these choices.

Ethics is sometimes conflated or confused with other ways of making choices, including religion, law, or morality. Many religions promote ethical decision-making but do not always address the full range of ethical choices that we face. Religions may also advocate or prohibit certain behaviors which may not be considered the proper domain of ethics, such as dietary restrictions or sexual behaviors. A good system of law should be ethical, but the law establishes a precedent in trying to dictate universal guidelines and is thus not able to respond to individual contexts. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas and may be slow to address new problems. Both law and ethics deal with questions of how we should live together with others, but ethics is sometimes also thought to apply to how individuals act even when others are not involved. Finally, many people use the terms morality and ethics interchangeably. Others reserve morality for the state of virtue while seeing ethics as a code that enables morality. Another way to think about the relationship between ethics and morality is to see ethics as providing a rational basis for morality, that is, ethics provides good reasons for why something is moral.

## **Ethics of Care**

Carol Gilligan, who coined phrase “ethics of care” in 1982, explains: “the ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. Its logic is inductive, contextual, psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical.”

Definition from Webteam, Gilligan, C. (2011) [Academic Exchange](#)

## **Ethical Literacy**

The ability to articulate a personal ethical viewpoint and to understand the ethical position of others. In psychology, the American Psychological Association (APA) defines ethical literacy as the ability to understand the codes of ethics/conduct relevant to psychology, to identify ethical issues, and to act ethically. Ethical literacy allows professionals to:

- identify personal values as well as the values of others
- understand the ethical orientations that shape our perspectives
- critically analyze the appropriate ethical frameworks
- apply the ethical principles to evaluate the ethical decision

## **Experimental Moral Philosophy**

Experimental moral philosophy emerged as a methodology in the last decade of the twentieth century, as a branch of the larger experimental philosophy (X-Phi) approach. Experimental moral philosophy is the empirical study of moral intuitions, judgments, and behaviors. Like other forms of experimental philosophy, it involves gathering data using experimental methods and using these data to substantiate, undermine, or revise philosophical theories.

See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/experimental-moral/#:~:text=Experimental%20moral%20philosophy%20is%20the,undermine%2C%20or%20revise%20philosophical%20theories>.

## Metaethics

Metaethics is a branch of analytic philosophy that explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values, properties, and words. Whereas the fields of applied ethics and normative theory focus on *what is moral*, metaethics focuses on *what morality itself is*. Just as two people may disagree about the ethics of, for example, physician-assisted suicide, while nonetheless agreeing at the more abstract level of a general normative theory such as Utilitarianism, so too may people who disagree at the level of a general normative theory nonetheless agree about the fundamental existence and status of morality itself, or vice versa. In this way, metaethics may be thought of as a highly abstract way of thinking philosophically about morality. For this reason, metaethics is also occasionally referred to as “second-order” moral theorizing, to distinguish it from the “first-order” level of normative theory.

Metaethical positions may be divided according to how they respond to questions such as the following:

- What exactly are people doing when they use moral words such as “good” and “right”?
- What precisely *is* a moral value in the first place, and are such values similar to other familiar sorts of entities, such as objects and properties?
- Where do moral values come from—what are their source and foundation?
- Are some things morally right or wrong for all people at all times, or does morality instead vary from person to person, context to context, or culture to culture?

Metaethical positions respond to such questions by examining the semantics of moral discourse, the ontology of moral properties, the significance of anthropological disagreement about moral values and practices, the psychology of how morality affects us as embodied human agents, and the epistemology of how we come to know moral values. The sections below consider these different aspects of metaethics.

*(Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*

## Moral Exemplar

An individual who demonstrates outstanding moral conduct often in the face of difficult or demanding circumstances.

## Moral Injury

As Carol Gilligan defines moral injury as “the shattering of trust that compromises our ability to love.” A fuller definition from the Shay Moral Injury Center is “the suffering people experience when we are in high stakes situations, things go wrong, and harm results that challenge our deepest moral codes and ability to trust in others or ourselves. The harm may be something we did, something we witnessed, or something that was done to us. It results in moral emotions such as shame, guilt, self-condemnation, outrage, and sorrow.”

## Moral perception

Moral reasoning, as conventionally understood, is one of many important elements in deliberating practical moral questions. Equally significant are moral perception - the ability to

recognize an ethical issue in a complex set of circumstances - and moral character - the disposition to live ethically in a coherent way over time. A business executive, for example, may be disposed to act morally in his personal life but may not see that moral issues are raised in his professional life when he decides to close a plant or to accept the health risks of workplace hazards.

### **Normative Ethical Theories**

Ethical theories are often broadly divided into three types: i) Consequentialist theories, which are primarily concerned with the ethical consequences of particular actions; ii) Non-consequentialist theories, which tend to be broadly concerned with the intentions of the person making ethical decisions about particular actions; and iii) Agent-centered theories, which, unlike consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories, are more concerned with the overall ethical status of individuals, or agents, and are less concerned to identify the morality of particular actions. Each of these three broad categories contains varieties of approaches to ethics, some of which share characteristics across the categories. Below is a sample of some of the most important and useful of these ethical approaches.

1. Consequences of a particular action—focused on the outcome (Consequentialism)
2. Principles or standards of conduct—focused on the action (Duty-based approach)
3. The character of the person—focused on the agent (Aristotle)

Each of these strands of theory provides moral insight. They all capture important elements of moral life, yet each has its limitations. For most people and most cultures, none of the four strands of ethics by itself provides a complete set of moral considerations to live by. Each raises important themes for decision-making, and while all four strands are distinctive, there are often important tensions and interconnections among them in practice.

Making good ethical decisions requires a trained sensitivity to ethical issues and a practiced method for exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that should impact our choice of a course of action. Having a method for ethical decision-making is essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that we work through it automatically without consulting the specific steps. This is one reason why we can sometimes say that we have a “moral intuition” about a certain situation, even when we have not consciously thought through the issue. We are practiced at making ethical judgments, just as we can be practiced at playing the piano, and can sit and play well “without thinking.” Nevertheless, it is not always advisable to follow our immediate intuitions, especially in particularly complicated or unfamiliar situations. Here our method for ethical decision-making should enable us to recognize these new and unfamiliar situations and to act accordingly.

The more novel and difficult the ethical choice we face, the more we need to rely on discussion and dialogue with others about the dilemma. Only by careful exploration of the problem, aided by the insights and different perspectives of others, can we make good ethical choices in such situations.

Based upon the three-part division of traditional normative ethical theories discussed above, it makes sense to suggest three broad frameworks to guide ethical decision-making: The Consequentialist Framework; The Duty Framework; and the Virtue Framework.

While each of the three frameworks is useful for making ethical decisions, none is perfect—otherwise, the perfect theory would have driven the other imperfect theories from the field long ago. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of the frameworks will be helpful in deciding which is most useful in approaching the particular situation with which we are presented.

### ***(i) The Consequentialist Framework***

In the Consequentialist framework, we focus on the future effects of the possible courses of action, considering the people who will be directly or indirectly affected. We ask about what outcomes are desirable in a given situation, and consider ethical conduct to be whatever will achieve the best consequences. The person using the Consequences framework desires to produce the most good.

Among the advantages of this ethical framework is that focusing on the results of an action is a pragmatic approach. It helps in situations involving many people, some of whom may benefit from the action, while others may not. On the other hand, it is not always possible to predict the consequences of an action, so some actions that are expected to produce good consequences might actually end up harming people. Additionally, people sometimes react negatively to the use of compromise which is an inherent part of this approach, and they recoil from the implication that the end justifies the means. It also does not include a pronouncement that certain things are always wrong, as even the most heinous actions may result in a good outcome for some people, and this framework allows for these actions to then be ethical.

### ***(ii) The Duty Framework***

In the Duty framework, we focus on the duties and obligations that we have in a given situation and consider what ethical obligations we have and what things we should never do. Ethical conduct is defined as doing one's duties and doing the right thing, and the goal is performing the correct action.

This framework has the advantage of creating a system of rules that has consistent expectations of all people; if an action is ethically correct or a duty is required, it would apply to every person in a given situation. This even-handedness encourages treating everyone with equal dignity and respect.

This framework also focuses on following moral rules or duty regardless of the outcome, so it allows for the possibility that one might have acted ethically, even if there is a bad result. Therefore, this framework works best in situations where there is a sense of obligation or in those in which we need to consider why duty or obligation mandates or forbids certain courses of action.

However, this framework also has its limitations. First, it can appear cold and impersonal, in that it might require actions that are known to produce harm, even though they are strictly in keeping with a particular moral rule. It also does not provide a way to determine which duty

we should follow if we are presented with a situation in which two or more duties conflict. It can also be rigid in applying the notion of duty to everyone regardless of personal situation.

***(iii) The Virtue Framework***

In the Virtue framework, we try to identify the character traits (either positive or negative) that might motivate us in a given situation. We are concerned with what kind of person we should be and what our actions indicate about our character. We define ethical behavior as whatever a virtuous person would do in the situation, and we seek to develop similar virtues.

Obviously, this framework is useful in situations that ask what sort of person one should be. As a way of making sense of the world, it allows for a wide range of behaviors to be called ethical, as there might be many different types of good character and many paths to developing it. Consequently, it takes into account all parts of human experience and their role in ethical deliberation, as it believes that all of one’s experiences, emotions, and thoughts can influence the development of one’s character.

Although this framework takes into account a variety of human experiences, it also makes it more difficult to resolve disputes, as there can often be more disagreement about virtuous traits than ethical actions. Also, because the framework looks at character, it is not particularly good at helping someone decide what actions to take in a given situation or determine the rules that would guide one’s actions. Also, because it emphasizes the importance of role models and education in ethical behavior, it can sometimes merely reinforce current cultural norms as the standard of ethical behavior.

***(iv) Putting the Frameworks Together***

By framing the situation or choice you are facing in one of the ways presented above, specific features will be brought into focus more clearly. However, it should be noted that each framework has its limits: by focusing our attention on one set of features, other important features may be obscured. Hence it is important to be familiar with all three frameworks and to understand how they relate to each other—where they may overlap, and where they may differ.

The chart below is designed to highlight the main contrasts between the three frameworks:

	<b>Consequentialist</b>	<b>Duty</b>	<b>Virtue</b>
<b>Deliberative process</b>	What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)?	What are my obligations in this situation, and what are the things I should never do?	What kind of person should I be (or try to be), and what will my actions show about my character?
<b>Focus</b>	Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action.	Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.	Attempts to discern character traits (virtues and vices) that are, or could be, motivating the people involved in the situation.
<b>Definition of Ethical Conduct</b>	Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences.	Ethical conduct involves always doing the right	Ethical conduct is whatever a fully virtuous person would

		thing: never failing to do one's duty.	do in the circumstances.
<b>Motivation</b>	Aim is to produce the most good.	Aim is to perform the right action.	Aim is to develop one's character.

Source: Brown University

## Practical Ethics

First, practical ethics is a **linking discipline** seeking to bridge theory and practice. But it differs from both applied ethics and professional ethics as they are usually understood. Practical ethics draws on other disciplines and other forms of knowledge besides philosophy. Understanding ethical decisions in such professions as business, government, law, and medicine requires knowledge of those professions. Still, beyond that, it needs the assistance of moral psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. Practical ethics in the professions should consist of more than a study of the codes of ethics, such as the legal profession's code and model rules, or the emulation of role models, as in clinical rounds in teaching hospitals. These may be an essential part of moral education in the professions, but if they are the principal part, they reinforce parochial and technical conceptions of professional life.

The second feature of practical ethics is its **institutional context**. Most people live most of their lives under the influence of institutions - schools, administrations, corporations, hospitals, and media organizations - working for them or coping with them in one way or another. Yet ethics, both as an academic discipline and as concrete practice, has tended to focus either on relations among individuals or on the structures of society as a whole. It has neglected the middle range of intermediate associations, of which institutions are the most durable and influential. Institutions are the site of many of our most difficult moral problems and the source of many of our most promising solutions. We need to pay attention, for example, not just to the ethics of doctor-patient relations or to the justice of health care policy but also to what might be called hospital ethics. On what basis should hospitals allocate scarce beds in the intensive care unit? What rights should professionals and other employees have to dissent from a hospital's policy on, for example, AIDS precautions or physician-assisted suicide? To address such questions adequately, practical ethics must go beyond the moral principles of individual ethics yet pay attention to the moral life that dwells among the structures of society.

The third characteristic of practical ethics that has become increasingly important is its **political nature**. Practical ethics is political because it cannot avoid the question of authority: who should decide? The distinction between the right decision and the right to make the decision is especially significant in practical ethics because people reasonably disagree about many ethical issues - for example, abortion or capital punishment. Practical ethics must provide principles for resolving or accommodating such disagreement. It is not simply a matter of choosing a particular procedure (majority rule, informed consent, shareholder proxies, and the like) to settle such disputes fairly, but finally. We have found it more illuminating to think of the problem as involving a process of deliberation - continuing interaction in which the way the disputants relate to each other is as important as the question of who has the right to decide in the end.



Practical ethics in the professions is also political in another, more familiar sense: it addresses the question of who should regulate the ethics of the professions. As many professionals themselves insist, professional ethics is too important to all of us to be left only to professionals. The pressing challenge for the future is to forge, in principle and practice, a union of the traditional idea of the autonomous profession (preserving its ethics of service) and the modern demand for accountability (acknowledging an ethics of responsibility). Beyond the professions, the challenge is to find the principles and practices that will enable us to acknowledge what we owe to one another in the public life we inevitably share. The ethics of public life is too important to be left only to ethicists.

Through the years, it has been recognized that many of the issues that professionals face go well beyond the practice of their profession. That is one reason to devote at least as much attention to more general ethical issues, such as the questions of war and peace, global justice, environmental responsibility, the problem of immigration, standards for political campaigns, and the role of religion in public life.

See <https://ethics.harvard.edu/what-practical-ethics> (Dennis F. Thompson, founding Director of the Harvard Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Ethics)

### **Prosocial Behaviors**

Behaviors intended to help other people. These actions are characterized by a concern for the rights, feelings, and welfare of other people. Behaviors that can be described as “prosocial” include feeling empathy and concern for others. Prosocial behavior includes a wide range of actions, such as helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating. The term originated during the 1970s and was introduced by social scientists as an antonym for antisocial behavior.

### **Rights Approach**

The Rights approach to ethics is another non-consequentialist approach which derives much of its current force from Kantian duty-based ethics, although it also has a history that dates back at least to the Stoics of Ancient Greece and Rome, and has another influential current that flows from work of the British empiricist philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). This approach stipulates that the best ethical action is that which protects the ethical rights of those who are affected by the action. It emphasizes the belief that all humans have a right to dignity. This is based on a formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative that says: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means to an end.” The list of ethical rights is debated; many now argue that animals and other non-humans such as robots also have rights.

### **Social Perspective-Taking**

The sociological theory that one of the most critical factors in facilitating social cognition in children is the growing ability to understand others’ feelings and perspectives, an ability that emerges as a result of general cognitive growth. Harvard Professor Robert Selman argues that a mature role-taking ability allows us to appreciate better how our actions will affect others. If we fail to develop the ability to role-take, we will be forced to erroneously judge that others are behaving solely due to external factors.

Source: Selman, R.L. (1971b). "The relation of role taking to the development of moral judgment in children." *Child Development*. 42 (1): 79–91.

## Technical Challenges

Challenges that can be solved by the knowledge of experts and:

1. They are easy to identify.
2. Often lend themselves to quick and concrete solutions
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert
4. People are generally receptive to technical solutions
5. Technical solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by decree

According to Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz, the single biggest failure in the exercise of leadership is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems and *apply technical solutions*. *Differentiating* between technical and adaptive challenges is crucial to managers, teachers, and parents. Appreciating this difference provides the possibility to clearly define the purpose and a more effective line of action.

## Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is one of the most common approaches to making ethical decisions, especially decisions with consequences that concern large groups of people, in part because it instructs us to weigh the different amounts of good and bad that will be produced by our actions. This conforms to our feeling that some good and some bad will necessarily be the result of our actions and that the best action will be that which provides the most good or does the least harm, or, to put it another way, produces the greatest balance of good over harm. Ethical, environmental action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good and does the least harm for all who are affected—government, corporations, the community, and the environment.

Utilitarianism (i.e., creating the most favorable balance of benefit over harm), which has heavily influenced economics, is the most famous branch of ethical thought focused on consequences. There are two core features of this branch of ethics:

1. Morally defensible purposes: People must ensure that the ends they set for themselves are morally defensible.
2. Creating favorable consequences: People need to undertake actions that create the most favorable consequences for realizing their purposes.

Critical questions on utility:

- Does this action produce the most good and do the least harm for all who are affected? What good and what harm will or may result?
- How will I measure a good outcome? Happiness? Financial or social impacts? Others? How will my action affect the resources everyone must share, such as the environment?
- Does this action best serve the community as a whole, not just some members? Will this option be equally to everyone's advantage? While the potential harm from this action may affect only a few people, is the harm so great that it would outweigh the good this action might bring to many others?

## Virtue Approach

One long-standing ethical principle argues that ethical actions should be consistent with ideal human virtues. Aristotle, for example, argued that ethics should be concerned with the whole

of a person's life, not with the individual discrete actions a person may perform in any given situation. A person of good character would have attained particular virtues. This approach is also prominent in non-Western contexts, especially in East Asia, where the tradition of the Chinese sage Confucius (551-479 BCE) emphasizes the importance of acting virtuously (in an appropriate manner) in a variety of situations. Because virtue ethics is concerned with the entirety of a person's life, so it takes education and training seriously. It emphasizes the importance of role models to our understanding of how to engage in ethical deliberation.

Critical questions on virtue:

- Does this action improve the conditions of economic and social life over time? Does it allow everyone to thrive and get a better posture in the future?
- Does this option lead me to act as the person I want to be? What character traits would I be exhibiting if I chose this action? Honesty or deceit? Compassion or selfishness? Prudence or irresponsibility?
- What habits of character would I be developing if I took this action? What would a person I respect say about this choice?