

# Virtue Ethics

**Principle:** *An action is morally correct if it is the action that would be taken by a virtuous person of practical wisdom to achieve the goal in question, in harmony with the golden mean.*

Virtue Ethics posits that moral behavior is achieved by patterning oneself after moral exemplars—virtuous persons who possess practical wisdom and can guide us towards cultivating our own virtuous capabilities. Although virtue ethics exists in many cultures, most of virtue ethics is credited to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC). Under Aristotle’s formulation, all things have a telos or purpose determined by their nature. Because the nature of humanity is to be rational, the telos for a human is *Eudaimonia*, something like ‘flourishing’ or cultivating and exercising one’s virtuous capabilities.

Virtues, according to Aristotle, require finding the golden mean between excess and deficiency. For example, the virtue of truthfulness lies between saying too much (exaggeration) and saying too little (understatement). The cultivation of virtues, like any other skill, requires practice in finding the mean. This, according to Aristotle, requires a virtuous community with moral exemplars to pattern oneself after.

**Golden Mean** – The Principle that states that the virtue in given sphere lies at the mean, between excess and deficiency. Example: in the sphere of fear and confidence, the virtue of courage lies between the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice. This is NOT just ‘good is between two bad things.’

**Naturalistic Ethics** – The theory that morality and ethical obligations are derived from the nature of the thing in question. For Aristotle, humans are by nature rational, thus what is ethical for us is what is rational.

**Telos** – Telos is purpose, the reason or meaning for which something exists. The telos of a knife is to cut, the telos of a plant is to grow and reproduce, the telos of an action is the goal it aims to accomplish.

**Eudaimonia** -- The telos of humans: to develop and flourish in all of their virtuous capabilities.

## Examples:

“...when trying to cultivate an ethically responsible policy on environmental justice, we can look to the State of Maine as a moral exemplar, and pattern our response after theirs...”

“...We can use to golden mean to help us understand the virtuous approach to government welfare programs. On the one hand, an insufficient amount of welfare allows the most vulnerable parts of our population fall through the cracks, on the other hand, an excess of welfare programs can destabilize a healthy economy, the key is to find the harmonious medium that can pull people out of poverty without jeopardizing the system as a whole...”

“...the proliferation of Video Games is an ethical concern because video games do not promote the flourishing of our virtuous capabilities...”

## Further Reading:

*The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle - <https://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/samples/cam032/99036947.pdf>

*Virtue Ethics*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

*Virtue Ethics*, Cambridge <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/think/article/virtue-ethics/87DFEB834EEBFCA9D4B295CDC743DDC9>

# Deontology

**Principle:** *Act only on that maxim (rule) which you could will be made a universal law, OR always treat others as rational thinking ends in of themselves, never purely as means OR an action is evaluated in terms of its good-will intention to do one's duty, and not in terms of its consequences.*

Deontology, established by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), grounds ethical behavior in doing one's duty. It does not evaluate actions on their consequences, but on their good-will—their intention to fulfill one's duty according to certain ethical imperatives or rules. Because humans are rational beings, these imperatives must not themselves be contradictory. We determine this using the test of universalizability. If a rule were to be applied universally, would it contradict itself? If it does, the rule fails the test and cannot be an ethical imperative. For example: if dishonesty were made universal, it wouldn't merely be bad, lying would stop having any meaning—dishonesty, as a rule, becomes a contradiction.

Using this test, Kant determines that the only rule that can be made universal without contradicting itself is the *Categorical Imperative*: 'act only on that maxim which you could will be made a universal law.' In practice this rule can also be formulated as a basic principle of respect for humans as rational creatures: 'always treat others as rational thinking ends in of themselves, and never purely as means.' Consequently, deontology demands that we consider all rational agents as having equal and inherent worth, deserving of dignity, and a right to autonomy as subjects.

**Universalizability** – When a rule or maxim can be made universal without contradicting itself.

**Good-Will** – Doing the right thing for the right reason. Doing a thing because it is right and only because it is right.

**Autonomy** – The right of a subject to be self-directed and act on their own informed rational judgments.

**Dignity** – The inherent and universal equal worth of rational beings as ends-in-of-themselves.

## Examples:

“...to address the objection about negative economic impact we reiterate that the potential consequences should not be factor in our good-will intention to respect the stakeholders in this case...”

“...an international policy of in interfering in the elections of other countries is not universalizable...”

“...while sourcing mineral resources from other countries might benefit the United States and protect our landscape from dangerous and destructive mining practices, it is a clear example of using other countries and other people as mere means towards our ends...”

## Further Reading:

*Kant's Moral Philosophy*, (SEP) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

# Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

**Principle:** *The action that is morally correct is the one that provides the greatest utility for the greatest number of people, while minimizing harm (act-based) OR the rule that is morally correct to implement is the rule that provides the greatest utility for the greatest number of people, while minimizing harm (rule-based).*

Consequentialism evaluates an action based on the consequence or effect it has on a larger social whole. While its earliest formulation can be found as far back as 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC (Mohism), the most influential form is classical utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Bentham identifies the pleasure/happiness as the only intrinsic good, and the primary motivation behind all human and non-human action. Thus, actions are evaluated by how well they promote pleasure/happiness—a kind of hedonism.

John Stuart Mill introduced the Greatest Happiness Principle: actions are correct if they produce the greatest amount of overall happiness in the world. Beyond amount, however, Mill also recognized a qualitative difference between higher and lower pleasures, prioritizing intellectual pleasures over hedonistic ones, and human pleasure over animals. In addition to this formulation (act-based utilitarianism) Mill recognized that in practice evaluating the consequences of every action is impractical. A rule-based approach would be needed for society to actually function. Rule-based utilitarianism thus takes the same principle and applies it to rules for action, rather than each individual action.

In all cases, consequentialism demands that actions be made impartially, without preferential treatment, and with equal consideration for all members of the moral community.

**Hedonism** – The belief that pleasure, or happiness, is the only thing of value.

**Higher & Lower Pleasures** – The idea that some pleasures (intellectual, cultural, human, etc.) are more important than others (physical, individual, animal, etc.)

**Greatest Happiness Principle** – Actions are correct if they produce the greatest amount of overall happiness in the world.

**Impartiality** – The equal treatment of all persons without prejudice or preferential treatment

## Examples:

“...the long-term benefit of counteracting climate change now out ways the cost of inconvenience and economic disruption...”

“...although it conflicts with the interests of some private companies, a strong set of regulations on the quality of food is necessary for the greater good...”

“...funding a college football team might be a good way to make a lot of people happy quickly, but applying Mill’s model of higher and lower pleasures we can recognize that the value of education should hold more weight than entertainment...”

## Further Reading:

*Consequentialism*, SEP - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/>

*Utilitarianism*, Notre Dame - <https://philife.nd.edu/j-s-mills-utilitarianism-promote-the-most-happiness/>

*Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill - <https://www.utilitarianism.com/jsmill-utilitarianism.pdf>

# Care Ethics

**Principle:** *An ethical action is one taken in the context of a concrete caring relationship, that preserved and maintains that relationship by increasing trust, promoting mutual benefit, and minimize future conflict OR our ethical obligation is to relate to others as 'one caring.'*

Ethics of care is a feminist ethic developed by Nell Noddings's (1929-2022) that has become the staple model for relational ethics. Relational ethics grounds ethical obligations in the dynamics of existing relationships as opposed to universal laws or general duties. What is right is determined by the nature of the relationship being considered. Because of this, ethical obligations vary dramatically from person to person, and only extend as far as relationships extend. This makes proximity a legitimate ethical factor; instead of remaining impartial, under relational ethics we have a greater obligation towards the people we are closest to.

Noddings builds her ethics of care from the observation that, despite the variety of relationships, all humans share the basic experience of having been cared for by another person (usually by a mother or parent). From this basic human experience comes the ethical obligation to extend that same standard of care to everyone we are now caring for. More specifically, Noddings takes the maternal relationship of care from parent to child as the paradigmatic case of an ethical relationship and argues that we should pattern all our relationships off of it. The basic standards of care include (a) concern for the others wellbeing, (b) being motivated by the good of the other, and (c) avoiding harm and minimizing conflict. When we apply this standard of care and act as 'one caring' we fulfill our ethical duty to care.

**Natural Care/Ethical Care** – Ethical standards of care are derived from our experience with naturally caring relationships. Paradigmatically, the relationship between parent and child.

**Proximity** – The principle that gives priority to people who are closest to us physically or relationally.

**Relational Ethics** – The theory that ethical obligations are generated by our relationships.

## Examples:

“...in addition to a commitment to accuracy, election officers have an obligation to foster trust and minimize the potential for future conflict by allowing citizens to participate in and oversee the process of tabulation...”

“...we can recognize the influence of the 24hr news cycle as one that is fundamentally uncaring because it promotes distrust and shifts attention away from local communities and real relationships...”

“...his relationship between to his spouse is more intimate than the relationship to his community. Under an ethics of care, we must prioritize our more intimate relationships because of their greater proximity...”

## Further Reading:

*Feminist Ethics*, (SEP) - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/>

*Care Ethics*, Santa Clara University - <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/care-ethics/care-ethics.html>

## Justice as Fairness

**Principle:** *Society must be structured to ensure that all persons receive equal consideration and equitable allocations of the burdens and benefits of society. Any inequality must go toward the benefit of the least advantaged.*

Justice and fairness are both hotly contested concepts. Generally speaking, both are invested in the formation of uniformly applied standards of treatment in society. The most famous theory of justice was formulated by John Rawls (1921-2002). Rawls argues that from an impartial perspective, behind a veil of ignorance, a rational risk-averse individual would choose to a system of justice that gave everyone a claim to the same set of basic liberties. Informed by this, Rawls' first principle of justice seeks to maximize the minimum position by providing each member of society with the most extensive set of liberties capable of being applied equally to all. Thus, Rawls suggests that what is just for society is that it be fair.

Rawls recognizes that some social and economic inequalities will inevitably persist. To combat this, his second principle states that all inequalities must (a) be available to all under conditions of fair and equal opportunity, and (b) must ultimately be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society. By giving preference in un-equal situations to the least-advantaged, Rawls seeks to counteract the unfair distributions that already exist. For example, if a city must decide between two infrastructure projects, Rawlsian justice would support choosing the one that services the least wealthy neighborhoods. In this way, Rawlsian justice is not entirely egalitarian in practice; it integrates elements of equity in order to address the inequality that already exists, or inevitably will exist, in society.

**Equality vs. Equity** – When equality and equity are contrasted, equality is usually suggesting insuring equitable treatment or opportunity, whereas equity is concerns itself more with rectifying existing inequalities to ensure equality of outcome. There is usually substantial overlap.

**Veil of Ignorance** – Rawls' hypothetical in which a person must design a society without knowing where in the society they will be put (from behind a veil of ignorance), the result is supposed to reflect an impartial perspective.

**Maximizing the Minimum** – A strategy that attempts to improve a system by considering the worst case and improving it as much as possible.

**Difference Principle** – Organizing privileges within a system so that they benefit the least advantaged.

### Examples:

“...zoning laws are structured to benefit wealthy and more established areas of a city at the expense of poorer marginalized communities. Not only is this unfair, it further harms the least advantaged groups making it impossible to justify under a standard of equality or equity...”

“...we can use Mill's veil of ignorance to understand why we must find a way to portion out water from the Colorado river such that it doesn't ignore the downstream effects. If you had to design the system without knowing where on the river you would end up, you would want to make sure everyone had enough to survive...”

“...failing to take into account the wealth of a defendant when posting bail risks unfairly affecting poorer defendants that don't have the ability to pay what wealthier defendants can easily afford...”

### Resources:

*Justice as Fairness*, Santa Clara University <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/justice-and-fairness/>

*John Rawls*, (SEP) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/>

*Justice as Fairness*, John Rawls -

[http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/Philosophers/Rawls/Justice%20As%20Fairness%20\\_FromTheBook.pdf](http://fs2.american.edu/dfagel/www/Philosophers/Rawls/Justice%20As%20Fairness%20_FromTheBook.pdf)

# Social Contract Theory

**Principle:** *All members of society are obligated to obey the law, and governments are justified by the practical necessity of protecting certain rights: life, liberty, health, and property.*

Contractualism, in its many forms, attempts to reconcile the conflict between the freedom of individuals through agreement in the form of contracts. Social Contract Theory, mostly attributed to Hobbes (1588-1679), Locke (1632-1704), and Rousseau (1712-1778), applies this approach to the founding principles of society. Building on Hobbes' work, Locke draws a distinction between civil society the state of nature. In the state of nature, without formal laws or governments, individuals exist with perfect freedom to act however they want. Natural laws of morality dictate that individuals should be treated as equal and be protected from harms against life, health, liberty, and property. But, without a formal system of governance this is a practical impossibility. In order to navigate between competing interests, rational individuals enter into a social contract wherein they willingly relinquish some of their freedoms in return for a common system of laws, adjudication, and enforcement. Thus, governments are justified by their practical function in securing each individual with the right to life, health, liberty, and property. Citizens of this new government are obligated to uphold their end of the social contract by obeying the law or submitting to punishment. From here, the question of what kinds of governance are justified by the social contract and which governments citizens are justified in revolting against, divides thinkers. A Hobbesian social contract demands total submission to the sovereign authority. Locke's ideas were used to justify revolutions and the construction of republics. Rousseau provides the notable addition of the 'general will' and requires governments and citizens to adhere to a common will, usually through a form of direct democracy.

**State of Nature** – The imagined state of life for individuals without laws or governments, seen as 'nasty brutish and short' by Hobbes, chaotic and incapable of satisfying our needs by Locke, and peaceful but incapable of supporting large populations by Rousseau.

**Social Contract** – The founding agreement of society wherein individuals surrender certain freedoms to establish law and a system of governance.

**Natural Law** – The basic principles of morality according to Locke: all are equal and should be free of harm against life, health, liberty, and property.

## Examples:

“...while everyone is certainly free to riot against a system they disagree with, unless their government has failed to protect their fundamental rights, they are obligated to maintain their end of the social contract by accepting the legal ramifications...”

“...considering that the fundamental purpose of the social contract involves protecting the citizens from harming each other, the government is completely justified in regulating any substance that could make people more violent or reckless...”

“...vigilante justice against doctors that perform abortions, regardless of the moral permissibility of their acts, violates the social contract which gives power to enforce justice exclusively to the state...”

## Resources:

*Social Contract*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - <https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/#SH2a>

*Contemporary approaches to Social Contract*, (SEP) -<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/contractarianism-contemporary/>



# Just War Theory/International Humanitarian Law

**Principle:** *A war is just if it is waged by a legitimate authority, for a just cause, with the right intentions AND/OR warring nations must respect the basic humanity of civilians, combatants, and prisoners, by adhering to International Humanitarian Law.*

Just war theory was formalized by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). It attempted to establish a minimum standard for morality in war, for the sake of preserving life and avoiding unnecessary war. Although it is increasingly difficult to apply to modern warfare, it has been regarded as a credible authority on the ethics of war through most major conflicts. In order to conduct a just war the following principles must be upheld:

- **Last Resort:** A just war can only be waged after all peaceful options are considered.
- **Legitimate Authority:** A war cannot be waged by individuals or groups that do not constitute the legitimate government.
- **Just Cause:** War always needs to be fought with the objective of correcting a wrong. Self-defense against an attack always constitutes a just war.
- **Probability of Success:** To avoid unnecessary death, there must be a rational possibility of success.
- **Right Intention:** The primary objective of a just war is to re-establish peace.
- **Proportionality:** The nations involved in the war must avoid disproportionate military action and only use the amount of force that is absolutely necessary.
- **Civilian Casualties:** Innocent citizens must never be the target of war. The deaths of civilians are only justified when they are an unavoidable casualty of a strategic attack.

Following the World Wars the Geneva Conventions (1949) were held to establish more detailed ethical parameters for conducting war. General principles of the convention include

- Formal neutrality and protections for all medical operations, hospitals, medical ships, humanitarian efforts, and safety zones.
- Obligations to protect and adequately care for wounded combatants, POW, civilians, children under 15, expecting mothers, and shipwrecked personnel.
- Abstaining from inhumane practices of torture, mutilation, discrimination, and taking hostages.
- Outlawing of indiscriminate weapons, weapons that cause unnecessary suffering, weapons of mass destruction, biological weapons, and chemical weapons.
- The targeting of certain infrastructure: nuclear power plants, dams/dikes, civilian water supply, or vital agriculture.

## Examples:

“...Texas cannot declare war on California because neither state is itself a country with legitimate authority to enact war...”

“...the use of anti-personal “butterfly” mines violates humanitarian law because undetonated mines indiscriminately kill civilians, usually children, long after the conflict is over...”

“...while targeting the three-gorges dam would be an effective way of disabling the Chinese economy, it is unethical because dams are protected by international law...”

## Resources:

*Just War Theory*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP) - <https://iep.utm.edu/justwar/>

*Ethics Explainer: Just War Theory*, The Ethics Center <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-just-war/>

*Summary of the Geneva Convention*, Red Cross -

[https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF\\_s/International\\_Services/International\\_Humanitarian\\_Law/](https://www.redcross.org/content/dam/redcross/atg/PDF_s/International_Services/International_Humanitarian_Law/)

## Rights-Based Ethics

**Principle:** *An action is morally permissible if it respects the rights of all affected persons.*

Rights based approaches to ethics are grounded in a principle of respect organized around a set of established rights. Rights generally fall into two categories: *negative rights* guarantee that individuals will not be subjected to certain treatment while *positive rights* guarantee that individuals are provided with certain resources or structures. For example, freedom of expression is a negative right protecting individuals from state censorship, while the right to vote is a positive right guaranteeing access to a fair and secure voting system. Under a rights-based approach all actors, but especially governments, must never infringe upon an individual's negative rights, and must provide and protect what is guaranteed by positive rights. In addition, some rights come with corresponding duties. For example, the right to vote comes with the duty to responsibly participate in democracy.

How rights are structured and what rights are included depends upon which system of rights you appeal to. The rights guaranteed by the United States and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) are the most common authorities that are appealed to:

### U.S. Rights

- Right to life, liberty, and property.
- Freedom of expression (press & speech)
- Freedom of religion.
- Freedom of assembly/association.
- Right to bear arms.
- Right to privacy.
- Right to due process.
- Freedom from cruel or unusual punishment.
- Right to a fair trial/jury of peers/lawyer.
- Freedom from discrimination.
- Right to vote.
- Right to remain silent.

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- Right to be regarded as equal regardless of race, sex, color, language, religion, politics, or location.
- Right to live a life of dignity and security.
- Freedom from slavery.
- Freedom from torture and inhumane treatment.
- Right to be recognized before the law.
- Right to seek just amends
- Freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.
- Right to a fair trial and presumed innocence.
- Right to privacy.
- Freedom of movement.
- Right to seek asylum.
- Right to nationality.
- Right to consensual marriage and family.
- Right to own property.
- Freedom of thought, religion, and conscience.
- Freedom of expression.
- Right to assembly and association.
- Right to take part in government.
- Right to equal pay capable of supporting a dignified existence.
- Right to leisure time, and to participate in culture, art, and science.
- Right to education.
- Right to international order.

### Resources:

U.S. Bill of Rights - <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights/what-does-it-say#:~:text=It%20spells%20out%20Americans'%20rights,the%20people%20or%20the%20States.>

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, U.N. - <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Summary of Human Right, Amnesty.org - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/>





# Animal Ethics...a few approaches

## Singer's Negative Utilitarianism

**Principle:** *An action is morally correct if it minimizes suffering of all sentient life.*

Peter Singer (1946 - ) extends the conceptual model of utilitarianism to include all animals. Tracing the logic of anti-racist and anti-sexist arguments, he concludes that failing to include non-human-animals in our ethical frameworks is a prejudice of the same kind, what he calls *speciesism*. Treating an animal differently purely because it is a different species is prejudicial and therefore unethical. This does not mean that we must ignore the differences between humans and other animals, it just requires us to recognize the real similarities that exist. Most importantly the ability to suffer is indistinguishable between most species. Thus, in the same way that we are ethically obligated to alleviate the suffering of humans, we must alleviate the suffering of other animals.

## Regan's Animal Rights

**Principle:** *An ethical action is one that respects animals as subjects-of-a-life and protects their ability to live out an existence appropriate to the nature of their species.*

Tom Regan (1938-2017) takes a rights-based approach to animal ethics. Rights stem from a respect for the intrinsic value of individuals. Historically, most rights have been granted with respect to the intrinsic value of individuals as *rational subjects*, which is why some rights are denied until adulthood. This makes perfect sense for some rights, like the right to vote, but there are other rights that are valid regardless of rationality—the right to life for example. These more basic rights stem, not from our rationality, but from our intrinsic value as the subjects of our own lives. These rights, Regan argues, are equally applicable to an infant (who is not yet capable of rationality) and a dog (who is probably more intelligent than the infant). Following this rationale, all animals that are *subjects-of-a-life* have a right to the life they naturally would lead. This doesn't bar us or other animals from killing and eating them, but it does demand a respectful full life for all animals in our care.

## Resources:

*All Animals are Equal*, Peter Singer - <https://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/phil1200,Spr07/singer.pdf>

*The Case for Animal Rights*, Tom Regan -

[https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=acwp\\_awap](https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=acwp_awap)

*The Moral Status of Animals*, (SEP) - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-animal/>

*Animal Rights Theory and Utilitarianism: Relative Normative Guidance*, Michigan State

<https://www.animallaw.info/article/animal-rights-theory-and-utilitarianism-relative-normative-guidance>

# Environmental Ethics...a few approaches

## The Land Ethic

**Principle:** *An action is morally correct if it preserves and cultivates the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.*

Aldo Leopold's (1887-1948) land ethic broadens the ethical horizon to include the land and everything in it. Using principles of ecology, he models the interrelations between all living organisms and the land they inhabit as a pyramid. In each environment, predator's (including human's) are at the top of the pyramid and require a large number of animals to support them, those animals in turn rely on an even larger set of animals, plants, and insects, for their support, and so on until finally the land itself supports the entire structure. Each layer needs the one beneath it for support, and the one above it to keep it from growing unmanageable. To sustain a stable existence the entire structure must form a harmonious biotic community within the natural limitations of the land's resources. As members of that biotic community, we are obligated to preserve and promote that harmonious community.

## Honorable Harvest (Indigenous Land Ethic)

**Principle:** *The ethical exchange of life for life requires that all things harmoniously exist in good relations and respectfully participate in the honorable harvest.*

Indigenous American attitudes towards ethics are incredibly holistic, including considerations for all animals, plants, rivers, and the body of the earth itself. All things have a kind of personhood which must be respected and exists in a deep relationship with all-life. Life sustains itself when this relationship is reciprocal, generous, mindful, and caring. While there is no central or authoritative theory beneath indigenous practice (theory is secondary), most traditions maintain a similar focus on the ethical exchange of life for life. Robin Wall Kimmerer (1953 - ) captures this in her guiding principles of an honorable harvest:

*Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.  
Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.  
Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.  
Never take the first. Never take the last.  
Take only what you need. Take only that which is given.  
Never take more than half. Leave some for others.  
Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.  
Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.  
Share.  
Give thanks for what you have been given.  
Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.  
Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.*

To practice the honorable harvest, one must sincerely engage in a relationship, and communication, with the life and lives that are being sacrificed. This requires a conscientious and careful existence within the natural world.

### Resources:

*Environmental Ethics*, (SEP) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/#EnvEthPol>  
*The Honorable Harvest*, Robin Wall Kimmerer - <http://www.doebay.net/appeal/Honorable%20Harvest.pdf>

# Revolutionary Ethics...a few approaches

## Marxist Ethics

**Principle:** *An ethical action is one that alters the material conditions of control over resources in favor of the working class OR an unethical action is one that maintains the status quo and allows for the continued exploitation of the working class.*

Materialism views society through the relationships of dominance and control over material resources. Using materialism, Karl Marx (1818-1883) traces out a fundamental distinction between two classes in society: the capitalist class (bourgeois) which owns and controls the property and material used for production, and the working class (proletariat) which has no option but to work for the capitalist class for wages. All events and actions can be evaluated by how they shift control between these two groups. For example, by uniting the workforce, unions are usually understood as tipping the scales in favor of the working class, while the formation of a monopoly solidifies control in the hands of the capitalist class. Because Marxism views wage-labor and the power of the capitalist class as fundamentally exploitative and coercive, an ethical action under Marxism is one that overthrows the power of the capitalist class in favor of the working class.

## Ethical Protest

**Principle:** *An ethical protest is one that creates the greatest disruption to an unethical system while minimizing the harm to participants and innocent bystanders.*

Theories of ethical protest begin with the premise that not all problems can be solved from within the systems and authority structures of society. This is especially true when the system itself is unethical. In such cases, acting against the system through disruption becomes an ethical obligation. Protest aims to motivate change through effective disruption. Theorists disagree about what kinds of disruption are necessary. Some advocate for strictly peaceful protest (Dr. King, 1929-1968) while others insist that violence and destruction are an important catalyst for change (Malcom X, 1925-1965). In any case, the aim is to disrupt unethical systems as much as possible without causing unnecessary harm to participants or innocent bystanders.

## De-Colonialism

**Principle:** *An ethical action is one that works against the ongoing erasure of a colonized people, culture, or place, by restoring them to their sovereign identity.*

Anti-colonial thought aims to recognize the harms against peoples, cultures, and places, caused by colonization from non-native invasive groups. Colonization brings about the erasure of native identities through violent and non-violent means and continues long after the initial colonization through ongoing cultural influence, immigration, and assimilation. De-colonialism attempts to address this ongoing erasure by removing colonial influence and restoring native cultures, practices, landscapes, and communities. De-colonialism critiques ethical theories that are based in multi-culturalism and cosmopolitanism because allow for further erasure by attempting to compromise with colonial influences. Under a de-colonial ethic, power and influence is returned to native identities while colonial influence is removed.

**Resources:**

*Karl Marx, (SEP)* - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>

*Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx & Engels* -

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>

*Protesting Ethically, Singer & Skladany* - <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ethical-tests-for-nonviolent-protest-tactics-by-peter-singer-and-martin-skladany-2024-09>

*Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King* - [https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/\\_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf](https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf)

*Decolonization is not a Metaphor, Tuck & Yang* -

<https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf>

## Dialogical Pluralism (T. M. Scanlon)

**Principle:** *We have an ethical obligation to engage in ethical discourse and provide reasons for our beliefs and actions that cannot reasonably be rejected. Usually in the form of appealing to generally held ethical principles.*

Ethical Pluralism maintains that, while ethical theories certainly aid in sorting out ethical dilemmas, no single ethical framework can satisfy the demands of ethics in every case. Thus, Ethical Pluralism draws from all ethical theories to construct positions that are morally defensible from multiple perspectives. Because Ethical Pluralism embraces a patchwork of ethical reasoning it is highly adaptable and often aligns more closely with the way individuals engage with ethics in their individual lives. However, this adaptability can also rob a position of a firm reliable basis for its conclusions. Successful pluralistic models must find a way to ground their positions in uncontested moral intuitions.

In the works of T. M. Scanlon's (1940- ) this takes the form of guiding ethical principles. Each principle draws from established ethical theories but is designed to appeal to common sense and moral intuition. Principles are tailored to each use case and derive their authority from how well they aid in the project of ethical discourse and mediating differences. Under this specific formulation, ethical obligations stem from our willingness to participate in ethical dialogue and require us to provide our interlocutors with reasons they cannot reasonably reject. These reasons are anchored to principles that our interlocutors cannot dismiss outright. Commonly used principles include:

- **Beneficence:** We should act in ways that ensure that the happiness of all persons is maximized, in a way that outweighs any bad that might result. (See Utilitarianism)
- **Non-Maleficence:** Whenever possible, we should act in such a way that we do not cause any further harm.
- **Fairness:** we should treat everyone equally and impartially according to universal standards, and any unequal treatment must be defended by appeal to some acceptable moral reason like the benefit of the least advantaged. (See Justice as Fairness)
- **Respect:** we must treat each person as an end in themselves. We must honor the autonomy of each person by refusing to interfere with their right of self-determination unless to protect others. (See Deontology)
- **Care:** We must act in ways that cultivate trust between all the stakeholders, encourage cooperation, and minimize the potential for further conflict, while giving priority to those closest to us. (See Care Ethics)

While Ethical Pluralism does not limit itself to any specific set of principles, these work well because most audiences find them to be generally applicable and intuitive. In practice, each principle being used should be defined before its application, and interlocutors should be capable of defending why the principle was chosen.

**Guiding Ethical Principle** – A generally applicable principle of action that appeals to our moral intuitions as a reasonable grounding for doing ethics in the given context.

**Reasonability Principle** – Our ethical obligation in ethical discourse to provide each other with reasons that cannot be reasonably rejected by our interlocutors.

### Resources:

Value Pluralism, (SEP) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-pluralism/>



### **NOTE: On The Use of Pluralism in Ethics Bowl**

Because ethics bowl requires teams to engage with each other on the use and application of various ethical theories, it is in some way intrinsically involved in ethical pluralism. Because of this, ethical pluralism can be used as a kind of default moral framework. Its application is very simple and consists of three steps.

- (1) Select a set of moral principles to use in your analysis of the case.
- (2) Carefully define each principle.
- (3) Explain how the principle can be applied to the case such that it supports your position.

Although ethical pluralism is well suited for ethics bowl and intuitive to use, its structure as a moral framework is often overlooked. In ethics bowl, teams are asked to present a clear moral framework. A general moral principle is not, by itself, a moral framework. Ethical pluralism allows for the use of general principles *on the basis that their use can be defended on some grounds*. Or, in Scanlon's terminology, if we can give reasons for their use. Because of this, it is important to keep in mind the structure of pluralism:

- (a) No ethical framework is sufficient for every case.
- (b) The approach used should be tailored to include what is most salient in the given context.
- (c) In the context of this case \_\_\_\_\_ (principles) are the most salient because \_\_\_\_\_ (reason for using principles).
- (d) The application of these principles supports the conclusion \_\_\_\_\_.

Ethical pluralism can be very convenient because it does not require your team to tie itself to any specific framework. However, being able to explain why your team justified in using the approach you did is a necessary part of how pluralism functions. Consequently, it can be a good idea to become familiar with the theories that underpin the ethical principles you put into practice.

**Judge:** *"You talked a lot about respect and fairness, but I'm not sure exactly how these idea's form an ethical framework. Can you explain?"*

**Team:** *"Yes, our team is using a pluralistic framework which allows us to appeal to multiple ideas and principles to better address the dimensions of our specific cases. Because this case involves interactions between medical professionals and patients, our team finds the principle of fairness to be particularly suited for dealing with the larger system organizational questions, while respect is necessary for addressing the concerns of autonomy for individual patients..."*

## Epistemic Justice (Standpoint Epistemology)

**Principle:** *An ethical analysis is one that gives voice to the people or groups that are best situated to know the dimensions of the issue, and amend epistemic injustice...*

Epistemology, or the study of knowledge, is concerned with the social systems that determine how and where we get our knowledge (news, research, education, politics, credibility...etc). Epistemic Justice is concerned with how inequality impacts these epistemic systems and vice versa. Present and historical discrimination can silence marginalized groups by discrediting their role in knowledge production and communication. This failure to include everyone in epistemic systems in turn informs decisions about society that misrepresent and harm those silenced and excluded groups. For example, the failure to include a demographic in medical research can lead to inaccuracies in diagnosis and treatment for that same group.

Standpoint epistemology attempts to fix this problem by structuring our systems to give voice to the groups and individuals proportionate to their position in society. This builds from the basic idea that some people are better situated (through embodied experience and education) to know certain things. Thus, a reliable system will turn to the people who are better situated to know the answer to a given question. On an interpersonal level this might be as simple as asking a mechanic questions about fixing cars because he is most likely to know the answer. But, on a larger societal scale, standpoint epistemology argues that any analysis, description, decision, or conclusion about a particular group of people must be informed by members of that group. This means that we are obligated to listen to the people who are actually involved in an issue and resist speaking about people or groups that we are not situated to understand. As a mild example: when talking about the effects of inflation on middle-class Americans, standpoint epistemology would support interviewing middle-class Americans, rather than asking Bill Gates what he thinks about the issue. Less mildly, standpoint theory can be used to insist that women, as opposed to men, make decisions about abortion, or to suggest that speculation about trans-experience from someone who is not trans is irresponsible, or that the question of 'does racism exist today?' is one that white-people simply cannot answer. Overall, epistemic justice remains focused on critically examining where we get our information and ensuring that marginalized groups aren't ignored, especially when that ignorance will further disadvantage them.

**Epistemic System** – Any social structure or system that deals with information or knowledge, especially in the transfer, production, or distribution of knowledge. News, education, politics, social media, organizational structures...etc.

**Situatedness** – The idea that a person's access to knowledge is determined by where they are situated in society. The closer someone is to an issue, or the more directly impacted they are, the more credible they should be treated. This usually means that marginalized groups, as the most affected, should be granted greater credibility.

**Marginalized Groups** – Any group that has been or currently is 'pushed to the margins' by discrimination.

### Resources:

*Feminist Epistemology*, (SEP) - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/>

*Standpoint Epistemology*, New Discourses - <https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-standpoint-epistemology/>

*History of Standpoint Epistemology*. Sandra Harding - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOAMc12Pqml>