

WHY ETHICS?

Ethics has come to have many meanings. In general terms, ethics concerns the frameworks and principles that define our ability to have a good life and to clearly conceptualize our rights and responsibilities. In many fields of ethics, these frameworks and principles are either considered in terms of outcome, as in consequential ethics, or in terms of rules, as in deontological ethics. We propose to go beyond the consequentialist and utilitarian points of view, using alternative ethical approaches that we believe fit better with the problems at hand. These include virtue ethics which tend to focus on an individual's process of attempting to live a good life, capabilities approaches that examine the ability to act, including to choose an alternative given the existing structural constraints and opportunities, and care ethics which not only examine responsibility and care but take into account the shifting obligations and responsibilities of individuals as they are positioned in a web of relations.



VIRTUE ETHICS

An individual's process of attempting to live a good life.

Virtue ethics offers an individualist approach that sits well with the ethos of technological development, focused as it is on augmenting and improving the self. The familiar rhetorical devices such as “technologies for good” or “don’t be evil” speak to the idea that the virtuous moral choices of technology developers and designers can lead to bringing about a better life for all.

From a virtue ethics point of view, such an outcome hinges on individuals actively cultivating particular virtues in themselves resulting in the kind of moral character that would lead to decisions with good outcomes. Despite this focus on the internal worlds of individuals, virtue ethics also emphasizes the importance of community. Virtue ethics gives most importance to the individual as an ethical agent in their decisions and practices and as a part of a community.



THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH

Choosing an alternative given the existing structural constraints and opportunities.

“Capability is thus a kind of freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations.” This means that paying attention to individual’s internal capabilities is insufficient and we must also consider the possibilities created by a combination of internal capabilities and the **structural conditions** defined by the particular social, economic and political environment within which the individual attempts to act. This recognition that personal principles **may need to be compromised** to cope with structural constraints point to the importance of understanding what these constraints are and what influence they might exert. Furthermore, technology developers are in a curious position of both having to make decisions within the structural constraints of their context and having to acknowledge that the **design decisions** they make will result in producing structural constraints and possibilities for their users. Thus for developers to **“do good”** it is important to not only evaluate how existing constraints affect design but also to consider how these constraints are translated into the design and how these might be mitigated to offer more or different possibilities to the users.

CARE ETHICS



Not only examine responsibility and care but take into account the shifting obligations and responsibilities of individuals as they are positioned in a web of relations.

In our work, we are interested in the tensions between how individuals must negotiate their, **at times conflicting** obligations and responsibilities to others, and how they are expected to behave virtuously or 'well' in relation to a ideal set of future potential states of being. How then must we consider what constitutes "**doing good**" given the **conflicting relational demands** from team members, management, other institutional arrangements, personal relationships, diverse community memberships as well as from the moral objects of hardware, data and code?

But the logic of care has no real use for guilt, because it merely calls for **acknowledging problems and trying again**. In this way, the logic of care offers a way around the paralyzing realizations of downright apocalyptic possibilities of IoT. Where might we seek solutions to these problems? Julie E. Cohen proposes the idea of "semantic discontinuity" as the opposite of seamlessness - a call for strategically under-designing technologies in order to allow spaces for experimentation and play. Such intentional building in of flexibility may be one way to offer possibilities for alternatives.





