

Factsheet on Ethics, Radicalization and Polarization



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Introduction

Ethics pertains to what is morally good or bad and right or wrong. It refers to values, virtues, and ideas that help us answer the question of how we should live our lives fully, and what we should strive for. It offers us the opportunity to reflect on what constitutes happiness and well-being, both in relation to individuals and communities.

Unlike monotheistic religions, ethics is not a uniform set of values and beliefs to which a person can adhere, but a heterogeneous phenomenon. When we talk about ethics, we cannot refer to a sacred text or a supreme authority, nor to a systematically ordered structure to which one can belong. We can acknowledge the emphasis on human reason as the main condition for human freedom and autonomy and as the guiding principle for one's actions.

Modern ethics has its origins in the philosophical tradition of classical Greece developing over time through various philosophical schools. The etymology of the word "ethics" is derived from the Greek word ethos (θοç), meaning "character, moral nature," which was rendered into Latin as "ethica." "It denotes a view of life that contains two elements: 1) an awareness of what is good for a person; 2) an awareness of the duties a person has to fulfill."

Ethics is the basis of our relationship with the world around us and with ourselves. It enables us to live together and provides us with ideals for developing our character so that we can flourish as human beings.



Figure 1: *The School of Athens* by Raphael, Vatican City.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/49/%22The_School_of_Athens%22_by_Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino.jpg

Basic Ethical Concepts

Good, Bad, and Values

The terms "good" and "bad" are often used when we evaluate things and situations or people and their character. Such evaluations are at the heart of ethics, since they determine what our lives should be about. When we say something is good or bad, we ascribe a value to it.

Right, Wrong, and Duty

When we think about the ethical status of actions, we use the terms right and wrong, such as when we say that what someone did was right or that a particular action was wrong. We use these terms to evaluate actions. Actions that are right and that we are obliged to perform are called duties. Having a particular duty means, in the most direct sense, that one is bound by a binding ethical requirement.

Virtues, Vices, and Ideals

Virtues are morally valuable qualities of our character, i.e., our person (e.g., fairness, honesty, compassion, etc.) The opposite of virtues are flaws or vices (e.g., envy, arrogance, greed, etc.). An ideal is a certain perfection or model of excellence that helps us think and act ethically.



Figure 2: Eleanor Roosevelt holding poster of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, New York. November 1949. (FDR Presidential Library & Museum)
Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/fdrlibrary/27758131387/>

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is a modern articulation of a set of ethical values that attempts to establish a secular reasoning in the perception of human life as a value in itself and is perhaps the most universally accepted framework of an ethical worldview.

Every person, without distinction of race, religion, colour, gender, language, political or other opinion, is endowed with dignity and deserves to live in peace and prosperity.

The Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

Dignity is a fundamental, inherent and inalienable value that all human beings possess by virtue of their humanity. It is often seen as the fundamental right of every human being. Dignity is thus associated with an inalienable status that belongs to all human beings, regardless of their characteristics and circumstances.

Emerging Issues

Being unrestricted by a strong (historical) structure, ethics as a worldview can quickly respond to various emerging challenges. One could say that there is no current issue that ethics neglects or pushes aside. Since there are many social groups with different interests and priorities, no matter what the issue, there will always be some groups that put forward or even try to impose their solutions. On the other hand, the diversity of non-confessional ethics lacks a unifying element when we try to identify and establish priorities. It would be very difficult to try to determine the most pressing emerging issues are through the prism of ethics.

As a society, we are still trying to find a solution to the fact that millions of people are starving, millions of people are subjected to modern slavery, millions of women and girls are forced into marriages and into sexual exploitation, millions of children are living in war zones around the world, not to mention the environmental challenges. One attempt to define the most pressing challenges we face on a global scale, and one that is perhaps most likely to be accepted by all, is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, set out by the United Nations in 2016.

If we take a closer look at all 17 SDGs, we can see that each goal aims to promote human prosperity and seeks to protect human life and our planet. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasise the need for a proactive approach at the global level in addressing emerging issues.

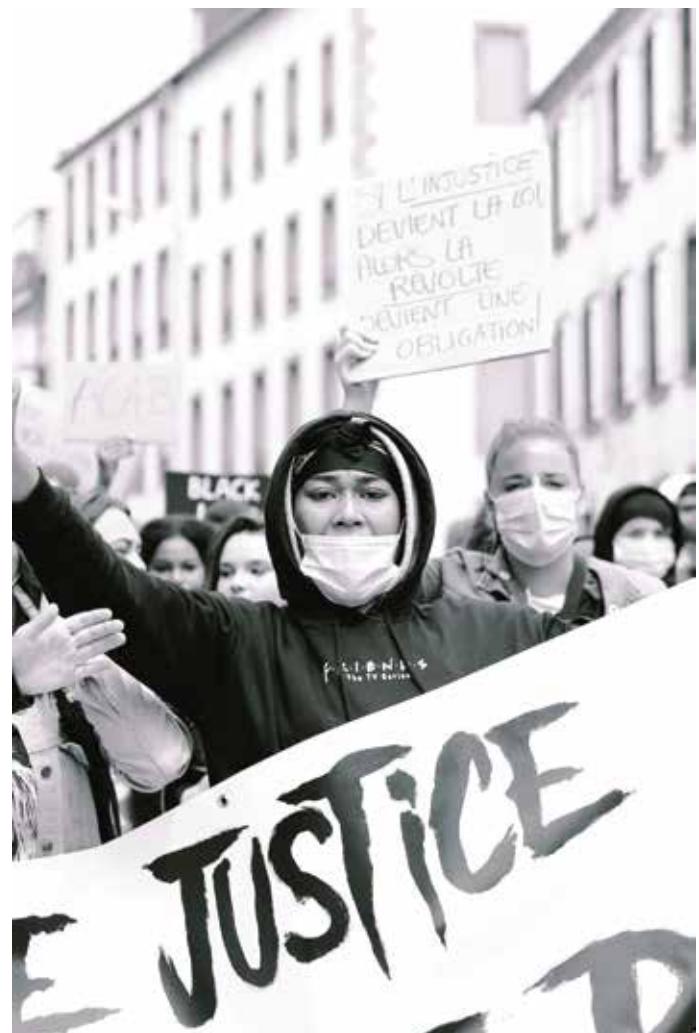


Figure 3: Justice. Photo by Guillaume Issaly on Unsplash, 2020.
Source: <https://unsplash.com/photos/B0stzXNCej8>

Polarisation and Radicalisation

Different social groups interpret the emerging challenges with conflicting underlining ideologies. In the absence of a unified and universal set of values, each philosophical rationale of ethics emphasizes its worldview, which can lead to increased polarization within communities and among citizens.

Different initiatives use different methods to achieve their own goals, and they may also differ in what values and rights should be respected. For example, when the activists of Pro Life meet the activists of Pro Choice, one could speak of competing human rights, since each of the two groups sees itself as perfectly ethical and tries to promote a human right - a basic "common" value.

The polarization of society, when political representatives fail to reach a compromise on shared values, can also lead to radicalization and violence. Left-wing activists who oppose fascist, racist, or right-wing governments in order to protect civil liberties may be prone to violence and looting, which in turn undermines the civil liberties they are trying to protect.

In a pluralistic society, we have different views of ethics; two cultures can have different values for the same reasons as two different solutions to the same problem. At the same time, two cultures can have the same value but based on different justifications. Polarization occurs when we agree on the values but disagree on the reasons.



Figure 4: George Floyd protest by the White House. Geoff Livingston, 2020.
Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/geoliv/49953042223/>

Condemnation of Violence

The work for peace and justice begins with each individual. We need to know how to resolve conflicts peacefully and that we are seeking just and lasting solutions. Conflict and violent disputes arise when different parties want the same thing, such as economic resources, money, power, recognition, or social status. We see others as obstacles to achieving our desires. When we deal with conflict nonviolently and constructively, we become more creative and fully human.

The UN Security Council has the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It takes the lead in determining whether there has been a breach of the peace or an act of aggression. It is not enough to confront violent and armed conflict only at the institutional level.

The Rwandan genocide remains a tragic reminder of human cruelty to this day. Despite the presence of UN peacekeepers in Rwanda (UNOMUR), some 500,00 to 800,00 Tutsis were killed in 100 days.

When we analyse violent events from an ethical perspective, we can see the futility of aggression, its destructive actions and consequences, and the need to address conflicts before they escalate into wars.

Cover: Hands in Peace Sign
Photo by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash, 2020

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