THE THOUGHTFUL THING TO DO

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Ethical Agency in Customer and User Interaction

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PREFACE

This book grew from a shared concern: how can ethics remain meaningful and practical in the everyday realities of professional life? As educators working in fields that engage with ethical issues both directly and indirectly, we have spent years engaging with questions that do not always come with clear answers, questions that emerge not only in theory, but in the texture of daily work: in meetings, design choices, communication strategies, and institutional routines.

The Thoughtful Thing to Do took shape in these settings. It draws from real-life experiences, classroom discussions, staffroom conversations, and inter-institutional collaboration. In all of these, we encountered a recurring tension: how to act responsibly within systems that often reward speed, performance, or efficiency more than reflection, integrity, or care.

This book does not aim to offer definitive answers. Instead, it offers tools for reflection. It invites readers to take a step back, examine the moral texture of their work, and consider how ethical awareness can inform their professional judgment. It encourages the use of ethical language and imagination – not to complicate decisions unnecessarily, but to deepen our understanding of what's at stake.

Writing this book together, across different institutions and contexts, was also a deliberate choice. Ethics, after all, is relational. It depends on dialogue, openness, and a willingness to cross boundaries. And in a European setting, it inevitably connects to broader public values and how these can inform even the smallest decisions in professional practice.

This book is for those who, through their work, help shape how people live, choose, and interact: designers, communicators, educators, policymakers, public servants, entrepreneurs. It is written for those who want to reflect more deeply on their role and who are looking for thoughtful ways to do so.

We hope it contributes to a wider conversation on what it means to act with care and integrity in today's professional world.

Tom Vandooren & Koen J. Van Damme

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate ethics is gaining momentum. A growing number of companies and organizations are recognizing that their social responsibility extends beyond generating profit or complying with legal requirements. Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made in the field of ethical business conduct. Issues such as sustainability, transparency, human rights, and fair labor practices have moved to the forefront. Topics like diversity in human resources policies or environmentally responsible choices in the supply chain are no longer optional add-ons, but have become central components of organizational strategy.

Yet ethical attention often focuses on internal processes or external relationships with shareholders, suppliers, and government bodies. The way organizations interact with their customers, users, or clients receives noticeably less scrutiny. That is striking, because it is precisely in this provider–user relationship that ethical boundaries often come into sharp focus.

Today, the ability to influence consumer behavior is greater than ever before. Drawing on insights from behavioral psychology, marketing, and data-driven technologies, organizations can now fine-tune their communication, products, and services to align with the preferences, desires, and even vulnerabilities of their target audiences. While these advancements create opportunities for improved service and personalization, they also open the door to unprecedented forms of influence, manipulation, and ethically questionable practices.

Of course, laws and regulations establish important boundaries. Privacy legislation, consumer protection rules, and bans on deceptive practices or the targeted sale of harmful products provide a necessary legal baseline. But as is often the case in ethics, the real challenge lies not in the divide between what is permitted and what is prohibited, but in the gray area between what is legally and technically possible and what is morally acceptable. It is precisely in that space that many everyday decisions are made.

This book aims to offer guidance for navigating that space, especially for employees, managers, and decision-makers involved directly or indirectly in customer interaction across commercial, non-profit, or public sectors. After all, ethics is not about gut feelings or lofty ideals, but about making deliberate

choices in complex situations. What can I – or we – do? What should I – or we – do? And what is better left undone?

This book is divided into two main parts. The first part lays the ethical foundation by introducing key frameworks, theories, and tools for moral reasoning. It begins with an introduction to ethics and philosophy, exploring distinctions between ethics and morality, intuition and reasoning, and values and norms.

Next, we examine the three most influential ethical theories – virtue ethics, consequentialism and deontological ethics – and complement them with perspectives from theories of justice and human capabilities. We then apply these frameworks to the organizational level by exploring how ethical conduct takes shape within companies, governments, and non-profits. This includes a distinction between compliance-based and integrity-based approaches, along with discussions on sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and professional ethics.

Finally, we conclude this part with a series of practical models for moral reasoning in organizational contexts. These tools are designed to support thoughtful and responsible decision-making in real-world professional situations.

The second part of this book brings ethics into practice. Here, the theories, concepts, and frameworks introduced earlier are applied to six pressing themes related to customer and user interaction. Each chapter begins with a familiar context in which organizations face decisions that are simultaneously commercial, communicative, and ethically charged. Throughout, one guiding question remains central: what is the right thing to do?

We start with an exploration of honesty in communication. In a world where persuasion plays a central role, the line between informing and misleading is not always clear. The chapter *Truthful Messaging* examines how organizations can take responsibility not only for what they say, but also for what they choose to leave unsaid.

Next, we turn to the ethics of risk communication. Organizations increasingly face the question of which risks they should disclose to customers or users, and how clearly and promptly this should be done. The chapter *Disclosure of Risks* explores the ethical tension between transparency and protection, between respecting user autonomy and fulfilling provider responsibility.

The third chapter explores the phenomenon of *nudging*; subtle cues designed to steer people toward "better" choices. But what happens when a gentle nudge becomes a covert push? This chapter examines the conditions under which nudging can be ethically justified, and when it risks crossing the line into paternalism or manipulation.

Building on that discussion, the fourth chapter focuses on *gamification* and the use of game elements such as rewards, badges, or rankings to boost engagement and motivation. What happens when these techniques are applied in domains governed by ethical norms? This chapter explores how gamification can blur the line between play and reality and the moral questions this raises.

The fifth chapter turns to the ethics of *stereotyping*, a practice deeply embedded in marketing, communication, and visual design. While stereotypes can make messages more effective and instantly recognizable, they also risk reinforcing prejudice, exclusion, or stigma. This chapter invites professionals to engage more consciously with representation and asks where ethical boundaries should be drawn.

Finally, the sixth chapter addresses the treatment of *vulnerable groups*. When consumers or users are in a position of dependency or limitation – due to age, cognitive ability, poverty, or crisis – the moral responsibility of the provider becomes more pronounced. This chapter explores the fine line between acknowledging vulnerability and exploiting it, and calls for an ethics rooted not in labels, but in care, respect, and professional judgment.

We hope this book will not only inform, but also encourage and inspire reflection, dialogue, and deliberate decision-making. Ethical action is rarely clear-cut. It requires careful consideration, and the courage to question assumptions and act with integrity. Whether you work in a commercial enterprise, public service, or social profit organization, every interaction with customers or users offers an opportunity to make a meaningful difference.

With this book, we aim to contribute to a professional practice where it is not only efficiency or effectiveness that matters, but also integrity, care, and moral courage. If it can serve as a helpful and inspiring guide along that path, then it will have fulfilled its purpose.

PART I

Foundations of Ethics: From Theory to (Organizational) Practice

1. ETHICS

1.1 Introduction to Ethics

Because ethics and moral philosophy fall within the domain of philosophy, it is important to begin by examining what philosophy is and how it originated in the Western world. This provides a foundation for understanding the concepts that will be explored throughout this book.

The word "philosophy" has Greek roots. Philo- (Greek: *philós* – friend) and sophia (Greek: *sophía* – wisdom) together mean "love of wisdom" or "the pursuit of wisdom." Philosophy has many meanings, depending on who defines the term, but all interpretations share a common pursuit: the search for wisdom and understanding.

Everyone has a need for a proper understanding of reality and for deeper knowledge. Philosophy can be seen as a practice: the critical examination of one's own beliefs and judgments. At the same time, philosophy can also be viewed as a product: for instance, an individual's personal philosophy of life or an organization's corporate philosophy.

Philosophy can further be seen as occupying a space between the exact sciences and theology (Russell, 2006). Like science, philosophy emphasizes human reason over authority; like theology, it speculates on matters about which no definitive knowledge yet exists. Knowledge belongs to science; dogma to theology. Philosophy lies somewhere in between.

That philosophy can take on different forms should come as no surprise. It is a time-bound concept that has changed significantly throughout history.

In classical antiquity, philosophy meant thinking without recourse to myths or gods. The first philosophers, often called natural philosophers, reflected on nature, the cosmos, and the order of the world. Philosophy was initially a unified science that was only later split – after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment – into separate disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics (Loobuyck, 2016).

Western philosophy has its roots in the Mediterranean region, particularly in Greece and Turkey, between 800 and 400 BCE. During this period, the polis, or city-state, developed. It was an environment that became a breeding

ground for creativity, culture, and innovation. At the same time, life in these cities meant confronting a diversity of views, interests, and social structures.

THE ACADEMIES AND THE THREE FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE

In classical antiquity, philosophy was not only practiced in closed scholarly circles but also played a role in public life. Citizens attended philosophical lectures much as they would attend a sports event, religious service, or theatrical performance, for both education and entertainment. The context of the city-state, and the fact that many aspects of society took place in public spaces (the agora), stimulated the need for reflection, critical thinking, and normative ordering. This created fertile ground for the development of ethics (Gude, 2010).

Philosophy thus provided a framework for reflecting on life, just as theater fostered empathy, and temples offered a space to cultivate gratitude and hope. In stadiums, thousands of people could experience what it meant to cooperate, win, and lose. Themes that also echoed in philosophical reflections.

Within this context, three major fields of knowledge developed within philosophy, taught at the academies to cultivate thinking as a craft:

1. **Physics**: the study of nature and the world around us, and the beginning of scientific thought.
2. **Logic**: the art of clear reasoning and communication, as well as understanding and expressing thought.
3. **Ethics**: reflection on human actions, morality, and customs, or how we can improve the world through conscious choices.

All Western philosophy developed thereafter can, broadly speaking, be categorized within one of these three domains. Together, they form the foundation on which our thinking about the world – through science, clear communication, and ethical action – still rests today.

1.1.1 Ethics and Morality

ETHICS

The word "ethics" is derived from the Greek *êthos*, which carries several meanings: dwelling place, habit, custom, mores, character, disposition, and attitude. For the purposes of this book, the most relevant meanings are habit, custom, mores, and attitude.

As previously noted, ethics is a distinct branch of philosophy. It is concerned with fundamental questions such as: which human actions are desirable or permissible, and which should be avoided or are unacceptable, and why?

Ethics investigates the origin, justification, and coherence of values, norms, and moral systems. As an academic discipline, ethics is historically connected to the figure of Socrates (ca. 470/469 BCE–399 BCE). Unlike the natural philosophers who focused on the cosmos and natural phenomena, Socrates concentrated on human behavior and the search for the good life. For him, wisdom was not about acquiring knowledge of the world, but about continuously examining one's own life. His most famous adage reads: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Through the Socratic method – engaging in street dialogues with citizens – he challenged people to articulate and critically examine their own values and norms.

His questions were simple but fundamental. Some examples include:

- What does justice mean to you?
- What does it mean to live well?
- How do you integrate reliability and honesty into your life?

By encouraging citizens to reflect independently on their moral convictions, Socrates offered them a path toward personal ethical autonomy. "Know thyself" is another maxim attributed to him. This stance was perceived as subversive and threatening by the ruling class, ultimately leading to his condemnation and death by drinking hemlock (a highly poisonous plant).

The Death of Socrates, oil on canvas, Jacques-Louis David, 1787

In summary, ethics is concerned with making choices consciously and striving to "act rightly." The central question it raises is: how can I know which choices and actions are truly good?

ETHICS AND MORALITY: TWO PERSPECTIVES

In everyday language, the terms "ethics" and "morality" are often used interchangeably. Traditionally, however, a distinction has been made between the two concepts. Morality refers to the personal values, norms, and convictions that guide individuals in what they consider right or wrong. It arises from upbringing, culture, and emotional development, often shaped early in life. Ethics, by contrast, is understood as the external framework of rules, codes, or standards that apply within a particular profession, community, or institution. It provides collective guidance on how to act responsibly in complex or sensitive situations.

This distinction, commonly used in professional and academic contexts, is not tied to a single philosopher, but has roots in classical Western thought. For example, Aristotle linked moral action to virtues developed within a community, while Kant emphasized universal ethical principles grounded in reason. In this tradition, morality is seen as inward and personal, and ethics as outward and structured.

In more recent thought, this line has been questioned. Sociologists like Émile Durkheim argued that morality is not merely personal but shaped by the norms and expectations of the group or society to which we belong. From this perspective, "being moral" is largely about conforming to social norms.

This resonates with the idea of a "moral majority," the belief that ethics is defined by the values held by most members of society. While Durkheim would see alignment with such a majority as the foundation of moral behavior, thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard warn that the moral majority can just as easily suppress individuality and conscience. For them, ethics may require standing apart from, or even against, majority norms when those norms lack genuine moral depth.

On the other hand, thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard emphasized the role of personal reflection and resistance to prevailing norms as the starting point of ethics. In their view, ethics is not about following rules but about choosing one's own path with integrity.

Both perspectives shed light on the complexity of ethical life. One emphasizes shared values and rules that ensure trust and cohesion; the other stresses the individual responsibility to reflect, choose, and sometimes challenge what is expected. In practice, ethics and morality interact constantly: our intuitive moral sense may conflict with external rules, and ethical reflection can help us navigate such tensions consciously.

DOMAINS OF ETHICAL INQUIRY

Within philosophy, ethics has developed into a distinct field of study comprising several areas of inquiry. Each domain addresses the question of right

action from a different perspective and with its own dimensions (Glorieux & Selis, 2016).

Descriptive ethics, also known as empirical ethics, examines the actual moral beliefs and behaviors found within societies. It maps out what people consider to be right or wrong, without making normative judgments. Fields such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural history make important contributions to this descriptive layer of ethical inquiry.

Normative ethics, also called prescriptive ethics, goes a step further and formulates standards for right action through systems of norms. Normative ethicists ask questions like: what ought a person to do? They develop moral theories and principles that guide human behavior and decision-making (see also the section "Values and Norms").

Applied ethics connects general ethical principles to specific domains. Examples include medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, journalistic ethics, and, as in this book, customer ethics. In this approach, ethical theories are used to analyze and evaluate practical situations.

Meta-ethics, finally, investigates the foundations of ethical judgments themselves. What do we mean when we call something "good"? Are values objective or culturally relative? Meta-ethics reflects on the nature, origins, and knowability of moral concepts.

Together, these domains demonstrate that ethics is not only about action but also about thinking, understanding, justifying, and refining the moral structures that guide our behavior.

VALUES AND NORMS

In every society, organization, or group, values and norms play a fundamental role in shaping behavior.

Values are shared beliefs about what is considered desirable and worth striving for. They provide a guiding compass for our thoughts and actions. Values express what we find important: honesty, respect, freedom, solidarity, justice, beauty, truth, and so on. Each of us has our own value framework, shaped by culture and upbringing. The specific interpretation of values can vary depending on the context and may also differ across generations.

Political systems such as liberalism and socialism emphasize, respectively, individual freedom or solidarity as core values. In economics, utility or efficiency often take center stage; in politics, power and representation; in art, beauty; in science, truth and objectivity. Organizations also develop their own value systems, often captured in a mission statement accompanied by a set of core values or a code of conduct. Professionals in customer-facing companies bring their own socio-cultural value frameworks with them, but they also encounter the organization's value system. An open attitude toward other values – especially in a super-diverse society – is essential for maintaining professional integrity.

Organizations are more than just a collection of individual norms and values. They formulate their own missions, codes of conduct, and policies that define what is considered appropriate behavior within their structures. In doing so, they actively influence the decisions of employees and expect loyalty to core values such as customer orientation, sustainability, or integrity.

Organizations then display something traditionally regarded as a distinctly human trait: agency, the capacity to act. Agency refers to the ability to make conscious choices, engage in moral reasoning, and accept responsibility. While this is typically attributed to individuals, organizations can exhibit a form of agency in a structured and coordinated manner. This organized capacity for moral decision-making allows us to hold organizations accountable for their actions. From this perspective, organizations can be seen not just as normative institutions but as moral actors in their own right.

The question of whether organizations bear moral and societal responsibility must therefore be answered with a clear "yes" (Fuerst & Luetge, 2023). For many pressing global issues – such as climate change – it is difficult to assign responsibility to individual persons. According to the control principle, moral responsibility can only be assigned to those who have a meaningful degree of control over outcomes. Yet if no one is deemed responsible, a moral void arises in which accountability disappears altogether (Mukerji & Luetge, 2014).

To prevent such a void, it is helpful to consider responsibility at the group level. According to the theory of group agency (List & Pettit, 2011), collectives – including organizations – can function as unified agents with their own goals, decision-making processes, and moral considerations.