

## 4. (Teaching) Ethics and Technical Communication

Derek G. Ross  
AUBURN UNIVERSITY

**Abstract:** Ethics helps us make supportable decisions and explain those decisions to others. In this chapter, I discuss the role the study of ethics and ethical models play in helping us get at the ways ethical decision-making can inform our thought processes, thereby offering support for decision-making and consideration of the ways that the decision-making process shapes actions and outcomes. I discuss models such as Aristotelian, Kantian, utilitarianism, feminist, and ethics of care approaches. I consider how we might approach teaching and discussion of ethics in the classroom and offer an overview of many different approaches to ethics, including environmental ethics, different feminist approaches, and social justice models. The chapter uses a central scenario as a way to look at how different models enable different ways of problem solving and decision-making, ultimately arguing that an understanding of ethics opens the possibility of finding new ways of thinking and knowing in the classroom, in the workplace, or in research.

**Keywords:** ethics, decision-making, ethics of care, feminist ethics, social justice

### Key Takeaways:

- Understanding how and why we make decisions allows us to more effectively communicate our decisions to others.
- Ethics-based decision-making is not a way to find a “right” answer but instead helps us to define “right” based on agent, action, recipient, and consequence.
- Ethics-based decision-making gives us a way to creatively solve problems and explore different possible outcomes and consequences.

As a field of study, technical and professional communication engages with ethics in deeply meaningful ways.<sup>1</sup> To teach ethics in the technical communication classroom, however, is no easy feat, nor is applying ethics in the workplace. We can teach or apply certain ethical moves, such as writing with inclusive language or considering accessibility in design, but getting at the complexity of ethics as it relates to the way we make decisions, and how those decisions might change as our ethical thinking changes, can be difficult.

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1. Pieces of this chapter have been published in *Intercom Magazine* (Ross, 2017b) and *Mother Pelican* (Ross, 2012).

In this chapter, my hope is to help teachers of technical and professional communication help their students (and help students help themselves) start to get at the complexity and value of ethical thought in an accessible manner. While other chapters and books on ethics in technical communication often move quickly into rhetorical and theoretical complexity, my goal here is, instead, to get at the ways ethical decision-making can inform our thought processes, and thereby offer some support for decision-making and consideration of the ways that the decision-making process shapes actions and outcomes, whether in the classroom, in the workplace, or in research.

We have a growing body of scholarship on ethics in technical and professional communication that can help us navigate the complexity of ethics-based decision-making. Scott P. Sanders' (1997) chapter, "Technical Communication and Ethics," in Katherine Staples and Cezar M. Ornatowski's *Foundations of Teaching Technical Communication*, the spiritual predecessor to this volume, for example, offers a general overview of types of ethics. Sanders argues for three models: practical, philosophical, and rhetorical. He associates practical ethics with rules-based business ethics; philosophical ethics with a general, theoretical, understanding-problems approach; and rhetorical ethics with a postmodern model mixing construction and presentation of ethos, understanding of audience, and use of ethics, in general, as a model for analysis-writ-large. Texts like Paul M. Dombrowski's (2000a) *Ethics in Technical Communication* and Mike Markel's (2001) *Ethics in Technical Communication* address various theories of ethics and cases to which we might apply ethical thought to come to consensus with others on what we might consider "right" action, and, at this point, most, if not all, of our technical communication textbooks address ethics in some way.

The role of the technical communicator is increasingly expanding, and as roles expand, the decisions we make, or even now have the ability to make, take on more ethical weight. From transmitters of information to articulators of information (Slack et al., 1993), from information designers (Carliner, 2001; Redish, 2000) and information architects to experience architects (Potts & Salvo, 2017; Salvo, 2014), technical and professional communication is diverse, and how we identify ourselves and our profession is ever-changing. We identify as writers, editors, authors, teachers, researchers, user-experience experts, and more, and the methods we use to conduct our work are similarly diverse. We rarely work alone, however, and, as many authors have pointed out, ours is a profession that calls for collaboration (see, for example, Frith, 2014). Because working with information involves so many variables, such as determining origins of information, intent of the communicated information, and the impact information has on society, on top of the job of negotiating others' roles and involvement, an understanding of ethical theories, principles, and practices is increasingly important. We have more productive communication when we can see another's point of view, and we can produce more ethical communication (working alone or in groups) when we can clearly articulate our reasoning

and desired outcomes. Ethics helps us make supportable decisions and explain those decisions to others.

## ■ The Basics of Ethical Decision-Making

Clear understanding of our actions allows us to communicate our reasoning to others. Following both Dombrowski's (2000a) and Markel's (2001) focus on decision-making—both authors begin their books by discussing how ethics ultimately shapes the way we make decisions—I argue that if we can teach nothing else about ethics in the technical communication classroom, we should at least show how a firm understanding of *why* we make decisions allows us to support our reasoning to both ourselves and others, which ultimately can make us more effective, insightful communicators. If we ourselves do not fully understand how we come to decisions, we are unlikely to be able to convince others to support our decisions or judgements in similar situations (Dombrowski, 2000a; Markel, 2001). This focus on setting standards (and defending them) means that when we make ethical decisions, we are making *normative decisions*.

A normative decision is one which makes an argument towards how things ought to be. Normative decisions guide our actions and seek agreement from others. So, given a simple situation, I might make an ethical judgement that I suspect most of us can agree with and say that “stealing is wrong.” Rephrased, I can make an action-guiding statement and say, “Do not steal.” Rephrased again, I can seek your agreement: “I think we can all agree that we should not steal.” I have now made an ethical (normative) decision—not stealing, and agreeing that we should all not steal, becomes an action-guiding, agreement-seeking ethical principle.

Ethical situations generally involve four components: a moral agent, an action or series of actions, a recipient, and consequences. The agent takes action, the recipient receives consequences. Ethics comes into play when we consider what actions are appropriate to take in given circumstances and what consequences are justifiable for recipients of actions—even, in many cases, who or what we will even consider as a recipient for action.

Different ethical approaches privilege different elements of this decision-making equation. Virtue ethics, for example, relate to the agent's (or action-taker's) moral character. Deontological ethics refer to ethics that consider an agent's duties or obligations in any given scenario, and consequentialist ethics focus on the consequences of action.

Who or what is considered a viable recipient-of-action in any ethical equation also matters. In anthropocentric ethics, only humans have moral standing. In non-anthropocentric ethics, non-humans can be a part of that agent-action-recipient-consequence chain. Non-anthropocentric ethics takes at least three basic forms: zoocentric ethics assigns moral standing to all animals; biocentric ethics assigns moral standing to all living things, including plants; and ecocentric ethics

assigns moral standing to ecosystems (communities of organisms in conjunction with non-living components like soil, air, and water). “Moral standing,” then, becomes an important part of the way we think about ethics. If we agree to consider something in any part of an ethical equation, we have granted it (a fellow human, a dog, a tree, the air we breathe) moral standing. Andrew Kernohan, author of *Environmental Ethics*, succinctly defines moral standing by arguing that “if we must consider [a thing] or its interests for its own sake when we are making an ethical judgement,” then we can consider that thing “morally considerable” (2012, p. 8).

Designating something as “morally considerable” is an important part of ethical decision-making because doing so means that we have agreed to build that morally-considerable thing into the fabric of our decision-making, agreed to make that morally-considerable thing an integral part of society (which can begin to envelop non-human components under various ethical models).

Morals are different from, though inextricably related to, ethics. In short, morals are concerned with how one situates oneself within society. Markel notes, for example, that “morality refers to a society’s set of beliefs and mores about appropriate conduct” (2001, p. 28). Put another way, we can all agree that there are set expectations surrounding us regarding the way we conduct ourselves in public, in the workplace, in particular social settings, and more. Those always-surrounding-us belief systems are morals. “A person,” Markel argues, “does not formulate his or her own morality; the morality of the society or culture already exists when that person is born, and that morality does not await the individual’s approval or disapproval” (2001, p. 28).

Morals are societal. Ethics, on the other hand, are individual, though they may be socially constructed and agreed upon, and may lead to social action—a society’s code of ethics, for example, such as that offered by the Society for Technical Communication (STC, 2020), offers guidelines for individual action and decision-making within the context of a larger organization. If society’s morals suggest a particular course of action, following that course of action does not generally take much conscious thought. I wake up, eat breakfast, then leave the house to go to work. In all the things I do in the morning, I do not stop off at the store and steal a loaf of bread and some cheese for lunch. Not stealing, being a societal agreement, is part of our society’s shared morality. If, however, I am starving, and my family is starving, and I have no immediate means of compensation and do not know where to turn for help, I might decide to steal that loaf of bread and some cheese. Such a choice falls under the purview of ethics, as there is now a situation (agent, action, recipient, and consequence) that conflicts with morality, but might, individually, be supportable. That we are all not likely to agree on the “right” choice of action without further argument and positional support works to highlight this scenario as one based in ethical decision-making. Any situation that involves agent, action, recipient, and consequence could potentially be an ethical situation. Stealing is an obvious example to work with when we start to

think about ethics, but this easily translates into situations more in keeping with what technical communicators might encounter on the job: issues of copyright infringement and plagiarism, for example, which, really, are still just about stealing (theft of intellectual property).

Once we have established the basics of an ethical scenario, we might wish to begin to add complexity. For example, we might consider the agent's (the action-taker's) duty in an ethical equation by looking at indirect and direct duties. An indirect duty to a nonhuman is a duty owed to a human, and a direct duty to a nonhuman is a duty directly owed to that nonhuman. Put simply, if I can pollute your lake (let us say my company is directly upstream from you) but do not because you do not want me to and I have told you I will not, I am following an indirect duty. I did not pollute the lake because of the way I feel about the lake but because of our human-human agreement. If I can pollute your lake but do not, even though you have told me I can (perhaps because I think the lake is better off unpolluted), I am following a direct duty. It does not matter what you (another human) say. If I believe that I have a direct duty to a nonhuman (a tree, a lake, the environment-writ-large), I have assigned it moral standing, written it into the complexity of our society. Knowing where duties lie—and being able to articulate that knowing to others—allows an agent to make supportable, duty-based decisions. If I believe a lake has moral standing and I owe it a direct duty, then I can tell someone that I refuse to engage in actions that pollute the lake, even though our company might profit. Duties, as a decision-making heuristic, of course, extend far beyond the environmental. If I believe that all intellectual property is valuable, then I might decide that I have a direct duty to that concept and then can always support my decision not to plagiarize another's writing, music, art, photography, etc., even if that intellectual property is owned by a company I do not value or agree with. Assessment of where duty lies allows me to make (and support) an ethics-based decision.

This leads us directly into issues of value: when I make decisions based on action and consequence, I might consider something's instrumental value (its ability to cause value either through trade, sale, negotiation, etc.) or its intrinsic value (the belief that whatever I am considering has value no matter what I do with it). All of this—and much more—is why any theoretical discussion of ethical principles and values can get complex quickly. These elements, our consideration of agent, action, recipient, and consequence; our consideration of to whom or what we assign moral standing; our consideration of duty, or perceived duty; and our consideration of value, and how we assign it in any given instance, offer us complex ways to address problems. When confronted with a difficult situation at work (a co-worker who takes credit for your work, for example) or when thinking of how to solve difficult issues in the world (pollution, immigration policy, gun control, etc.), even the practice of building these ethical equations can start to help us interrogate how and why we are reaching decisions and making conclusions. Our action-guiding, agreement-seeking, normative decisions become

potentially more supportable because we can work through the complexities of the decision-making process with some detail, and because we can clearly identify the components of any given argument.

## ■ An Introduction to Ethical Models

Ethics-based decision-making asks us to apply ethical models to ethical scenarios in order to establish a supportable course of action. These models are heuristics: ways to approach a problem that suggest courses of action without guaranteeing optimal results. They are not ways to find a universal “right” answer, as, arguably, such a thing does not exist. “Right” action is action designated as “right” given context. Instead, ethics-based decision-making in some ways *defines* “right” *through* audience, purpose, and context by working through the agent(s), action(s), recipient(s), and consequence(s) of a scenario.

I have used a variation of the following scenario for years as a way to get at the complexities of different ethical models, and, as simple as it may be, it has the benefit of letting us see how various components in any given situation work. Here is the situation: I am a university professor, and I am on my way to teach a class. I am running late and am forced to park across a busy street from the building where I meet with my students. There are 20 students in the class, all of whom have busy life/school schedules. By school policy, they are mandated to wait 15 minutes for me to show up, then they are free to leave. By social construction, they will most likely wait until one brave soul packs up and leaves, then everyone else will leave. I have roughly two minutes to get to class by the time I park my car. Given no obstacles, I can make it to my classroom within a minute or two of the official start time. So here is the situation: As I run up to the intersection to cross the street, I see an older woman with her arms full of bags also getting ready to head across. Do I help her across the road?

First, we need to establish how even the perceptual components of an ethics-based scenario work. Please understand that the scenario construction here is deliberate: perceived age, gender-identification, race, religion, political affiliation, ability, and more often play into the way we interact with each other, sometimes subconsciously. One of the strengths of ethics-based decision-making, particularly in a field dedicated to understanding how interlocutors and multiple publics interact, is considering how perception impacts action. So, here, my (the agent’s) identification as “male” and my perception of the recipient’s identification as “older” and “female” have a place in the way these models play out. When I teach this scenario in the classroom, I move from model to model, showing how each model creates different ethical tensions and, ultimately, ethics-based decisions. The models move from *Aristotelian* to *Kantian* to *utilitarian* to *feminist*, then into *ethics of care*, ultimately moving to then discuss other models and how they might shape the decision-making process as well. In each case, I remind students of the general scenario, then we apply that model’s decision-process to the scenario.

## ■ Aristotelian Ethics

Aristotelian ethics are generally considered as virtue-driven and rule-based and are derivative of Aristotle's (384–322 BC) predecessors Socrates' and Plato's models. In this system of thought, the decision-maker's perspective is concerned with such concepts as goodness, truth, justice, and rightness. In virtue-driven, rule-based decision-making, one determines the most virtuous of possibilities from decision-making options and then chooses that outcome, regardless of outcome or personal backlash. Virtue—according to Aristotle—is “concerned with emotions and actions, and it is only voluntary actions for which praise and blame are given” (1975, p. 117). Once virtue in a given situation has been established, a personal ethical rule is created. Should a similar decision-making choice arise in the future, the decision-maker can simply follow the previously created rule.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Chapter VII, for example, Aristotle lists 12 individual virtues of character: Courage, also called bravery; Temperance; Liberality, also called generosity; Magnificence; Greatness of Soul, also called magnanimity; a nameless virtue concerned with appropriate concern for honor, defined in excess as ambition and in deficit as unambitious, where the virtue lies in the middle; Gentleness, also called mildness; Truthfulness; Wittiness; Friendliness; Modesty, or proneness to shame; and Proper, or righteous, Indignation (Aristotle, 1975, pp. 97–105). If I view myself as being virtuous of character and associate “friendliness” with being of good character, I might decide that the appropriate, friendly thing to do in our road-crossing scenario is to offer help. When I stop and offer help, I set precedent (create a rule). In the future, I need not stop to weigh the various components of this type of perceived ethical situation. I have established a rule that helping someone across the street that I read as needing my help is the right thing to do. That is the important catch here, however, and one we will come back to: I have established a virtue-based rule determined against my own internal perceptions of who or what is deserving of help without taking any other steps.

## ■ Kantian Ethics

Kantian ethics (from Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804) is an extension of Aristotelian ethics we can mark as situational, rule-based, motive-driven decision-making. Kant's decision-making process is governed by his overarching categorical imperative: that, simply put, one is duty-driven to base actions in relation to universal rightness and goodwill. Dombrowski sums up Kant's imperative as follows: “Act in such a way that, if you had your way, the principle guiding your actions would become a universally binding law that everyone must act in accordance with (in relation to you), applying to everyone, everywhere, and always, without exception” (2000a, p. 49). Kant's process differs from the Aristotelian approach in that both situation and guiding principles play a significant role in the deci-



sion-making process. If a choice appears in an ethical question where, given the situation, one can maintain pure motives (not acting out of greed, for example), regardless of the apparent good of the action itself, then that should be the decision-maker's choice.

In our scenario, I might make a similar choice to that made under Aristotelian ethics. Since under Kantian ethics one is duty-driven to act in goodwill toward others, I could choose to help the woman cross the road—unless, of course, my motives are impure, or there is no real need. If my choice to help her cross the street is motivated by my knowledge that there is a group of students watching, I might decide that my actions could be entirely self-serving, therefore not universally-binding, thereby unethical. Or, simply, there might be no traffic. The situation might not warrant action. If there is traffic, and I determine my motives to be pure, however, off we go.

At this point you should be asking an important question: Namely, what if the recipient in our scenario, described here as an “older woman” does not want my help? How do elements like perceived gender identity, age, ability, and more figure into our decision-making process? What about the other part of the equation, namely, the students I mentioned I was on my way to teach? The next ethical models begin to get at these elements, leading us to question how culture and context fit into ethics-based decision-making.

## ■ Utilitarian Ethics

Utilitarianism, which can be traced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), is often described as seeking the greatest good for the greatest number and is often referred to as cost-benefit analysis. This approach seeks to quantitatively assess—to the extent such a thing is possible—“good” vs. “bad” decision outcomes in relation to the number of elements involved. One problem here, of course, is that many views consider only the number of humans involved, a view with particular ethical connotations when we attempt to use cost-benefit analysis to assess ethical choices in relation to human vs. environment situations. In completing a cost-benefit analysis, value must be assigned to inputs and outcomes. As Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez note, however, “it’s often difficult, if not impossible, to measure and compare the values of certain benefits and costs” (2014, para. 8). How much is time worth? What is the value of a life? As opposed to the Aristotelian and Kantian models, which are concerned with the moral validity of a choice itself (a deontological approach, from the Greek “obligation” or “duty”), utilitarianism is primarily concerned with outcomes, with the consequences of any given action.

As Andrew Kernohan (2012) explains, utilitarian ethics have four aspects: They *cause the maximum total utility*. That is, causation is concerned with consequence, and consequences are considered in terms of total consequences counted for all affected recipients with regards to the consequence’s utility, taken in ag-



gregate. That means that we do not consider value to one side as being of greater or lesser importance over value to another side, just total utility gained or lost as it applies to all considered. Note that this is not best possible outcomes for all recipients but instead a computation of total utility.

As with all the models presented here, there are more in-depth explanations that get into complex issues of definition. In this case, for example, given that utilitarianism's goal is maximum total utility, how we define "utility" is important. If we define "utility" as "pleasure," for example, we are working with "hedonistic utilitarianism" and are concerned with achieving maximum pleasure for the maximum number of people. If we define "utility" as a satisfaction of wants and desires, however, we are working with what is commonly referred to as "preference-satisfaction utilitarianism." Our goal becomes working out how best to achieve a model of life that leaves the least number of people unsatisfied. In general, however, the model addressed here, of "greatest good for the greatest number," works to show how the way we think about those affected by an ethical scenario shapes our decision-making.

In our street-crossing scenario as viewed through the lens of a general utilitarian ethic, I might stop to ask myself who potentially benefits from my actions and what the potential costs might be. If I help the older woman across the street, she benefits. My students, on the other hand, all 20 of them, might leave before I could then make it to class. They would be out of a class, and our class would get behind schedule. There are two ways to think about this. Under the first model, we might assume that students care about the money they spend, or the money spent on them, to attend class. They would have wasted their time travelling to class on this day, and they would not be getting their money's worth. At my institution, according to our 2019–2020 cost of attendance tables, resident undergraduates can expect to pay roughly \$10,000 for 12 hours of tuition and fees, plus books, transportation, supplies, and miscellaneous expenses. That comes out to roughly \$833.33 per class hour, or \$2,500.00 per class. In the fall, we are generally scheduled to meet 29 times, so each class costs approximately \$86.20 per student per meeting. At 20 students per class, I've wasted \$1,724.00 if I am late, and they leave—more, if my class includes non-resident students. Calculated this way, the greatest good for the greatest number lies in me ignoring the older woman who may need help crossing the road and running to class. If I do so, I maintain class momentum and protect student investments.

Under the second model, however, we might assume that a student's happiness will be increased by an unexpected day off and that this unexpected happiness-boost far outweighs the hypothetical \$86.20 being spent for each class session. Under this model, the woman benefits if I stop to help, *as do all 20 of my students*. This may be the greatest good for the greatest number. How I define "utility," then, becomes a critical factor in assessing the ethicality of my actions and choices.

## ■ Feminist Ethics

Feminist ethics offers an alternative to the (White) male-dominated discourse which comprises the bulk of the history of ethical interrogation. Constructed as an alternative approach to male-dominated academic and scientific discourse, third wave (and beyond) feminist ethics asks us to consider our decision-making in relation to repercussions and perceived social hierarchies. Under a feminist consideration of ethics, we should avoid making decisions based solely on traditional models of authority, the desire for control or subjugation, or gendered stereotypes. Additionally, decisions should be based in an awareness of how our actions ultimately ripple outward to others. While this model of ethics often seems quite complicated, Gesa Kirsch notes that

Ultimately, we have to learn to make political and ethical choices. These choices always entail risks—risks clarified by postmodern, postcolonial theories. We risk misrepresenting others (it is not a question of whether, but how much), we risk speaking for those who do not wish to be spoken for, and we risk speaking in voices that silence others. All this despite our best intentions. . . . But let me stress that such risks should not lead to intellectual paralysis. (1999, p. 63)

Under a feminist model of ethics, we strive to more carefully relate our decisions to our perceptions of virtues and outcomes, and an awareness of how our choices affect others. We should be very aware of how power is ascribed to us by society, by place, and by position, and, not conversely, but synergistically, how power is ascribed to those we consider of moral value. And, to add to that, equally aware of how and why moral value is assigned in the first place, and aware, if not hyper-aware, of gaps in the assignation of such value.

Under a feminist ethic, I should be aware of decision-making repercussions and social hierarchies, both real and perceived. Quite simply, considering culture and being Southern, the first question I should ask in our scenario might simply be “Excuse me, Ma’am, do you need help getting across the road?” If I ask *because I identify as male* and *because she is an older woman*, however, I’m already in a difficult situation. In fact, my typification of her as potentially needing help already creates a situation where I have removed power. I could start to remedy the situation, then, by rephrasing my question to “Excuse me, Ma’am, *would you like* help getting across the road?”

Under a feminist ethic, I need to think outside of stereotyped roles, particularly those which establish male/female power discrepancies. If I remove all outside elements, and my fellow human needs, and wants, my help, then off we go. Even though I have 20 students paying money for my time, a feminist ethic asks that I consider repercussions of my choices as well as my reasoning. For example, is there any decision-making calculus which warrants leaving a fellow human

in potential danger? A feminist perspective also asks me to move outside of my preconceptions. What if she is in no danger at all but would like help? What if I would like to help her? Kindness, putting another human's needs before my own, might supersede any other expectations of this scenario. I might also bring my students back into the equation as well: we have an important relationship here, one where obligations—professional, personal, and institutional—are at play (I emphasize obligation and constructed relationships here, as status-oriented decision-making is problematic in this case). The key point here, as it relates to the overarching lesson of thinking through decision-making strategies and the way we explain them to others, is that a feminist approach does not follow the rules-based, hierarchical, often patriarchal, models established by so many other models. Instead, decision-making should engage participants as complex humans, not artifacts. Regardless, any decision-making in a feminist ethic should be based on communication and, many would argue, care, which leads to the last model I consider here.

## ■ Ethic of Care

An ethic of care, which has also been referred to as “feminine,” or “feminist,” ethics, further complicates feminist reconsiderations of repercussion and hierarchy by asking decision-makers to show caring concern for all involved parties. An ethic of care is not rule-bound. Unlike Kant's Categorical Imperative, each action must be context-based, and contexts are immense and multi-faceted.

Though the ethics of care contains many voices, those most often associated with this approach are authors such as Carol Gilligan, whose *In a Different Voice* (1982) drew attention to differences between masculine and feminine approaches to problem solving, and Nel Noddings, who argues for a one-caring/cared-for relationship where one “reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other” (2003, p. 81). As ethicist Ruth Groenhout describes in her synopsis of care ethics, it is a model of ethics built from feminist ethics but concerned “not so much by innate or essential gender differences but by the different social location of women in the particular social and historical circumstances found in contemporary American life” (2003, p. 3). She notes that

One of the central strengths of care theory is its ability to identify gaps in traditional accounts of ethics that may be partially caused by the social location of the theorists who have traditionally done philosophy. When theorists who are largely male, upper-class, and single think about their own ethical experience, they do not note the extent to which they are located within caring relationships. (2003, p. 6)

Groenhout continues, noting that “care theory emphasizes the extent to which we are all dependent on communal and social structures for our existence

and our lives, and also emphasizes the extent to which we cannot leave this dependence of our analyses of ethical issues” (2003, p. 24). Under this ethical model, the decision-maker does not privilege the virtue of a decision over the outcome, or weigh costs and benefits, but strives to act in a way which shows caring concern to all involved parties—no one “wins,” no one “loses.” Instead, the decision-maker (“one-caring,” in this model) explores alternative pathways which potentially ameliorate majority/minority, win/loss structures.

Groenhout argues that an ethic of care can be likened to Martin Buber’s argument for relationships which value the other, what he terms as “I-thou” relationships, and notes that “human lives . . . are not the lives of disconnected, discrete rational egos, but rather the lives of fundamentally interconnected social beings” (2003, p. 17). Under an ethic of care, I make decisions based on context, circumstance, and the participants in any given ethical scenario by considering how the participants (agent[s] and recipient[s], now contextualized as one-caring and cared-for) relate, or could relate, to each other.

For our scenario, an ethic of care would build on the decision-making scenario established through consideration of feminist ethics. If everything about the situation suggests that the person I see about to cross the road truly needs help, but I truly can’t spare the time, then I look—quickly—for alternatives. Simply stopping another passerby to ask if they can help might be an option, as might offering to carry the other’s load, so that we both make it across the street, her safely, though perhaps without my full attention, myself perhaps more slowly than usual, but still while helping my fellow human. It asks, once again, that I really interrogate those labels identifying gender as a reason to make decisions and start making decisions based on deeper considerations of care for an(other).

## ■ Ethics in Research and Application

As I hope the previous sections show, how we make and justify decisions forms the backbone of ethics-based decision-making. In the justification of our decisions, we are setting and defending standards that we hope others will follow. In the workplace, this sort of ethics-informed decision-making process can lend credence to our actions, helping us to model desired behavior, argue for social justice, and explain how design choices and rhetorical structuring influence user behavior and ability. In the design and conduct of research, ethics-based thinking allows us to think through research questions to get at complex levels of participant/observer engagement (that often then influence the way we operate in the workplace). Using different ethical models to think about the different ways agent(s), action(s), recipient(s), and consequence(s) interact, or *might* interact, offers technical communication researchers powerful ways to discover and describe our world.

In *Plain Language and Ethical Action* (2015), for example, Russell Willerton develops and applies what he terms a BUROC (Bureaucratic, Unfamiliar, Rights-Oriented, and Critical) model to identify and analyze “situations in

which plain language supports ethical action” (p. xv). His model draws heavily from dialogic communication ethics, which considers Martin Buber’s depiction of the “narrow ridge,” a “place from which people in a dialogue genuinely listen to each other and remain open to the others’ persuasion” (p. 44), as a way to establish both research method and process. Similarly, Jared S. Colton and Steve Holmes (2018) re-envision, and, in many ways, re-invigorate, virtue ethics as a research tool in their book *Rhetoric, Technology, and the Virtues* by updating Aristotle’s framework of *hexeis*, “the cultivated bases for orienting oneself toward virtuous activity in varied circumstances” (p. 12) to consider the ways we engage with digital technologies. Willerton’s book looks at issues like civic design, federal rules of evidence, and the way complex communication organizations work together, and Colton and Holmes’ book considers such issues as digital sampling and remixing, and generosity in social media. Both are firmly based in ethics, not just as a way of thinking, but literally as a way of framing problems and researching solutions.

The field of technical and professional communication has embraced ethics as a systematic model of program development, both in the way we think about our research and in the ways we think about each other. Consider, for example, the conference proceeding titled “Social Justice in UX: Centering Marginalized Users” (2018). This proceeding serves as a valuable artifact for those of us interested in the way ethics-based thinking shapes research, as it places nine scholars in technical communication—Emma Rose, Avery Edenfield, Rebecca Walton, Laura Gonzales, Ann Shivers McNair, Tetyana Zhvotovska, Natasha N. Jones, Genevieve I. Garcia de Mueller, and Kristen Moore—in conversation about the way human-centered design may “intentionally or unintentionally” push “certain types of people” to the margins. It evolves *from* ethics-based decision-making because it argues for a way of thinking that we should all adopt. It seeks normative agreement on deeply important human-rights issues.

This same sort of agreement-seeking can be seen in much of our scholarship. Rebecca Walton and Sarah-Beth Hopton (2018) argue for consideration of non-Western rhetorics and the value of unity-seeking in “All Vietnamese Men are Brothers’: Rhetorical Strategies and Community Engagement Practices Used to Support Victims of Agent Orange”; Derek G. Ross, Brett Oppegaard, and Russell Willerton (2019) argue for a model of ethical thinking for technical and professional communicators which hybridizes Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, Martin Buber’s narrow ridge, and anticipatory technology ethics in “Principles of Place: Developing a Place-Based Ethic for Discussing, Debating, and Anticipating Technical Communication Concerns”; and Jared S. Colton, Steve Holmes, and Josephine Walwema (2017) reinvigorate care ethics by foregrounding Adriana Caverero’s concept of vulnerability in their examination of documents produced by the collective Anonymous in “From NoobGuides to #OpKKK: Ethics of Anonymous’ Tactical Technical Communication.”

It is not my intent here to produce a full literature review of work on ethics in technical and professional communication, but it is worth noting the breadth

of scholarship our field has produced on ethics, as these pieces have shaped not only our field, but any organization that hires our students. Our scholarship includes such pieces as Steven Katz's (1992) examination of technical documentation, expediency, and the Holocaust; Wanda Martin and Scott Sanders' (1994) consideration of ethics and public policy in the classroom; Nancy Allen's (1996) consideration of how electronic technologies allow us to mediate truth (which Jonathan Buehl extends in his own consideration of ethical rhetorics of scientific image-making in 2014); Sam Dragga's (1999) examination of Confucian ethics; Brenton Faber's (1999) critique of intuition in the role of ethical decision-making; and Paul Dombrowski's (2000b) rich synthesis of approaches to ethical thought. Sam Dragga and Dan Voss' (2001, 2003) work on ethics in visuals remain a staple in many of our classes, and Mark Ward's (2010) work on information design and the Holocaust extends many of Katz's ideas to account for "naturalized authority" (p. 60). My own work has included considerations of ethics and plain language (Ross, 2015); the role of ethics, culture, and artistry in scientific illustration (Ross, 2017a); and, with Marion Parks, mutual respect in an ethic of care (Ross & Parks, 2018), along with the piece I briefly described earlier on a hybrid place-based ethic for technical communicators (Ross et al., 2019).

The ideas discussed here can serve as jumping-off points for discussion in the classroom, and activities engaging the various ethical models result in often robust (and in some cases, impassioned) discussion. For example, in my own classrooms, both undergraduate and graduate, I often use a version of Lawrence Kohlberg's Heinz Dilemma (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1971) to set up discussion of how perception alters potential action. The exercise works as follows. I first introduce students to the Heinz Dilemma. In short, the dilemma is a scenario where a man's wife is dying, and the chemist of their small town has a potential cure. Unfortunately, however, the druggist is asking more for the potential cure than the man (Heinz) can afford, so Heinz breaks into the chemist's office and steals the drug. The question is then asked of the class, "Should Heinz have done this?" Initially, it's a fairly simple set-up, but I ask students to commit to an answer, then we tally the vote to determine how many students in the class think "yes, Heinz should steal the drug," and "no, Heinz should not." We then discuss the justifications for their choice. Our initial discussions focus on issues of legality (Is stealing ethical, if not legal, when a life is at stake?), fairness (Shouldn't the chemist just charge less for the drug?), and even love (Should family always come first in all things?). Even this initial discussion can go on for quite some time, and leads us into issues of capitalism, profit, well-being, community, and more. Then, however, the dilemma begins to change. As with Kohlberg's original version, which he used to assess moral development, we start to add variations and ask questions: Would it matter if Heinz had been cheating on his wife? If she had been cheating on him? If the chemist was independently wealthy? If Heinz is a member of the police force? If the chemist is a member of the clergy? If, if, if, and so on. Variations can include everything from social status, gender and sexual



identification, and religious issues to elements that get at capitalism vs. socialism and more. Each time, we take a new vote and tally responses, noting along the way how sometimes seemingly simple perceptual differences can lead to very different perceptions of “right” and “wrong.”

My use of the Heinz dilemma in class is not unique—I know many who use it, and a simple online search shows many variations on what I have described above. It is an effective introduction to ethical thinking, however, and I have found that by tailoring the questions to class intent (in some classes we focus more on policy and politics, in others more on personal morals, in others more on social norms and societal expectation), we can get into rich discussions of ethical issues on any given subject in often passionate, well-considered ways. Having students think about the scenario from multiple ethical viewpoints also adds a layer of complexity that facilitates rich, engaged discussion and (potentially) writing. For example, considering the scenario from a utilitarian vs. ethics of care perspective can yield interesting contrasts, and often, I have found, result in conversations that come back into play throughout the semester. In fact, I have even had students bring in materials later in the semester from other classes that they found to be relevant to our discussion of the Heinz dilemma: Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1975) “Those Who Walk Away From Omelas,” which gets at issues of happiness at another’s expense (see Olivia Burgess’ [2019] “Stand Where You Stand on Omelas” for one potential teaching ethics activity), has come up several times, for example, as have news stories dealing with theft-for-a-good-cause, or even discussions of personal experiences with ethical-conundrum components.

This idea of approaching a scenario from multiple ethical viewpoints is, perhaps, one of the most powerful teaching strategies I have encountered when teaching ethics. Our field is full of case studies we might ask our students to engage with—ethics textbooks in technical and professional communication and engineering often contain scenarios, and our periodic publications regularly feature ethics sections. *Intercom Magazine: The Magazine of the Society for Technical Communication*, for example, regularly runs an ethics column which offers insights, discussions, and cases on ethics. Past cases include issues of use of inferior materials (Ross, 2013), Facebook use in the workplace (Hockenhull et al., 2013), business startups (Everett, 2014), insurance claims (Gosser, 2015), expediency (O’Neil & Cooney, 2015), edutainment (Lambert, 2016), group work (Grisham, 2016), use of common knowledge (Gehrke, 2016), conflicts of interest (Bippes, 2017), implementation of care ethics in style guides (Karr, 2017), creative messaging (Generaux, 2018), and more. Including even just one of these cases in an extended writing and discussion session in class can be valuable. For example, in Jessie Lambert’s (2016) “That’s [Unethical?] Edutainment!” we are presented with the scenario of a scientific illustrator being asked to alter drawings for a textbook to make them more entertaining. Lambert introduces us to the general scenario, then discusses “edutainment” and its role and impact on culture, then leaves us with a series of questions: What should the illustrator do? How will their choices



alter their relationship with the client, or shape the way others interact with the work? What does authorship look like in technical communication? And so on.

In discussing these issues in class, as presented in the scenario, we already have ways to get into ethical issues related to the way communicators create, modify, and publish content. But we can then revisit this piece from any variety of angles: What does the illustrator's decision-making tree look like if we take on this case from a purely utilitarian point of view? How might a feminist ethics approach to the scenario alter the outcome? What (looking ahead to the end of this chapter) might the illustrator's decision-making process and potential outcomes look like in indigenous models, or through the lens of Black womanist ethics? After all, the content we create shapes others' perceptions of the world, so creating visuals and describing findings has important implications for whose work is seen, for how those around us are seen, even for who and what is allowed to be seen.

Last, of course, having students engage with the ethical principles of their organizations is an excellent way to get into conversations about what constitutes right action on the job, and of how being able to articulate our decision-making process to employers, clients, and co-workers empowers us. In 2017, for example, I gave a webinar offered by the Society for Technical Communication that I later wrote up for *Intercom* (Ross, 2017b), in which I unpacked our ethical principles of legality, honesty, confidentiality, quality, fairness, and professionalism (STC, 2020). Having students address the concepts as written, then work through what makes those concepts normative (remember that a normative decision is one that makes an argument towards how things ought to be) is powerful. Having students then interrogate what model the principles are assumed to operate under adds even greater understanding of how ethical decision-making works, and, finally, having students write their own ethical principles based on specific ethical models adds yet another layer.

Having students develop their own set of ethical principles early on in class, that they then agree to abide by for the remainder of the semester (and question when necessary as new information becomes available), is also quite powerful. When I teach classes specifically related to ethics, we do this on day one. We began an upper-level undergraduate class on ethics, communication, and society, for example, with a five-part, simple, yet powerful, entirely student-created set of guidelines:

1. No passive aggressive attacks.
2. No malice.
3. No attacks on character.
4. No degrading your classmate's point(s): All views are worth hearing.
5. Discussion and debate will remain civil and academic.

In a graduate-level class on ethics and technical communication, my students created an entirely different set of rules (though you can certainly see shared concerns):

1. Listen to comprehend, not respond.
2. Learn to interrupt respectfully.
3. Consider every option as valuable. Some opinions are based in moral outrage, some on education, but a fairly offered opinion should be fairly considered.
4. Be able to entertain a thought without necessarily agreeing to it.
5. Avoid ad hominem attacks, and do not make assumptions about each other based on our in-class discussions.
6. Class disagreements end at the doorway—take the ideas away, not the outrage.
7. If it's a personal story told to make a point (or ask a question), leave it in the classroom.

These ethical principles gave us a way to not only discuss ethics, but openly self-moderate often intense discussions. Because the class created them, not the teacher, they became a powerful unifying tool that we could use in multiple ways throughout the semester: to mediate discussion, of course, but also to discuss how ethical principles shape professional spaces, to look at how principles enable (or prohibit) types of discussions, to make arguments about the way organizational policies shape behavior, and more.

In conclusion, it is my hope that this chapter offers ways to reinvigorate your thought when it comes to ethics, perhaps moving away from the model of ethics as a way to somehow “do the right thing” (though, please, do the right thing), and instead starting to get at ethics as a deeply complex, yet immensely valuable, system of thought that can inform many different aspects of life. The models of ethics I present here are only a few of many powerful heuristics available. You may instead find yourself drawn to one or more of many different models: In *Ethical Theory* (2018), for example, Heimir Geirsson and Margaret R. Holmgren offer overviews of divine command theory, egoism, consequentialism, deontology, moral pluralism, virtue ethics, and feminist ethics, and, in each section, consider different models or approaches for each type. If you are interested in environmental approaches, you might consider Tormod V. Burkey's (2017) *Ethics for a Full World*. For an animal rights perspective, try Peter Singer's (2009) *Animal Liberation*. For an indigenous perspective, consider Daniel R. Wildcat's (2009) *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*.

Social justice is certainly a component of ethics, and Rebecca Walton, Kristen Moore, and Natasha N. Jones' (2019) *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn* gets us into ways of thinking about oppression and justice, even taking us partially into ethics in the Global South—an area which, at the time of this writing, would benefit greatly from increased attention dedicated specifically to looking at ethical models outside of the Western canon. Work on localization (Agboka, 2013), politics (Dorpenyo, 2019), environmental action (Walweema, 2020), and more all get at ethical issues of justice in the Global South, but

there are relatively few pieces which *specifically* target ethical models. We need more work here—to echo Gerald Savage and Godwin Y. Agboka (2016), “research studies and activities involving professional communication scholars in the Global South offer some of the most important and interesting, and the least investigated work, to be done in our field” (p. 6). We’ve come a long way in a few years, but there is so much more to be done.

Within the scope of feminist approaches, there are many models: Carol J. Adams’ (2002) *The Sexual Politics of Meat* challenges not only male-centric models of ethics, but the way we eat and the impact these choices have on society; Donna Haraway’s (2006) essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” de- (and re-) constructs our bodies and relationships; Adriana Cavarero’s (2009) *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* addresses images of violence and issues of vulnerability; and Katie G. Cannon’s (2006) *Black Womanist Ethics* offers a vastly different approach to feminism from the Black woman’s perspective that stands to change the way we conceptualize ourselves, our bodies, and our interactions by asking us to consider lived experience and states of suffering. First published in 1988, Cannon’s model has not been widely covered in technical communication, though I believe that may soon change. This might be another way for you to think about the ethical models you choose: What are people marking as “important” ethical models, and who is doing the marking? What models are getting ignored, and why? Our research and teaching of ethics often begin with what we commonly discuss as the traditional models—the Aristotelian, Kantian, etc., models I have discussed here. You might, however, completely change the way we think about our decision-making by starting not with the traditional canon, as, admittedly, I have done, but by starting with indigenous ethical models. Robert Begay’s (2001) “Doo Dilzin Da: Abuse of the Natural World,” for example, offers insight into the Navajo view of the natural world as sacred, and working within this ethic dramatically changes any environment-related, ethics-based decision-making when coming from the Western utilitarian model. Whatever you choose, by making ethics the starting point of research and workplace decision-making, rather than an end-of-the-day note, I argue that we open the possibility of finding new ways of thinking and knowing.

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