



[Buy book or audiobook](#)

## The Power of Ethics

How to Make Good Choices in a Complicated World

Susan Liataud • Simon & Schuster © 2021 • 304 pages

### Take-Aways

- “Ethics on the edge” describes the place where laws no longer guide decision-making.
- Use the ethical decision-making framework to confront life’s dilemmas.
- Airbnb got rid of binary thinking in dealing with complaints of race discrimination.
- Diffused power leads to unintended consequences, which technology accelerates.
- “Contagion” describes the normalization of new ideas, their mutation and how they spread.
- On the edge, three bulwarks that support ethics are crumbling.
- Indistinct borders between people and machines endanger human rights.
- Lies weaken the scaffolding that holds civilization together.

## Recommendation

Ethics advisor Susan Liataud, an ethics professor at Stanford, describes a world in which technology perilously amplifies unethical decision-making. She provides an ethical framework to help you ask the right questions when you're facing a dilemma, and describes six forces that drive ethics beyond the edge where the law has all the answers. Employing concrete examples from tech, medicine, politics, and more, Liataud grounds ethical dilemmas in real life. She teaches that in a fast-changing, uncertain world, well-meaning people need to understand ethics to prevent exploitation, ensure fairness and protect humanity's future.

## Summary

**“Ethics on the edge” describes the place where laws no longer guide decision-making.**

With technology driving massive global change at an unprecedented rate, people must make ethical decisions. Society has growing concerns not just about day-to-day ethical problems like conflicts on social media over politics, but about existential issues like climate change. In this heightened, super-charted environment, many people face grappling with ethics beyond the point where the law can guide their decision making. To understand why ethics so often fail and cause undue pain to people and the planet, consider the stories behind such failures. People need this knowledge to remedy and prevent similar lapses in the future.

*“On the edge, we may do our best with what we know, and make every effort to see reality, but good intentions are just not enough.”*

Ethics informs many of your choices, from deciding to post your opinion online, to sending in your DNA for genetic analysis, to electing political candidates. Ethics offers a deliberate, positive approach to problem-solving that provides a strong base for bouncing back when you make a mistake.

Six forces affect ethical decision-making on the edge:

1. **“Banishing the binary”** – A binary choice is a clear yes or no answer to an ethical question. However, on the edge, most decisions are not binary. Try replacing the question “Should I or shouldn't I?” with “When and under what circumstances should I?”
2. **Diffused power** – Detecting who has power, how much of it they have or how they might use can be difficult. Scattered power is hard to discern and hard to govern.
3. **Contagion** – Like an infectious disease, bad behaviors and ideas can spread rapidly. When too many people engage in unethical behavior, they normalize it.
4. **Failing bulwarks** – Three disintegrating foundational pillars support ethical behavior: transparency, informed consent and effective listening. On the edge, these tent poles are crumbling.
5. **Blurry borders** – What constitutes being human as boundaries blur in an age of machines?
6. **Lies** – Ethical decision-making is based on truth, foremost. When truth is tainted, the other five forces are also compromised.

## Use the ethical decision-making framework to confront life's dilemmas.

When you approach an ethical decision, use a framework consisting of:

- **Principles** – To be effective, your tenets should be clear, but not too prescriptive. The most common principles are honesty, integrity, kindness, compassion and loyalty.
- **Information** – With technology advancing so quickly, people face a gap between what they know and what they need to know to make ethical decisions. Ask questions, listen, observe and repeat as new information emerges.
- **Stakeholders** – Your decisions don't affect only you. You may not know the downstream effects, but try to identify the people or categories of people who may suffer or benefit from your choices.
- **Consequences** – Consider the short-, medium- and long-term effects of your decision, now and over time.

## Airbnb got rid of binary thinking in dealing with complaints of race discrimination.

Stories that Airbnb hosts were discriminating on the basis of race caught its managers off-guard. Unbeknownst to them, their business model put them on the ethical edge. While property owners do get to decide who can stay in their homes, discrimination isn't ethical. It's not that laws forbid this behavior – it's that regulation generally lags behind innovation. Airbnb's founders didn't anticipate this problem. Systems need time for people to live through an innovation, and assess its risks and opportunities.

*“When we oversimplify ethical dilemmas by immediately taking sides, we miss opportunity and risk.”*

Perhaps if the company's leaders had made its principles about discrimination clear, or had done more research into the hospitality industry – where racism is a familiar and recurring problem – they could have prevented people from abusing Airbnb's business model.

The founders failed to observe two elements of the decision-making framework: principles and information. They neglected their stakeholders by not understanding that the lack of knowledge and of useful principles has bad consequences. But they did listen effectively, and corrected their mistake. They changed their principles, offered training programs and required hosts to sign a Community Commitment form. They did away with the binary, embraced nuance, accepted responsibility and re-established trust.

## Diffused power leads to unintended consequences, which technology accelerates.

In today's super-charged technological world, power no longer rests primarily with heads of state or CEOs. It becomes scattered among people who lack preparation or training to deal with the ethical issues that accompany long-ranging, unpredictable problems. And power routinely falls into the wrong hands.

Many technologies that people take for granted, like streaming services, are invasive, but few question them. Newer technologies, such as gene-editing (CRISPR), are so new and so edgy that rules are still emerging for their use on the humane germline – eggs and sperm – though human subjects can participate in

experimental therapies. The question remains about what the long-term effects of editing the human genome could be.

*“Scattered power pushes the law further and further behind the reality in which our ethics are playing out.”*

Technological power is uniquely problematic because it moves so quickly, and understanding its effects requires so much expertise. It is diffuse, with no real center of control. For example, 3D printing is a versatile new technology, which makes it ripe for exploitation, such as 3D guns you can print at home. In the case of CRISPR, little time passed after its debut before an IVF doctor in China interfered in embryonic development, editing germlines without state authorities’ knowledge or consent. Scattered power breeds more scattered power, and the law must race to catch up. Technology has indistinct borders, and society lacks jurisdictional model showing how to enforce it to comply with any laws. Tech companies exploit this relative lawlessness for profit.

### **“Contagion” describes the normalization of new ideas, their mutation and how they spread.**

Diffused power amplifies another force in modern ethics: contagion. Behavior has become contagious through social media and other technology. Two kinds of forces drive contagion: classic (greed, fear, jealousy, ineffective regulation, ineffective listening) and edgy (driverless cars, social media, gene editing, robots). Edgy forces blur people’s vision, making it almost impossible to predict their risks and uses. Stopping unethical behavior would require eliminating these drivers, which isn’t practical or possible.

*“Behavior, both ethical and unethical, is more contagious than ever.”*

Sometimes, unethical behavior surrounds people, and they don’t recognize they are acting unethically. For example, many doctors prescribe opioids for the pain of routine procedures – particularly dentistry – despite the well-known opioid epidemic. Millions of people trusted their doctors to know what was best for them, and then became addicts. This isn’t all the doctors’ fault. Weak regulations and weak compliance contributed to the opioid epidemic’s contagion, mutation and spread.

Applying the ethics framework to this problem identifies the crucial gap: information. Doctors were not monitoring the opioid crisis and didn’t know they were contributing to it. Once they gained education, dentists stopped automatically prescribing opioids.

### **On the edge, three bulwarks that support ethics are crumbling.**

Society needs the three pillars that support ethical decision-making on the edge: transparency, informed consent and effective listening. These help people maintain a common understanding of their shared reality, which is becoming increasingly complex. And yet, these pillars are crumbling when society needs them most.

Transparency provides the crucial information people need when they’re making decisions – especially big ones, such as choices around public spending. Informed consent regulates the actions people take and the

consequences of those actions. Effective listening calls for paying attention to whether people mean what they say, and noticing what they don't say.

*“On the edge, we may do our best with what we know, and make every effort to see reality, but good intentions are just not enough.”*

Direct-to-consumer genetic tests from 23andMe are immensely popular, and people worldwide have purchased them to learn about their heritage and health. While their principles touted consumer control of genetic information, the testing company is a for-profit entity that bypasses the usual medical regulations. This compromises the pillars because the company doesn't have the same accountability as, say, a doctor or scientist. That complicates informed consent. People have gained unexpected information from their genetic profiles – such as paternity – that caused them anguish. Users have encountered other unintended consequences, such as health insurance and criminal liability (23andMe DNA data have helped solve cold cases), so what you do as a lark might disrupt your life.

### **Indistinct borders between people and machines endanger human rights.**

New technology blurs the boundary between human and machine. Today, algorithms, robots and AI agents make decisions and carry them out. Consider entities such as “Sophia,” a robot with a humanlike face and manner that encourages people to treat her like a person. This raises the ethical question: What is human? Sophia's creator believes that if humans and machines have respectful interactions, humans will be kinder to other humans. When Saudi Arabia granted Sophia citizenship, it brought the debate about robot rights into high relief in a country that curtails women's rights. Can Sophia vote? Does she pay taxes?

“  
*Perhaps we should be focusing on how robots further human rights instead of the reverse.*”

Indistinct boundaries influence and are affected by the other five forces. They split binary thinking. They scatter power, as machines become more autonomous. They amplify contagion and mutation, as they proliferate and as the law struggles to keep pace. What might robots will do to society, and could they render the three pillars useless? Now – before robots proliferate – is the time to establish their place in society. Humans should come first, so they need to take full responsibility for machines' activities. Most of all, robots need an off switch, in case of emergency.

### **Lies weaken the scaffolding that holds civilization together.**

“Alternatively factual ethics” and alternative facts are a contradiction in terms. When Donald Trump's presidential administration began with an obvious untruth – that his inauguration had drawn the biggest audience in history – it exposed an urgent problem: Truth had become an option. Ethics need truth to exist.

Compromised truth is the single biggest threat to humanity. Facts – the truth – support laws, regulations, policy, leadership and community. But by 2017, weak ethical decision-making among the world's most powerful people made compromised truth acceptable on a large scale. A post-truth world would eliminate trust on every level.

*“Fight for truth. Fight as if the ethical decision-making that tethers us to our humanity depends on it. Because it does.”*

In the post-truth world, people can alter their faces digitally to take advantage of employment or dating opportunities. They can petition their government to allow them to decide their own age, instead of adhering to the age on their birth certificates. Wishful thinking is not a substitution for incontrovertible fact. Time is not subjective. People are not entitled to their own truth.

To frame a post-truth world, start with principles. If a principle doesn't hold someone accountable, it isn't reliable. When you're seeking information, note when people replace facts with feelings or scorn science. Encourage debate with rivals. Imagine what your truth would look like if it spread. Consensus isn't truth, and truth is neither convenient nor easy. Truth is worth fighting for, because without it, ethics can't exist, and without ethics, people cease to be human.

## About the Author

Ethics advisor **Susan Liataud** is founder and managing director of Susan Liataud & Associates Limited. She teaches ethics at Stanford University, serves as Chair of Council at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and founded the nonprofit platform The Ethics Incubator.



Did you like this summary?  
[Buy book or audiobook  
http://getab.li/41892](http://getab.li/41892)