



# COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Promoting Truth, Responsibility, and  
Civil Discourse in a Polarized Age



HEATHER WALTERS

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Discourse in a Polarized Age

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# Contents

Preface	xiii	
Chapter 1	<b>Why Ethics? Why Now?</b>	1
Chapter 2	<b>The Evolution of Ethics</b>	25
Chapter 3	<b>The Ethics of Truth</b>	47
Chapter 4	<b>Theories of Ethical Responsibility</b>	71
Chapter 5	<b>Ethics and Accountability</b>	95
Chapter 6	<b>The Ethics of Civil Discourse</b>	119
Chapter 7	<b>Culturally Responsive Ethics</b>	141
Chapter 8	<b>Global Perspectives on Ethics</b>	167
Chapter 9	<b>Ethical Crisis Communication</b>	191
Chapter 10	<b>Engaging Communication Ethics</b>	215
Glossary	239	
References	251	
Index	269	

# Detailed Contents

*Preface* xiii

Chapter 1 **Why Ethics? Why Now? 1**

- Chapter Objectives 1
- What Are Ethics? 2
- The Importance of Ethics 4
- Ethics Versus Morals 8
- Wallace's Four Moralities 11
- Why Now? Polarization 13
- Executive Summary 19
- Discussion Questions 23
- Terms to Remember 23

Chapter 2 **The Evolution of Ethics 25**

- Chapter Objectives 25
- New Ethical Challenges 26
- Three Pedagogical Approaches 31
- The Golden Rule 33
- Unethical Behavior and Social Confrontation 36
- Moral Silence, Deafness, and Blindness 39
- Executive Summary 41
- Discussion Questions 44
- Terms to Remember 45

Chapter 3 **The Ethics of Truth 47**

- Chapter Objectives 47

Ethics and Disinformation	48
Ethics of Lying	54
Intentional Ambiguity and Vagueness	57
Propaganda	58
The Duty to Truthfulness	62
Executive Summary	64
Discussion Questions	67
Terms to Remember	68

Chapter 4 **Theories of Ethical Responsibility 71**

Chapter Objectives	71
What Is Ethical Responsibility?	72
Freedom Versus Responsibility	74
Privacy Interests	80
Profit, Poverty, and Income Inequality	82
Assessing Ethical Responsibility	87
Executive Summary	89
Discussion Questions	92
Terms to Remember	93

Chapter 5 **Ethics and Accountability 95**

Chapter Objectives	95
What Is Ethical Accountability?	96
What Mechanisms Exist to Ensure Accountability?	98
Ethical Leadership and Accountability	103
“Cancel Culture”	107
Does Accountability Foster Ethical Behavior?	109
Executive Summary	112
Discussion Questions	116
Terms to Remember	116

Chapter 6 **The Ethics of Civil Discourse 119**

Chapter Objectives	119
The Decline of Civil Discourse	120
Habermas, Discourse Ethics, and the Ideal Speech Situation	125
Buber’s Monologue-Dialogue Continuum	127
Deetz and Genuine Conversation	130

Alinsky, Social Agitation, and Protest 132  
Executive Summary 133  
Discussion Questions 138  
Terms to Remember 139

Chapter 7 **Culturally Responsive Ethics 141**

Chapter Objectives 141  
Narratives of Identity and Intimidation 142  
Biased/Discriminatory Language 146  
Cultural Appropriation 152  
Feminist Contributions 154  
Communicating Ethics Across Difference 157  
Executive Summary 160  
Discussion Questions 164  
Terms to Remember 164

Chapter 8 **Global Perspectives on Ethics 167**

Chapter Objectives 167  
Ethics in a Global Society 168  
Hofstede's Cultural Indicators 170  
Moral Exclusion 175  
Kale's Human Nature Ethic 179  
Cosmopolitanism 182  
Executive Summary 184  
Discussion Questions 188  
Terms to Remember 189

Chapter 9 **Ethical Crisis Communication 189**

Chapter Objectives 189  
What Is a Crisis? 192  
Situational Crisis Communication Theory 194  
Pornography of Disaster/Disaster Marketing 196  
Applying an Ethic of Care to Crisis 201  
Apologetic Ethics Framework 203  
Executive Summary 209  
Discussion Questions 212  
Terms to Remember 213

Chapter 10 **Engaging Communication Ethics 215**

Chapter Objectives 213  
Resolving Ethical Dilemmas 216  
Truth Versus Loyalty 217  
Individual Versus Community 220  
Short Term Versus Long Term 224  
Justice Versus Mercy 226  
Process of Ethical Reasoning 227  
Executive Summary 233  
Discussion Questions 234  
Terms to Remember 237

*Glossary* 239

*References* 251

*Index* 269

# Preface

I am excited to offer the new book, *Communication Ethics: Promotion Truth, Responsibility, and Civil Discourse in a Polarized Age*. My mission in authoring this book was to provide new, cutting-edge instruction in communication ethics that serves the needs of and provides the skills necessary to help students critically evaluate the new ethical dilemmas they face in connecting with others in an increasingly technological and divisive world. I saw the need for a book that directly addressed current, controversial topics and offered strategies for communicating that emphasized dialogue, empathy, and compassion. I wanted to provide a text that went beyond a focus on just media ethics and recognized the individual responsibilities that we all have collaborating with others daily and how we can be better at holding others accountable for the choices we make with our communication. This book is the next step in the teaching of communication ethics because it provides concise, readable chapters that include both a case study and ethical theories that students can use to evaluate and analyze the cases, allowing direct interaction on how to promote ethical communication.

In response to the decline of civil discourse and polarization in the United States, I developed this text to address the need for discussion of how a change in the way we communicate with one another is necessary to preserve ethical leadership in America. Furthermore, we live in a more diverse world than ever, and teaching students how to successfully interact with those with other standpoints, experiences, and backgrounds is essential for the success of our nation, and for them as people.

The text's primary theme is how students can communicate ethically in a post-truth and polarized society. A post-truth society is one in which objective facts have less influence in shaping opinions and beliefs than do appeals to emotion. This raises the stakes for ethical communicators as they need to hold themselves and others responsible for communication choices, and the language we use to express our thoughts and emotions is more charged than ever.

*Communication Ethics: Promoting Truth, Responsibility, and Civil Discourse in a Polarized Age* is intended to train students in ethical communication in a world where it has become difficult to navigate the strains of perceived difference. Disinformation, dishonesty, denials of responsibility, and a lack of accountability are only some of the factors that compromise our ability to engage in civil discourse. For students to understand how to better communicate given these challenges, it is necessary for them to understand the theoretical foundation for ethics and practice applying ethical communication strategies to situations they will increasingly face in their everyday lives.

This text is designed to equip readers with practical skills to deal with the difficult communication situations they face in a complex world. The case study approach will provide students the experience in constructing arguments using a combination of traditional ethical theory with an updated focus on how to apply those principles in a challenging and ever more polarized society.

## Overview of the Book

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Although I view traditional study of ethical theory as a strong foundation for this textbook, my approach aims to blend these concepts with current events, an information-age focus, and new approaches to understanding what should be considered “ethical” communication. Below are some highlights of this textbook.

First, this text covers traditional ethics concepts while keeping in mind the 21st-century needs of our students. In a polarized society, it is more important than ever to give students the tools to participate in ethical communication interactions, whether as a sender or a receiver of a message.

Second, this text focuses on why the study of communication ethics needs to be more directed toward how people communicate on an everyday basis and not just on media ethics. While it is important for the media to also communicate ethically, it often seems the study of how individuals should communicate with each other is lost in the amount of information that can be studied about formal or legal media responsibilities.

Third, the generation of students whom we are seeing in classrooms now is more socially and self-aware. This is an opportunity to have conversations about their role in communicating with others in positive ways. We should not shy away from engagement with controversial topics. Students need strategies to deal with the communication issues they will face as well as suggestions for how to respond to rising polarization in a way that both confronts issues and takes responsibility for improving society. This book will aim to provide students the guidance they need to communicate these needs in an ethical way.

Finally, the book includes relevant case studies to help students understand the theories presented. Too often, instructors of these courses need to use at least two textbooks to gain access to situations in which students of ethics can apply their knowledge of theory. This text offers an all-in-one approach, with current examples that instructors can use to boost discussion and application skills for students. The book also has specific chapter objectives, end-of-chapter discussion questions, and a glossary of key terms.

In this text, I provide 10 focused chapters that are accessible and relevant to the lives of today's students. This book does not attempt to cover the entire history of ethics or examine every iteration of an ethical concept, but I do believe I provide the most relevant information to current students of communication. This is specifically *not* a media ethics book; it is, however, a text that provides all students with the strategies they need to be informed, ethical leaders and engage in productive civil discourse.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of and the causes of polarization and explains to students why the study of ethics is important. The chapter features the practical benefits of ethical communication and discusses the importance of civil discourse. This includes examining the role of ethical communication in the proper function of a democratic society. Chapter 2 focuses on how the focus of ethical communication has evolved. This chapter emphasizes new deployments of technology and how these developments have changed how we communicate with others, which

has raised new ethical challenges previous scholars never imagined. Chapter 3 highlights the need to promote truth. The growth of disinformation has made it more difficult to navigate the world and communicate ethically. This chapter also discusses Kant’s duty to truthfulness and how propaganda functions to undermine democratic deliberation and equality. Chapter 4 explores ethical responsibility, highlighting the tensions of freedom and privacy in the struggle for societal good. Chapter 5 takes the next step to define accountability and examine whether accountability fosters ethical behavior and, if so, how it can.

The next few chapters expand to focus on how ethical communication is the core of civil discourse and enlightened engagement with other groups and cultures. Diversity exists and ethical communication requires the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Chapter 6 analyzes the decline of civil discourse and offers concepts such as discourse ethics, the ideal speech situation, and genuine conversation as mechanisms to reinvigorate civility. Chapter 7 addresses the very current controversies around critical race theory and “anti-woke” laws. The chapter advocates for better strategies to communicate across difference. Chapter 8 examine ethics in a global society—including the concept of cosmopolitanism and ethical intercultural communication. Chapter 9 explores ethical crisis communication. Effective crisis communication has been more important than ever as we move from the COVID-19 pandemic into a new normal. The chapter also addresses how disaster porn and doomscrolling can create anxiety and inhibit effective crisis response and communication. The final chapter (Chapter 10) is an attempt to demonstrate to students how to move forward and make better ethical decisions. Specifically, I believed it was important to introduce some of the most complicated ethical situations students face, those right-right dilemmas, and how better communication strategies are necessary for evaluating those issues and promoting better individual choices and policies for the future of all.

## Features of the Textbook

The book contains several useful pedagogical features to assist students in understanding the content of a course in communication ethics.

- ***Current and unique case studies and examples*** exist throughout the text to engage students. Many of the cases seek to specifically

understand and utilize students' involvement with technology to generate understanding.

- ***A conversational and engaging writing style*** encourages students to actually read and know the content in the text. Often books about ethics seem dry, ancient, or too abstract for students. This book will keep their attention and drive learning objectives.
- ***Chapter objectives*** at the beginning of chapters and *executive summaries* at the end of chapters guarantee that students can identify the most important takeaways from each chapter.
- ***Discussion questions*** are presented that instructors may use to drive engagement about important chapter concepts.
- ***Terms to remember*** are further explained at the end of every chapter to give students an easy tool to advance understanding as they read to ensure they keep up with core text ideas.
- ***The instructor's resources and active learning components*** of this text raise the bar in communication ethics instruction. PowerPoint presentations, flashcards, practice quizzes, and additional video examples will add to already relevant and timely material for the benefit of all. To learn more about these resources, please contact [adopt@cognella.com](mailto:adopt@cognella.com).

## Acknowledgments

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I am blessed and lucky to have you all in my life. You motivate and inspire me.

—Heather Walters

## CHAPTER 1

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# Why Ethics? Why Now?

### Chapter Objectives

*After studying this chapter, you should be able to:*

1. Define *ethics* and explain how communication ethics have become more important than ever to the future of society
2. Understand Wallace's four moralities and the standards they set for ethical communication
3. Identify practical benefits of communicating ethically and recognize how they could be significant to your everyday life
4. Explain the significance of polarization and its relationship to the future of our representative democracy and social welfare
5. Discuss recent events and how they have highlighted a need for a renewed focus on ethical communication

## What Are Ethics?

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In October 2020, Frances Haugen, a former data scientist at Facebook, testified before a Senate subcommittee, urging lawmakers to investigate and regulate the actions of the social media giant. Haugen was viewed as a credible **whistleblower** because she possessed thousands of pages of company documents and argued that “the company intentionally hides vital information from the public, from the U.S. government, and from governments around the world” (Allyn, 2021). Specifically, Haugen claimed that Facebook valued profit over societal benefit, and “the result has been more division, more harm, more lies, more threats, and more combat. In some cases, this dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people” (Allyn, 2021). Haugen provided examples of Facebook and Instagram (owned by the same parent company as Facebook) using algorithms to get children “addicted” to their products and generating a rise in eating disorders among teenagers. Haugen also made accusations that Facebook spent very little time combatting misinformation, especially in other countries, and fostered worldwide societal division. She concluded Facebook “never set out to prioritise polarising and decisive content; it just happened to be a side-effect of the choices they did make” (Waterson & Milmo, 2021). In response to growing criticism, the parent company of Facebook rebranded—changing its logo to an infinity sign and its name to Meta (Levine, 2021).



IMG 11

The Facebook scandal raises several important ethical concerns. Whether a company is transparent with the public, is accurate in disseminating information, and acts in the interest of corporate profit or societal welfare are all ethical issues this situation brought to light, as well as the power of whistleblowing. The controversy also presents opportunity for discussion of corporate response to scandal, engagement with and support of **civil discourse**, and accountability. Facebook’s behavior continues to have global implications and presents an interesting backdrop for a new engagement with the study of communication ethics.

**Ethics** has been defined in multiple ways. *Ethics* is the “general and systematic study of what ought to be the grounds and principles for right and wrong human behavior” (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 1). Ethics are usually described as the standards we use to determine whether our actions are consistent with our obligations, other’s rights, fairness, or benefit to society. The study of ethics should not be based solely on feelings. Many can act outside of what is “right” based on their feelings. Ethics are also not consistent with laws. Laws can violate ethics, a common example of this being when the law legitimized slavery. **Social consensus** cannot help us generate understanding of what is ethical. Since universal agreement on policy rarely exists, the study of ethics goes beyond individual stances on issues into analysis of what ought to be “right” human behavior (Velasquez et al., 2010).

Ethics is also about an individual’s study and development of their ethical standards. Each person needs to be aware of ethics and attempt to ground their own choices in ethical decision-making. This requires knowing when they are presented with an ethical dilemma, thinking about the implications of their actions, researching facts to guide behavior, and understanding that each decision a person makes can help set a positive—or negative—trajectory for all of society.

While ethics should help guide all human behavior, it is uniquely important to the study of communication. Martha Cooper has argued we are bound by a social contract and we should understand “when we make decisions through communication ... a sense of commitment, a sense that when people say things, they really mean what they say, or what we think they said” (Page Center, 2021). More specifically, communication ethics “focuses on communicative behavior in speaking, writing, and actions. With communication ethics issues, questions of justifications or rationales emerge because we give reasons, either for or against particular commu-

nication behaviors, utterances, and actions (Ballard et al., 2014). Ballard et al. (2014) further highlights communication ethics and “also considers guidelines for passing judgment on what has transpired in written and spoken acts” (p. 3).

The historical foundations of ethical communication are thousands of years old and can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, like many concepts in the field of communication. Quintilian once forwarded the notion all communicators should be expected to present the truth. Further, he claimed “communicators should be ‘people skilled in speaking’ [Quintiliana XII:4] ... and above all, be good people” (Page Center, 2021). Fast-forward to 1983, and Kenneth Anderson, president of the Speech Communication Association (now known as the National Communication Association [NCA]), is presenting his national address at the yearly convention, titled *A Code of Ethics for Speech Communication*. This led to the creation of a division of communication ethics for the NCA and, in 1999, the creation of a Credo for Ethical Communication, which highlighted “ethical communication is... fundamental to responsible thinking, decision-making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, and media” (Ballard et al., 2014). This text attempts to feature why a renewed prioritization of communication ethics is necessary. Countries all over the globe, including the United States, are struggling more than ever to achieve tolerance, empathy, and building of community. A focus on individual, group, and organizational communication ethics is essential. As Zhenyi Li, director of the School of Communication and Culture at Royal Roads University, pleads, “the need for truthful and transparent communication is more important than ever, especially considering the spread of misinformation ... [W]e have an obligation as communicators to challenge, clarify and expand our ethical capacities” (Royal Roads University, 2021).

## The Importance of Ethics

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Ethical communication is essential, as our behavior and communication have the potential to affect other people. Philosopher S. Jack Odell believed “ethical principles are necessary preconditions for the existence of a social community. Without ethical principles it would be impossible

for human beings to live in harmony and without fear, despair, hopelessness, anxiety, apprehension, and uncertainty” (Odell, 1983, p. 95).

The lack of ethical communication also reduces our ability to engage in true dialogue with others to solve global problems. A **dialogue** is an orientation toward communication and “involves a genuine concern for the welfare and fulfillment of the other and a conscious choice making in response to the demands of specified situations” (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 54). Our ability to deal with environmental crisis, as well as the economy, pandemics, racism, and other issues, is lessened by our increasing inability to engage in meaningful conversations with others about potential solutions. This is perhaps one of the best reasons to increase our awareness about how to ethically communicate with others—because it is in the best interest of society.

We are also not without more pragmatic justifications for ethical communication. In the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ report *How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most*, ethical judgment and reasoning were considered “very important” or “somewhat important” by employers (Flaherty, 2021). This survey was conducted with more than 500 executives and hiring managers of companies in many fields and of various sizes (Flaherty, 2021). Employers want and need employees who can both make and explain decisions based on good reasons. A focus on ethics improves the chance that that is how individuals will make decisions. Empirical evidence also shows that understanding more about ethics teaches us principled reasoning skills, raises sensitivity, and increases awareness of others’ interests and needs.

Furthermore, research predicts that ethics will be even more important to workplaces in the future. A poll conducted by LinkedIn and published by *Fortune* showed that at least 60% of respondents believed ethics will be more important, and 32% agree that they will be just as important as they are now. Jesse Soria, a group compliance manager for Vodafone, responded, “As we advance with technology and artificial intelligence, we should expect a plethora of new ways to measure ethics in our businesses and using the output to guide strategy and decisions should demonstrate that ethics is not only the right thing to do—it’s also a great way to preserve/increase revenue” (Weinstein, 2021).

Not only should corporations see ways to boost revenue through the reputational and other benefits of ethical communication, but the harms of failing to act ethically are substantial and visible in the corporate world as well. Billions of dollars have been paid by companies who have been fined for unethical communication, action, and business practices. Still, however, a National Business Ethics survey found that 41% of workers reported seeing ethical misconduct in the previous 12 months, and many still feel pressure to compromise ethics in their workplace (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2014).

At the same time, as some researchers believe that ethics will become even more important in the future, others believe that we are falling more into ethical crisis. We are living in extraordinary times. Economic, social, and political structures are in upheaval, and this fact has affected individual behavior as well. It is easy to find situations where ethics have been sacrificed for the sheer desire of getting ahead. Examples include the 2019 college entrance exam bribery scandal that involved Felicity Huffman and Lori Laughlin as well as corporate fraud, tax evasion, sports doping scandals, and more. David Callahan (2011), a senior fellow at Demos, believes at least one factor driving these actions is “growing economic inequality, which has meant larger rewards for winners than ever before ... which has increased the incentives to become a winner by whatever means necessary. The bigger the carrots, the more likely people will cheat to grasp them” (para. 8). Beyond the desire to get ahead, others think that the focus on ethics has declined as people have become more isolated. Joseph Chumen, leader of the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, stated, “If we are less ethical now than in the past ... could it be because of our relationship to other people? Is it because we’re more solitary? ... People are more alienated and isolated than they used to be” (Beckerman, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic certainly has only exacerbated feelings of isolation.

A study by the *Harvard Business Review* identified several factors related to communication that prevent organizations from reaching ethical goals. These include the creation of environments where people believe it is psychologically unsafe to speak up, excessive pressure to meet performance targets, conflicting goals that create a sense of unfairness, a failure to infuse ethics as a part of everyday practices, and a lack of leadership who sets a positive ethical example (Carucci, 2016). Many of these factors directly relate to communication or the environment estab-

lished by a leader that fosters the ability to communicate with employees. Employees should not feel unsafe about speaking up in response to a potential ethical crisis. Additionally, it is vital that organizations recognize the need to hold ethics as a priority in daily practice. The behavior and communication of leaders of organizations are what allow employees to feel confident in acting ethically, promoting ethics in communication, and speaking up if they become aware of an ethical concern. More citizens being aware and acknowledging their ethical obligations to others is a first step toward creating the types of organizations that avoid the effects of scandal.

A potentially more serious ethical crisis is the one facing our institutions. A Pew Research Center survey found declining levels of trust in a set of eight institutional structures, including Congress, local elected officials, leaders of technology companies, journalists, religious leaders, police officers, principals at public K–12 schools, and military leaders. The survey also explained that when citizens believe that institutions are mired in ethical crisis, they also feel that they underperform at their jobs (Gecewicz & Rainie, 2019). Public distrust in institutions is growing. A 2021 survey by the Advanced Studies in Culture Foundation and public opinion consultancy Heart+Mind Strategies, found fewer than one in three Americans placed any real trust in our government or media (Robinson & Giles, 2021). Further, 57% said we were failing to build confidence in our public institutions (Robinson & Giles, 2021).

The impact of growing institutional distrust in the United States is significant. A report by Rutgers' Miller Center for Community Protection and Resilience highlights the current "contagion of institutional distrust" is fostering antigovernment conspiracy, which now doubles with antivaccination and anti–public health extremism to perpetuate notable threats to life, economic growth, and overall public good (Morrone, 2021). We also saw evidence of institutional distrust present on January 6, 2021, as protestors at the U.S. Capitol believed in the need to "stop the steal." Violent protests and other toxic behavior threaten the future of voting rights and **deliberative democracy**, in addition to causing loss of life and property damage. In November 2021, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance added the United States to its list of backsliding democracies (Kolbert, 2021). Investigations and prosecutions related to the events of January 6 continue, but it seems obvious that there are visible and dangerous ramifications of the lack of institutional trust.

Still others believe we have just become lazy about our moral character. Aine Donovan, the executive director of the Ethics Institute at Dartmouth, thinks “the grim reality of today’s moral climate should not be accepted as unchangeable. Courage, conviction, and vigorous discourse will counter the trend toward apathy, relativism, and moral paralysis” (2011, para. 2). The hope that dialogue can help us rise above growing threats to society is the foundation of the study of **communication ethics**, both historically and as we currently consider how to navigate future challenges.

## Ethics Versus Morals

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Is there a difference between ethics and morality? Scholars appear to differ on the question. The terms are often used interchangeably or taken as synonymous, which makes some sense. Both attempt to highlight the value of making decisions based on good reasons and contribute to the discussion of which standards used to evaluate reasoning as right or wrong. Still, however, it seems useful to explain the differences between ethics and morality that scholars have discussed throughout history.

German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel reserved the word *ethics* to describe norms within a particular society, whereas **morals** were abstract norms governing what is right and wrong (Rhode & Luban, 1995). This distinction seems to be guided by the notion that different cultures can have different ethics, but still some morals might be used to govern behavior. As an example of a moral, Hegel offered Kant’s Categorical Imperative: Treat others as an end, not just a means.

Other scholars view ethics as being focused on the way we live our own lives and morals as being focused on the way we should live our lives together. This perspective highlights that different individuals can have different ideas about ethics, but ideally, society should be able to generate a set of moral principles by which they can be guided for the best interests of all.

The idea that either different individuals or different cultures can have different perspectives on ethics or morals is an example of relativism. Ethical or moral **relativism** arises from the view that values can differ significantly, especially from person to person. In order to be tolerant of these differing ideas, we theoretically must accept that what is ethical or moral can be a matter of opinion and perhaps we are not all guided by

the same abstract codes. It seems important to recognize, however, that just because we all might not have the same exact views on ethics, this does not mean that there are not some moral principles upon which we can all agree. Also, relativism, when taken to its extreme, seems unsustainable. If we were to really accept that each person can have a different opinion on what is “ethical” and that each must be tolerated, some practices that we could ideally eliminate from society could be justified. The idea of slavery, genocide, murder, and hate speech being fundamentally wrong should not be controversial. Society digresses if there isn’t some basis we can use to come together for agreement on these issues. As Rhode and Luban argued, if saying slavery is OK seems morally unsatisfying to you, “that should tip us off that something is wrong with relativism as a moral theory” (1995, p. 5).

What are some of the fundamental moral theories that help us determine whether an action is right or wrong? This question can be answered using three basic approaches: those that focus on an act’s consequences, those that focus on the action itself, and those that regard the actor’s character (Rhode & Luban, 1995).

Consequentialists evaluate actions on their consequences, or results. Those that believe in **consequentialism** often summarize this logic as agreeing on the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Consequentialism is a theory mostly credited to scholars such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. An example of an action that a consequentialist might support could include approving of stealing food because it could provide nourishment to dozens of hungry people who would otherwise have nothing and would help sustain their lives.

An alternative to consequentialism is *nonconsequentialism*, sometimes also referenced as **deontology**. Deontological theories focus on the intrinsic act itself and not the act’s consequences. Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which was mentioned earlier, is an example of a deontological theory. The Categorical Imperative holds that an action is valuable only if its means are ethical and the consequences, or whom the act might help, are irrelevant. In the example of stealing food for the hungry, those who believe in deontology would view the fundamental act of stealing the food as unethical—even if it helped sustain the lives of the hungry. Historically, the premise behind deontology was that an ethical duty was owed to those who were being stolen from, so even the potentially beneficial consequence of feeding the hungry was morally unacceptable.

Today, most deontological ideals are couched in rights discourse (Rhode & Luban, 1995). In other words, the right of the store owner to be paid for their food is more important than the distribution of the food to those who might be in need. Ronald Dworkin (1978) expressed this as *rights trump utility*. Individuals have expressed this sentiment, for example, in masking debates during the COVID-19 pandemic—any time one’s right or preference to not wear a mask is considered more important than an interest in public health.



IMG 1.2

A third category of moral theories involves **virtue ethics**. Scholars of virtue ethics, such as Aristotle, argued that neither an act nor its consequences made it ethical. Instead, the way to evaluate an action was by the character of its actor. Alasdair MacIntyre attempted to revive this category in 1981 in his book *After Virtue*. The reason MacIntyre believed this was important was it seemed increasingly likely that it was impossible to generate consensus between those who were consequentialist and those who were deontolo-

gists. Both seemed to talk past each other, using rights, duties, consequences, and other language to prevent true assessment of whether actions were right or wrong. It’s important to recall that reaching an agreement on at least some ethical norms seems in the best interest of most societies. MacIntyre (1981) reflected, “[W]here is no longer any shared concept of the community’s good ... there can be no very substantial concept of what it is that contributes more or less to the achievement of that good” (p. 217). Unfortunately, it seems like virtue ethics might suffer from the same inability to make definitive conclusions as that which exists in consequentialism or deontology (Rhode & Luban, 1995). A universal

assessment of an individual’s character is also not possible without an agreed-upon ethical norm. We can see this type of disagreement playing out all over the United States. Disputes about mask mandates, the teaching of critical race theory in schools, income inequality, and other issues are grounded in various opinions about duty, responsibility—and, fundamentally, ethics. This is just another reason why positive communication through these disputes is more vital than ever.

## Wallace’s Four Moralities

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Karl Wallace was a well-known rhetorical theorist and speech teacher in the mid-1900s. Wallace authored public-speaking texts but also wrote more broadly about the philosophical foundations of rhetoric and speech. His work is noteworthy as it grounded the art of communication in the work of “good reasons” philosophers and built a strong case for ethical communication (Yarbrough, 1978). Wallace wrote extensively about the habits of productive discourse, including accuracy, truth, transparency, and the resolution of misunderstanding. He believed that communication always says *something* and reveals a series of choices for both the producer and receiver (Wallace, 1955). Wallace wrote that those choices are governed by values and insisted that “it has taken modern communication theorists a long time to recognize that acts of communication entail morality” (1955, p. 4). In a later analysis of his work, Jane Blankenship (1974) recognized that Wallace “was firm in his belief [that] ‘to emphasize the ethics of communication is to provide a solid foundation for both the teaching and criticism of discourse’” (p. 186). Wallace also insisted “the result of that focus would be a distinct improvement in the level and tone of discourse in America” (1972, p. 4). This is another reason why this text argues for a renewed focus on ethics in communication—in the hopes that Wallace could be correct in that this focus could lead to a genuine improvement in the tone of discourse in the United States.

In 1955, Wallace proposed “An Ethical Basis for Communication,” in which he outlined his four moralities—what he viewed as ethical guidelines for the future of communication. He hoped that these standards would help foster the growth of the values that he found important. Wallace grounded his vision in the work of Aristotle, writing “rhetoric shares the controlling ideas of the master art, politics. Hence, communication

inevitably must stand for and must reflect the same ethical values as the political society of which it is a part” (1955, p. 5).

The first “morality” was the “habit of search” (Wallace, 1955, p. 6). When we are communicating, we should recognize that we are the sole source of information and argument. As such, we should provide truthful and trustworthy opinions and facts. In other words, we have an obligation to have researched our topic and to provide accurate information. Wallace offers a question that can help us determine whether we have met his standard: “Can I answer squarely, without evasion, any relevant question that a hearer might ask?” (1955, p. 6). If you can answer that question with a yes, then you have met the standard of knowledge necessary for communicating about that topic.

Wallace’s second guideline was the “habit of justice” (1955, p. 7). He believed that a communicator should respect fact and opinion fairly. This means a speaker should be accurate rather than distort ideas or suppress information. Wallace believed that a communicator needed to give the audience the opportunity to make fair judgments, which is, theoretically, the only way to guarantee true equality among ideas. Specifically, Wallace contended a communicator should “avoid the short cut [*sic*] methods of the propagandist” and “cannot indulge in the tricks of emotion” (1955, p. 7).

Third, a communicator should reveal the sources of their information and prefer public to private motivations. Wallace (1955) called for a speaker to be willing to avoid bias and test themselves on whether they have concealed information about either sources or motives that, if revealed, would damage their case.

Fourth, a communicator should favor the “habit of respect for dissent” (Wallace, 1955, p. 9). This was his call to respect diversity in opinions. It is important to be able to argue your own positions with integrity as well as respect the convictions of others. Wallace concluded, “[T]here are ethical guides in the very act of communicating, and it seems to me that the guides are the same for all communicators” (1955, p. 9).

When reading about these moralities today and considering the political conversation of the current time, we might wonder how many of today’s politicians are aware of Wallace’s guidelines. Obviously, these moralities originated well before the time of social media and the Internet. What role has the rise in technology use played in the level and tone of our political communication? Can we still reasonably apply Wallace’s

ideals beyond the realm of politics and to our everyday, interpersonal interactions? In some senses, it should be easier to search for accurate information about our topics and to be knowledgeable communicators who are transparent and aware of how to argue while being able to tolerate dissent. But do we? Can you honestly say that you regularly meet the standards set by these four moralities when you are communicating? The beginning of this section quoted Wallace's goal of changing the tone of communication. Is that goal attainable? What would need to happen to make it possible? What would society be like if we could make it happen? Can a revitalized focus on ethical communication that begins with education change the world for the better?

## Why Now? Polarization

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We live in a challenging time. This is especially true given the potential obstacles standing in the way of ethical communication. The United States has rarely been as polarized as it is today. While it is true that the United States' history has at times been turbulent, the partisan nature of our current divide is more pronounced than ever before, if for no reason other than the fact that the existence of social media and other forms of instant communication make it easy to highlight tensions. Research from the 2020 presidential elections helps demonstrate this division. In a Pew Research Center study conducted a month before the 2020 election, "roughly 8 in 10 registered voters in both camps said their differences with the other side were about core American values, and roughly 9 in 10—again in both camps—worried that a victory by the other would lead to 'lasting harm' to the United States" (Dimock & Wike, 2021, para. 3). The phrase *lasting harm* seems significant and helps demonstrate the extent of the divisions. Other surveys found "that more than half of all Republicans and nearly half of all Democrats believe their political opponents to be 'immoral'" (Kolbert, 2021, para. 10). The ways in which people have been drawn to negatively characterize their opposition and their values has changed people's beliefs regarding the ways it is acceptable to communicate, especially with those of another political party. Congressional representatives of both parties, for example, have reported an increase in toxic messages such as "I pray to God, if you've got any children, they

die in your face” or “I hope you die” (Pellish, 2021, para. 4). Some admit to receiving several of these types of messages per week (Pellish, 2021).

As previously discussed, the January 6, 2021, protests at the U.S. Capitol were motivated by former President Donald Trump’s advocacy and refusal to accept defeat in the 2020 election and resulted in damage to the United States as a beacon of democracy. Campaigns that included “stop the steal” and “the big lie,” as well as allegations of voter fraud and efforts to pass legislation restricting voting rights, are long-term partisan controversies that continue. The Brennan Center for Justice reports, “[B]etween January 1 and July 14, 2021, at least 18 states enacted 30 laws that restrict access to the vote. These laws make mail voting and early voting more difficult, impose harsher voter ID requirements, and make faulty voter purges more likely, among other things” (2021, para. 2). These are just the states that passed laws. A total of 400 similar bills were proposed in 49 states during the 2021 legislative session (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). Attacks on voting rights are only one manifestation of political polarization in the United States. Inquiries into the protests continue in Congress, arguably distracting focus from other timely issues that could be addressed.



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The Pew Research Center has also reported rising levels of tension on issues that include the economy, race relations, climate change, law enforcement, immigration, and gun safety. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed additional conflict and friction. More than 75% of the public

agree the United States is even more divided than it was before the outbreak. The pandemic escalated hostilities through discussions of mask policies, vaccine mandates, contact tracing, travel restrictions, and lockdowns, among other issues. In Congress, there have been more decisions made strictly along party lines; where once compromise and deliberative debate were features of this institution, now there is all-or-nothing dogmatism. Recent policy discussions have gone as far as to abandon hope that bipartisan policy could be passed, and the budget reconciliation process (which allows legislation to be passed based on a strict party-line vote in the current Congress) is now used or proposed as a potential mechanism for change instead.

More research further supports the statement that the United States is polarizing faster and more intensely than other nations. Each country has its own political and social issues, but it is notable that the United States is unique among other democracies in its rate of polarization. Jesse Shapiro and colleagues have published “the first ever multi-nation evidence on long-term trends in affective polarization” (Kimball, 2020, para. 3). **Affective polarization** is “a phenomenon in which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own” (Kimball, 2020, para. 3). Shapiro’s research demonstrated affective polarization has increased more in the United States since the 1970s than in eight other advanced democracies that were studied (Kimball, 2020).

Recent reports from a Central Intelligence Agency panel reveal substantial concern about future political violence in the United States. Barbara Walter, a political science professor at the University of California at San Diego, said “the US is closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe” (Pengelly, 2021, para. 1). Additionally, three former generals wrote they are “increasingly concerned about the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election and the potential for lethal chaos inside our military” (Pengelly, 2021, para 3).



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Why is the United States becoming so much more polarized? Understanding the root causes can be critical to generate the understanding necessary to overcome divisions. It can also help us with insight for how to better communicate with others so conflict can be reduced. Shapiro's research supported the idea that "understanding the root causes of political polarization, both in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, could help politicians and citizens alike understand how the phenomenon may be driving their decisions and preferences—and it could ultimately reveal strategies for bridging divides" (Kimball, 2020, para. 12).

Polarization in the United States is multifaceted. One possible explanation for this lies in the strict two-party system that dominates U.S. politics. Dimock and Wike (2021) believe the United States' "two-party electoral system stands apart by collapsing a wide range of legitimate social and political debates into a singular battle line that can make our differences appear even larger than they may actually be" (para. 6). Additionally, Ezra Klein and others have argued that race, religion, and ideology now align with political party in ways that did not previously occur (Dimock & Wike, 2021). For example, the Republican Party made abor-

tion a litmus test of its ideology back in the 1970s. Prior to that, multiple Republican politicians were actually pro-choice, and the party as a whole supported efforts to decriminalize abortion, whereas opposition existed in the Democratic party because of its strong roots in the Catholic church. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue explained this “powerful alignment of ideology, race, and religion renders America’s divisions unusually ... encompassing and profound. It is hard to find another example of polarization in the world that fuses all three major types of identity divisions in a similar way” (Dimock & Wike, 2021, para. 8). In the United States, our party affiliation has become our identity.

Our use of technology in the United States has also been a contributing factor to the country’s rise of polarization. Specifically, we have the ability to watch *partisan* cable news 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This allows people to find their unique political niche and be supported in their beliefs whenever they want. If they ever find themselves on the edge of being



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persuaded by another viewpoint, they can easily return to their **echo chambers** and find people who will agree with and support them, no matter their perspective. To be clear, it is not exactly rising Internet use that can be blamed for this, but rather the way we use the Internet to help us match our opinions and screen out opposition. For example, *Newsweek* reported on the recent Internet experience of Mike Nieznany, who is standing ready to overthrow the U.S. government. Nieznany said there is “a ticking time-bomb” targeting the Capitol and “lots of fully armed people wondering what’s happening to this country” (Freedman, 2021, para. 2). Nieznany gained attention after posting his thoughts on the Internet platform Quora. More than four million people have viewed his comments. He concluded that the 2024 election “may well be the trigger (Freedman, 2021, para. 2).

Communicating with those with whom you disagree can be complicated. And it can become even more stressful and frustrating when extreme positions and partisan alignments are in play (Van Green, 2021). Unfortunately, these alignments are often so much a part of each individual’s ideology that it can be difficult to navigate conversations. A majority of Americans agree there are “strong political and strong racial and ethnic

conflicts in the U.S. and that most people disagree on basic facts” (Connaughton, 2021, para. 1). In fact, the United States ranks second in the world (to France), with 59% of the population believing that people cannot agree on basic facts (Connaughton, 2021). Keep in mind that a **fact** is something “known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). As Michael Lynch wrote, however, “the Internet is both the world’s best fact checker and the world’s best bias confirmer—often at the same time” (Stanford History Education Group, 2016, para. 4).

Luckily, most Americans still also believe that our differences are not so great that we cannot find some way to come together. The ability to communicate more effectively with those with whom we have substantial differences will be crucial in making this happen. We are more likely to be able to succeed at this if we have ethical communication strategies at the forefront of our thought processes. Daniel Yudkin made an interesting observation in a *New York Times* op-ed, providing hope that the United States is actually less politically polarized on moral issues—that is, until they become associated with partisanship (De-Wit et al., 2019). In other words, it’s when an issue becomes associated with a political party that our ability to communicate about it can be threatened. The solutions to our problems are not only political; the way in which we orient our communication and association with others can make overcoming division easier.

The **contact hypothesis** suggests getting to know more about each other, including encouraging the genuine exchange of ideas, is one way we can deal with polarization. The benefit of this type of communication is that it can help us find points of agreement with others’ perspectives (De-Wit et al., 2019). The studies of Gordon Allport have justified this approach to overcoming issues such as racism through relationships and personal interactions, including communication with those with whom we might be unfamiliar (Blake, 2022). Understanding the stories of others could be one of the most useful strategies we have to decrease polarization. Organizations such as StoryCorps now exist, which attempt to share humanity’s stories to build connection and create a better world. StoryCorps broadcasts weekly on National Public Radio, and the Library of Congress collects its recordings. Reaching the point where we can communicate those stories effectively could be one of our greatest obstacles. If we could

eventually reach a greater understanding about the perspectives of others by sharing our stories, this could be one of our greatest strengths.

The Bridging Differences initiative from the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, supports the need to use a greater perspective in creating more **superordinate goals** (De-Wit et al., 2019). These goals suggest that we could use a larger sense of ourselves and the issues we hope to make progress on to help navigate smaller differences (Kolbert, 2021). Sam McFarland and others (2019) found evidence to support the idea that a more universalist perspective toward communication and problem-solving can create a greater sense of **empathy**. *Empathy* is a “way to connect with others, to understand what is at stake for them, and to help guide moral deliberation” (van Dijke et al., 2019, p. 1282). Empathy seems to be at least one of the values that we could better internalize to help move toward a society that is more able to foster ethical communication.

## Executive Summary

*Now that you have finished reading this chapter, you can:*

- **Define ethics and explain how communication ethics have become more important than ever to the future of society:**
  - *Ethics* is the “general and systematic study of what ought to be the grounds and principles for right and wrong human behavior” (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 1). Ethics are usually described as the standards we use to determine whether our actions are consistent with our obligations, others’ rights, fairness, and benefit to society.
  - Ethical communication is essential, as our behavior and communication have the potential to impact other people. Philosopher S. Jack Odell believed that “ethical principles are necessary preconditions for the existence of a social community. Without ethical principles it would be impossible for human beings to live in harmony and without fear, despair, hopelessness, anxiety, apprehension, and uncertainty” (Odell, 1983, p. 95).

■ **Understand Wallace’s four moralities and the standards they set for ethical communication:**

■ In 1955, Wallace proposed “*An Ethical Basis for Communication*,” in which he outlined his four moralities—what he viewed as ethical guidelines for the future of communication. He hoped these moralities would help foster the growth of the values he thought of as so important.

■ The first “morality” was the “habit of search” (Wallace, 1955, p. 6). When we are communicating, we should recognize that we are the sole source of information and argument. As such, we should provide truthful and trustworthy opinions and facts. Warren’s second guideline was the “habit of justice” (1955, p. 7). He believed that a communicator should respect fact and opinion fairly, meaning that a speaker should be accurate and avoid distorting ideas or suppressing information. Third, a communicator should reveal the sources of their information and prefer public to private motivations. Fourth, a communicator should favor the “habit of respect for dissent” (Wallace, 1955, p. 9), a statement that was a call to respect diversity in opinions.

■ Jane Blankenship (1974) recognized that Wallace “was firm in his belief [that] ‘to emphasize the ethics of communication is to provide a solid foundation for both the teaching and criticism of discourse’” (p. 186). Wallace also insisted that “the result of that focus would be a distinct improvement in the level and tone of discourse in America” (1972, p. 4).

■ **Identify practical benefits of communicating ethically and recognize how they could be significant to your everyday life:**

■ In the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ report *How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most*, ethical judgment and reasoning were considered “very important” or “somewhat important” by employers (Flaherty, 2021).

- Research predicts that ethics will be even more important to workplaces in the future. A poll conducted by LinkedIn and published by *Fortune* showed that at least 60% of respondents believed this to be the case.
- A lack of ethical communication reduces our ability to engage in true dialogue with others in solving global problems. A dialogue is an orientation toward communication and “involves a genuine concern the welfare and fulfillment of the other and a conscious choice [made] in response to the demands of specified situations” (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 54). Our ability to deal with environmental crisis, as well as the economy, pandemics, racism, and other issues, is lessened by our increasing inability to engage in meaningful conversations with others about potential solutions.
- **Explain the significance of polarization and its relationship to the future of our representative democracy and social welfare:**
  - The United States has rarely been as polarized as it is today. While it is true that the United States’ history has at times been turbulent, the partisan nature of our current divide is more pronounced than ever.
  - The United States is polarizing faster and more intensely than other nations. Each country has its own political and social issues, but it is notable that the United States is unique among other democracies in its rate of polarization.
  - A majority of Americans agree that there are “strong political and strong racial and ethnic conflicts in the U.S. and that most people disagree on basic facts” (Connaughton, 2021, para. 1). In fact, the United States ranks second in the world (to France), with 59% of the population believing that people cannot agree on basic facts (Connaughton, 2021).

■ **Discuss recent events and how they have highlighted a need for a renewed focus on ethical communication:**

- In October 2020, Frances Haugen testified before a Senate subcommittee, urging lawmakers to investigate and regulate the actions of Facebook. She possessed thousands of pages of company documents and argued that “the company intentionally hides vital information from the public, from the U.S. government, and from governments around the world” (Allyn, 2021). Specifically, Haugen claimed that Facebook valued profit over societal benefit, and “the result has been more division, more harm, more lies, more threats, and more combat. In some cases, this dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people” (Allyn, 2021).
- We witnessed the January 6, 2021, protests at the U.S. Capitol, which were motivated by former President Donald Trump’s advocacy and refusal to accept defeat in the 2020 election, and their resulting damage to the United States as a beacon of democracy. Subsequent campaigns that included “stop the steal” and “the big lie,” as well as allegations of voter fraud and efforts to pass legislation restricting voting rights, are long-term partisan controversies that continue. Attacks on voting rights are only one manifestation of political polarization in the United States.
- The Pew Research Center has also reported rising levels of tension on issues that include the economy, race relations, climate change, law enforcement, immigration, and gun safety. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed additional conflict and friction. More than 75% of the public agrees that the United States is even more divided than it was before the outbreak.

## Discussion Questions

1. Is ethical communication possible? What can you do to combat the effects of the divided society in which we live? Have you ever found yourself driven more by emotion than by facts or evidence? What caused that to happen? How did you respond?
2. How do you think the rise in the use of social media platforms and technology has influenced polarization in the United States? What role do you think social media can play in reducing polarization? Will politicians be able to change citizens' behavior enough to reduce the rising tide of violence in America that appears to be related to increasing levels of incivility?
3. Discuss the benefits of ethical communication. Beyond possible employment advantages, what do you think are the important practical benefits of these skills? How do you think a course in ethical communication specifically will be able to improve your interactions with others?
4. What strategies and mechanisms do you believe are best for assisting students in communicating ethically? What factors would you include if you were writing a code or standards for ethical interpersonal communication?
5. Do you believe that political polarization is a serious problem in the United States? Can you think of any examples of violence that have occurred in the United States and that are related to rising levels of polarization? How could ethical communication have better resolved any of those disputes?

## Terms to Remember

affective polarization  
civil discourse  
communication ethics  
consequentialism  
contact hypothesis  
deliberative democracy  
deontology  
dialogue  
echo chamber

empathy  
ethics  
fact  
morals polarization  
relativism  
social consensus  
superordinate goals  
virtue ethics  
whistleblower

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