What is Ethics? What is AI/Tech Ethics?

Understanding how different fields interpret the same situations through distinct vocabularies

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What Ethics Is (and is not)

Ethics = making, understanding, and justifying decisions in terms of human values

It's not a property of the object; it's a way of evaluating actions/choices

Ethics asks: which values are at stake, and which should take priority here? ❓

Ethics as a 'Level of Conversation': Interpreting the Same Object Through Different Languages

Different fields analyze the same event through unique lenses.

Example: Person wearing camera-equipped Google Glass.

The point isn't the gadget, but how it's 'read'.

Ethics = a distinct vocabulary for interpreting situations

Same Object, Different Languages

Science/Engineering
materials, weight, size, components, how it works

Economics
price, incentives, adoption, demand, profit

Law
legality, jurisdiction, regulation, enforcement, penalties

Ethics (course focus)
human values (privacy, autonomy, dignity, fairness, social well-being)

Ethical Conflict: Privacy vs Freedom

using the Google Glass Example...

Benefits

- Could help identify a known thief
- Convenience
- Capability

Harm/concern

- "Creepy" surveillance
- Constant recording
- Chilling effects

Ethical question: "Is your freedom to use it worth more than my privacy (and my freedom to act/speak unrecorded)?"

Modern Parallel: 2025 Incident involving Meta Ray-Ban Glasses on NYC Subway

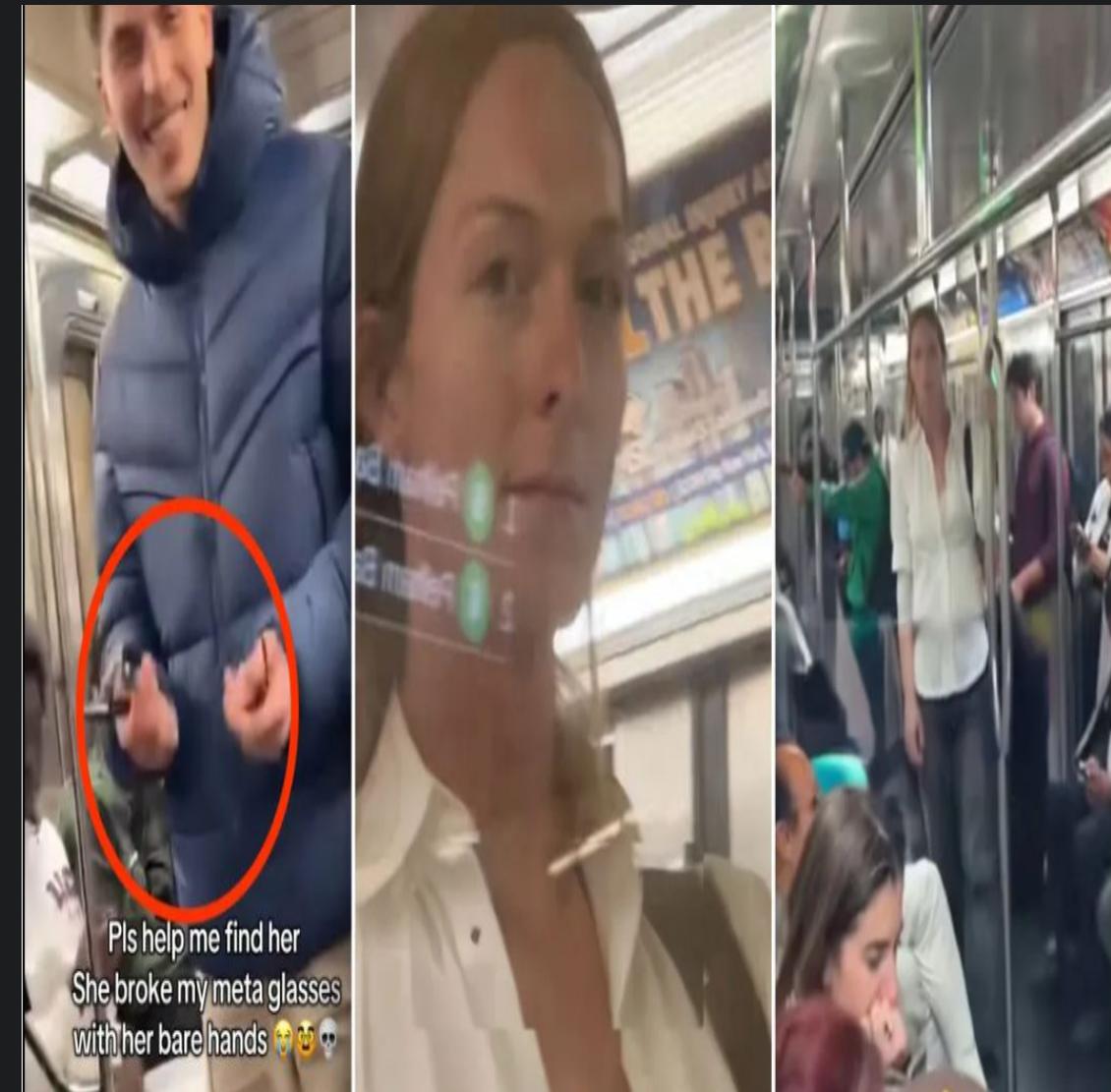**2025 Incident (Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses)**

- Man secretly recording passengers on NYC subway using discreet camera glasses
- Woman confronts him, smashes glasses, becomes viral "hero" online for privacy stand
- Same setting: Crowded subway, hidden recording, public backlash

Direct Relation to Google Glass Example

- Same tech evolution: Google Glass (2013) → Meta Ray-Ban (2025) — both enable subtle surveillance
- Same ethical conflict: Wearer's **freedom/autonomy** to record vs. bystanders' **privacy/dignity**

Our Group Insight

- Shows the privacy vs. freedom debate is still alive in 2025
- Reinforces lecture: Ethics remains the unique lens for human value clashes in tech
- Futurism (Dec 5, 2025): "Woman Hailed as Hero for Smashing Man's Meta Smart Glasses on Subway"

https://futurism.com/future-society/woman-hero-smashing-meta-smart-glasses-subway

Pls help me find her
She broke my meta glasses
with her bare hands 😭💀

Ethics vs Other Decision Systems

People also decide by: **custom/tradition, religion, loyalty, economics, law**

- Those systems are real—but they use different "justification languages"

- Most daily life runs on custom because full analysis for everything is paralyzing

- Ethics stands apart with different value reasoning

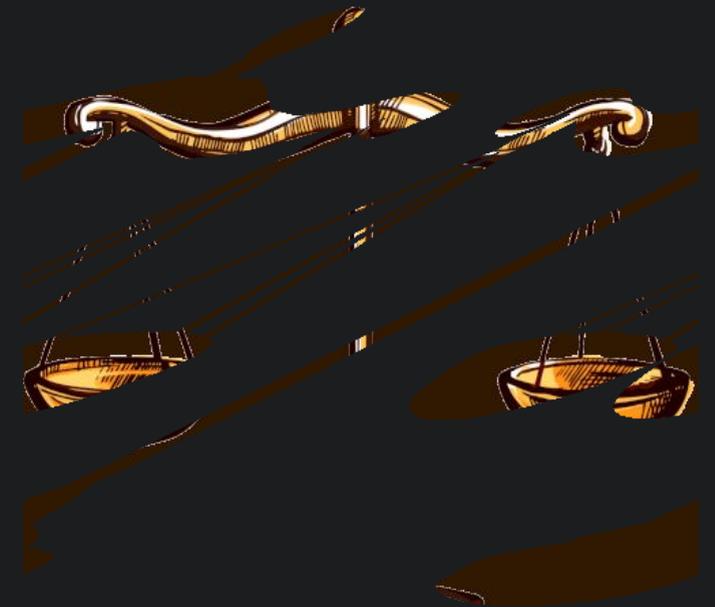# Human Values: Intrinsic vs Instrumental

Intrinsic values

Worth having "for their own sake"

Examples: autonomy, dignity,privacy, fairness

Instrumental value

Valuable as a tool to get intrinsic goods like money and power

Money example: important, but mostly instrumental—used to obtain intrinsic goods

Ethics focuses on intrinsic values. What truly matters to us

Ethics Is NOT Mainly "Right vs Wrong"

Brusseau critiques "ethics = right vs wrong" as misleading

Ethics isn't a binary calculator

Ethics = clearer value-based evaluation + prioritizing/privileging values in context

"Right/wrong" is downstream—after the value analysis

ChatGPT's Definition of Ethics(and why it's flawed)

Circularity

"ethics is the study of moral principles..."

Over-focus on right/wrong framing

Misses the core move

interpret situations in value-terms +

justify prioritization

Example: Grading Shows Different Justification Modes

Ethics

fairness (merit, equal treatment, harm/benefit)

Policy/rules

follow the rubric regardless of outcomes

Economics

bribery/cost-benefit incentives

Loyalty

nepotism/favoritism

Point: same action can be "justified" differently depending on the language

Why There's No "Ethics Calculator": Rules Have Exceptions

If ethics were rigid rules, you'd just compute answers—no class needed. Real life is messy: context changes what people judge as acceptable.

"Lying to Grandma" Example

1 Scenario

Colorblind grandma asks: "How do I look?"

2 Response

Many people lie kindly → "never lie" isn't exceptionless in practice

3 Takeaway

ethics requires reasoning with values under context, not just rules

COVID Contact-Tracing Apps: Privacy vs Social Well-Being

Social Well-Being

Contact tracing supports public health (social well-being)

Privacy Concerns

But it requires sensitive data (location logs, behavioral patterns)

Risk: leaks can reveal religion, politics, personal life

Key Nuance: Most Disagreements Share Values

Most people want both health and privacy

Conflict is usually about priority in this circumstance

This is what ethics looks like: shared value landscape + disagreement on weighting

Ethics vs Law: Why It's Harder

- Many people see ethics vs. engineering/econ easily

- Ethics vs law feels closer—both involve norms and "shoulds"

- Let's explore two models for the relationship between the two.

Two Models: Law and Ethics

Model 1

Rain & snow

Related forms of the same thing (law as practical ethics)

The lecture treats this as an open question, not a settled fact

Model 2

Rain & Mondays

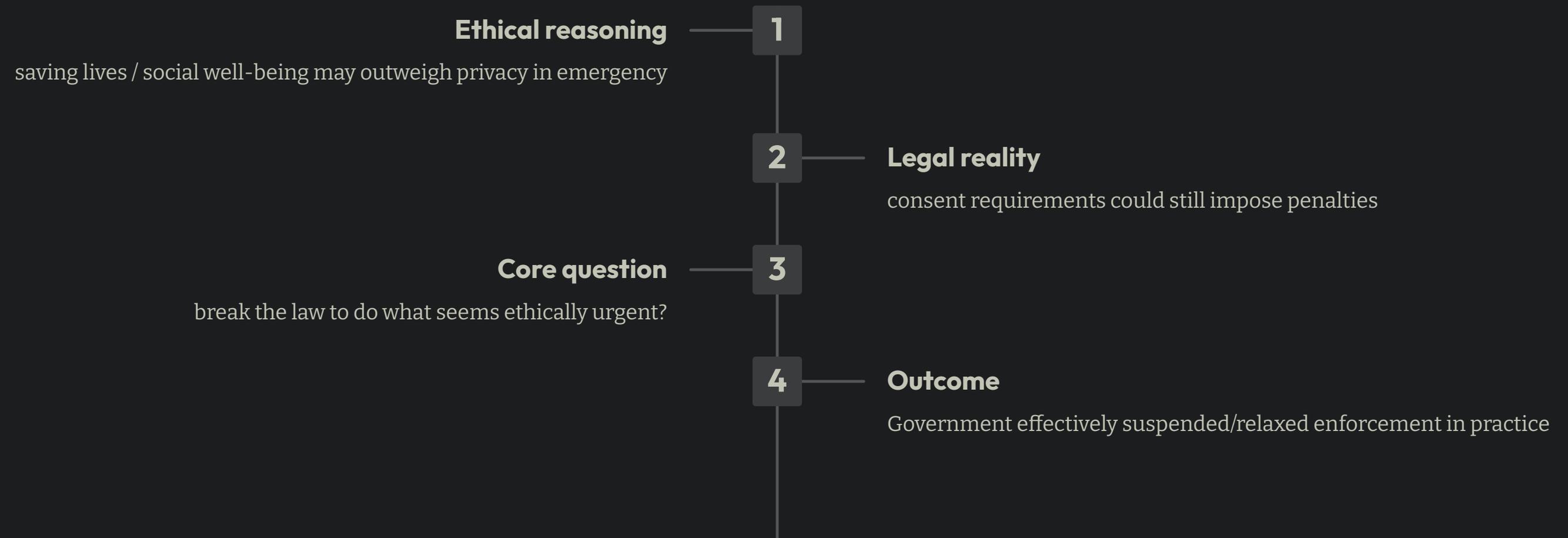Sometimes correlated but fundamentally different domains

Case Study: Northern Italy COVID Hospital + AI X-rays

- Hospitals overwhelmed; staff dying; huge volumes of chest X-rays
- AI proposal: train a model to read X-rays for COVID severity and triage
- **Data problem: patient consent missing for many X-rays**
- **Dilemma: Should they break the law in order to save lives?**

The Ethical–Legal Tension + Outcome

Ethical reasoning — **1**

saving lives / social well-being may outweigh privacy in emergency

2 — **Legal reality**

consent requirements could still impose penalties

Core question — **3**

break the law to do what seems ethically urgent?

4 — **Outcome**

Government effectively suspended/relaxed enforcement in practice

Not clearly legal/illegal "on the ground" — Enabled the hospital to proceed and save lives

Illustrates: law can block ethics, or crises expose their differences

Civil Disobedience & Unjust Laws

Dilemma & Legal-Ethical Tension

Dilemma & Core Conflict

Following an unjust law vs. moral duty to resist it.

Law vs. Ethics

- **Law**: Rigid enforcement (e.g., fines, arrest).
- **Ethics**: Allows flexibility, civil disobedience to correct injustice (e.g., privacy protests against surveillance laws).

Real Cases & Sources

2023–2025 climate activists (e.g., Just Stop Oil, Extinction Rebellion)

- Blocking roads or damaging art to protest fossil fuel laws.
- Law treats it as criminal damage; ethics privileges planetary well-being over strict property rules.

Sources

- BBC (2025) on climate protests
- AP News (2024) on ethical vs. legal justifications in activism.

Model Fit & Interpretation

Rain/Mondays (ethics acts independently to challenge law) but overlaps when law eventually changes (rain/snow adaptation).

How Many Principles? The AI Ethics Toolkit Problem

Too few principles

Vague; many false positives (stop sign = "red + white")

Easy to comprehend, but becomes difficult in more nuanced/diverse situations

Too many principles

Overfit; misses real cases (perfect stop sign only)

Leads to decision paralysis

Where the field lands	Lecturer says	This course uses
~7–11 principles	guidelines converge on a manageable set	nine consolidated principles

Principles are synthesized from major frameworks (EU Trustworthy AI, Germany Data Ethics)

Community Consensus: Most practitioners recommend 7 to 11 principles for effective AI ethics work (German Data Ethics Commission, EU Guidelines for Trustworthy AI)

The class will focus on 9 principles, so its enough to be specific but manageable in application

Principle group 1: Individual values

Autonomy: human agency, self-determination, meaningful control

Dignity: respect for persons; avoid dehumanization/manipulation

Privacy: control over personal information; freedom from unjust surveillance

Principle group 2: Social values

Fairness: nondiscrimination, equitable treatment, bias concerns

Solidarity: social support, cohesion, mutual responsibility

Social Well-Being: public health, welfare, collective benefit/harm

Principle group 3: Technical values

Performance: effectiveness, accuracy, reliability in context

Safety: robustness, security, avoiding physical/psychological harm

Explainability: transparency + accountability in practice (can we understand/justify outcomes?)

Why "Democracy" is not included here

- More political philosophy than core AI ethics
- Also not consistently present across frameworks → excluded from the consolidated nine

Modern Examples

Livestreamer in Public

- Person livestreaming/recording strangers using their phone
- Conflict: Freedom of expression vs Privacy/Dignity(bystanders right to not be recorded without consent)
- Our take: prioritize privacy, consent in close proximity
- Principles: Privacy, Dignity, Social Well-being

AI used for hiring

- Ai tools used to screen resumes, rank candidates, and conduct initial interviews
- Conflict: Efficiency vs Fairness (no Bias/Discrimination)
- Real Issue: Biased training data replicates gender/race inequalities (e.g., Amazon 2018 tool downgraded women's resumes; 2024 LLM tests favored white-associated names 85% of time)
- Our take: prioritize fairness, ensure no bias, have explainable outputs
- Principles: Fairness, Explainability

For the Covid hospital AI case, you are the doctor/deciders, what do you do?

I believe that proceeding is the better option. Prioritizing the well being of the people is of way more priority. Use gray zone flexibility as ethics will allow separate measure in dire times for the greater good.

-Christian

With the Covid tracer app, do you impose/support it and why?

Personally, I support the idea of the Covid Tracer App. While it could be argued that such an application infringes upon privacy, autonomy, and information security, I believe that the benefits outweigh the negatives. Applications such as this one promote overall social well being as they help contain the spread of deadly illness and protect vulnerable populations. Everyone has a phone which makes it significantly more efficient than manual tracing and allows it to work in real time.

-Ciaran

I think the app is something that I would be in favor of. While the concern for one's privacy is definitely valid, the potential gains from an app like this is hard to ignore. With how devastating COVID has been on us, a potential aid that will reduce, the risk of increasing the spread to individuals is very beneficial.

-Christian

Why is the number of values/principles important for practical ethics?

Too few principles will leave the rule to be very broad and vague. Could cause false positives. Too many rules only will recognize a perfect scenario, could lead to overload and paralysis. The right number (7-11), allows us to generalize and make quick, effective decisions without being freezed.

Final recap

See ethics as a language of intrinsic human values

Identify which values are in play and where they conflict

Make a justified choice by prioritizing values in context

Use the nine principles as a practical analysis toolkit (not an ethics calculator)