



Ethics

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Ethics, a lived, relational, and transformative force

This essay reflects on ethics as a living foundation of communities, emphasising its role in sustaining the bonds that hold them together, guiding collective action toward the common good, and enabling transformation without losing sight of fundamental human values.

The theme of community resonates strongly with the mission of universities that are rooted in their territories, attentive to the people they serve, and committed to social transformation through knowledge. Within this horizon, ethics cannot be reduced to regulatory compliance or abstract moral principles. Rather, it concerns the orientation of human action toward a good and meaningful life, understood as the responsible pursuit of what is genuinely worthwhile. Drawing on Aristotle's practical philosophy, ethics can be understood as an operative and reflective orientation of action toward *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, realised not in isolation but with and for others within shared forms of life (Aristotle, 2016). Ethics thus involves the formation of character through persistent action guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*), enabling individuals and institutions to deliberate well about what is good in concrete and situated contexts. It concerns not only what we do, but how and why we do it, shaping who we become through practices embedded in communities, structures, and institutions. In this sense, ethical life is inseparable from collective responsibility and from the pursuit of the common good.

Within the university and its role in society, ethics should therefore be understood as a lived, relational, and transformative force. It sustains collective life, enables cooperation, and provides orientation for social, environmental, and cultural transformation. Ethics is not an external

supplement to communal life, but a constitutive condition that allows academic, scientific, and social communities to exist as spaces of trust, respect, meaning, and shared responsibility. When ethics weakens, communities cease to order their practices toward their proper end (*telos*), understood in an Aristotelian sense as the common good that gives coherence to life in common. Action then risks being guided primarily by short-term utility, with a consequent loss of cohesion and shared purpose.

At a deeper level, ethics concerns the human being as a constitutively relational subject. Personal identity is not formed in isolation, but through relationships that precede us and call us into responsibility. Identity takes shape through encounters with others, sustained commitments, and responsibilities assumed over time. Paul Ricoeur's distinction between *ipseity*, the self as capable of promise, responsibility, and accountability, and *sameness*, the continuity that allows recognition over time, offers a valuable framework for understanding ethical subjectivity as dynamic, narrative, and relational (Ricoeur, 1992). Ethical life unfolds in the tension between fidelity to oneself and openness to the claims of others. This relational understanding of the self provides an important foundation for academic communities that value diversity, promote dialogue as an ethical practice, and recognise cooperation across cultures and disciplines as essential to life in common.

Ethics sustains communities by providing more than a shared framework of rules or goals; it establishes the moral conditions under which communal life becomes possible and endures. Communities are not held together solely by convergent interests, institutional arrangements, or coordinated action, but by the mutual recognition of their members as persons of moral worth, whose dignity demands respect and responsibility.

This ethical grounding is neither abstract nor incidental. It is disclosed in the everyday practices through which communal life is enacted and renewed: fairness in deliberation rather than mere procedural compliance; attentiveness to vulnerability that resists indifference; care expressed in sustained and concrete action; openness to difference that treats plurality as a moral resource rather than a threat; and responsibility in communication, where speech is guided by truthfulness, restraint, and awareness of its effects. Ethics, in this sense, is not external to community but its internal condition of possibility. Without it,

coordination degenerates into coercion, dialogue into strategic exchange, and coexistence into mere proximity. Language alone does not create a community. Words become binding only when grounded in ethical commitment and embodied in action. Communities endure through lived responsibility, through what members consistently do for and with one another over time.

Beyond sustaining communities, ethics also has a clear orientation toward service. To serve ethically is to direct science, knowledge, power, and innovation toward the common good rather than efficiency alone. Ethical service originates not in control or optimisation, but in attentiveness to concrete human needs. As Emmanuel Levinas emphasises, ethical responsibility arises from responsiveness to the Other and precedes calculations of utility or strategic rationality (Levinas, 1969). Ethical service therefore requires situated and reflective deliberation, expressed in practical questions: who is affected by a given action, what is at stake in a particular context, and how can knowledge contribute responsibly to improving human conditions. This understanding of ethics as service lies at the heart of meaningful community engagement and the co-creation of knowledge with and for society. It frames the university not as a closed space of knowledge production, but as a moral community embedded within a broader social frame.

This ethical orientation becomes particularly visible in the major areas of transformation currently confronting universities. In the environmental domain, ethics calls institutions to recognise their responsibility toward future generations and the natural world, guiding research, teaching, and innovation toward genuinely sustainable and regenerative practices. In the digital domain, it requires sustained critical reflection and a well-formed moral conscience in relation to technology, ensuring that digital transformation and scientific innovation serve human dignity, respect autonomy, and promote justice, beneficence, non-maleficence, and proportionality, rather than narrow efficiency, control, or power. In the societal domain, ethics challenges universities to respond actively to inequality, fragmentation, and marginalisation, and to affirm their role as spaces for the formation of citizenship, the cultivation of social cohesion, and the exercise of public responsibility.

Ethics is inseparable from character, understood in the Aristotelian sense as a disposition (*hexis*) formed through the repetition of good and just actions. As Aristotle notes, “it is by doing just actions that we

become just" (Aristotle, 2016). Ethics therefore concerns all members of the academic community, not only leaders or specialists, since individual actions directly affect institutional purpose and credibility. It operates as a principle of shared responsibility, sustained by *civic philia* – the bond of trust and mutual recognition that makes justice in common life possible. While moral reflection distinguishes good from evil, ethics asks why the good merits commitment and why harmful practices endure despite being recognised as such. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues, ethical communities are formed through shared practices oriented toward internal goods rather than mere instrumental success (MacIntyre, 1981). Universities thus bear a distinctive responsibility for the formation of character, cultivating habits of honesty, courage, coherence, commitment, and truthfulness. This perspective is also expressed in Paul Ricoeur's definition of ethics as "the good life, with and for others, in just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992). In the university context, this implies that technical competence and productivity are insufficient. What is required is the capacity to act responsibly, to relate ethically, and to assume accountability within increasingly complex institutional systems.

Finally, ethics has a genuinely transformative dimension. Contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, accelerated digitalisation, and social fragmentation cannot be addressed through technical or procedural solutions alone. They require an ethical orientation capable of introducing critical distance, interrogating inherited assumptions, and reconfiguring practices considering what is ultimately of value. In Aristotelian terms, it is through *phronesis* that action is ordered toward the human good that confers meaning and coherence upon practice (Aristotle, 2016). In this context, academic communities are called to resist indifference and forms of complicit silence, a responsibility articulated by António Sonegal in his analysis of the silent modes of violence that erode communal bonds and moral responsibility (Sonegal, 2022). Ethics, therefore, does not occupy a peripheral position in academic life but constitutes its normative core. It sustains universities as communities of meaning, capable of orienting knowledge, responsibility, and innovation toward a shared future that is not merely efficient or productive, but substantively human and just.

References

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