# Module 3: Virtue Ethics

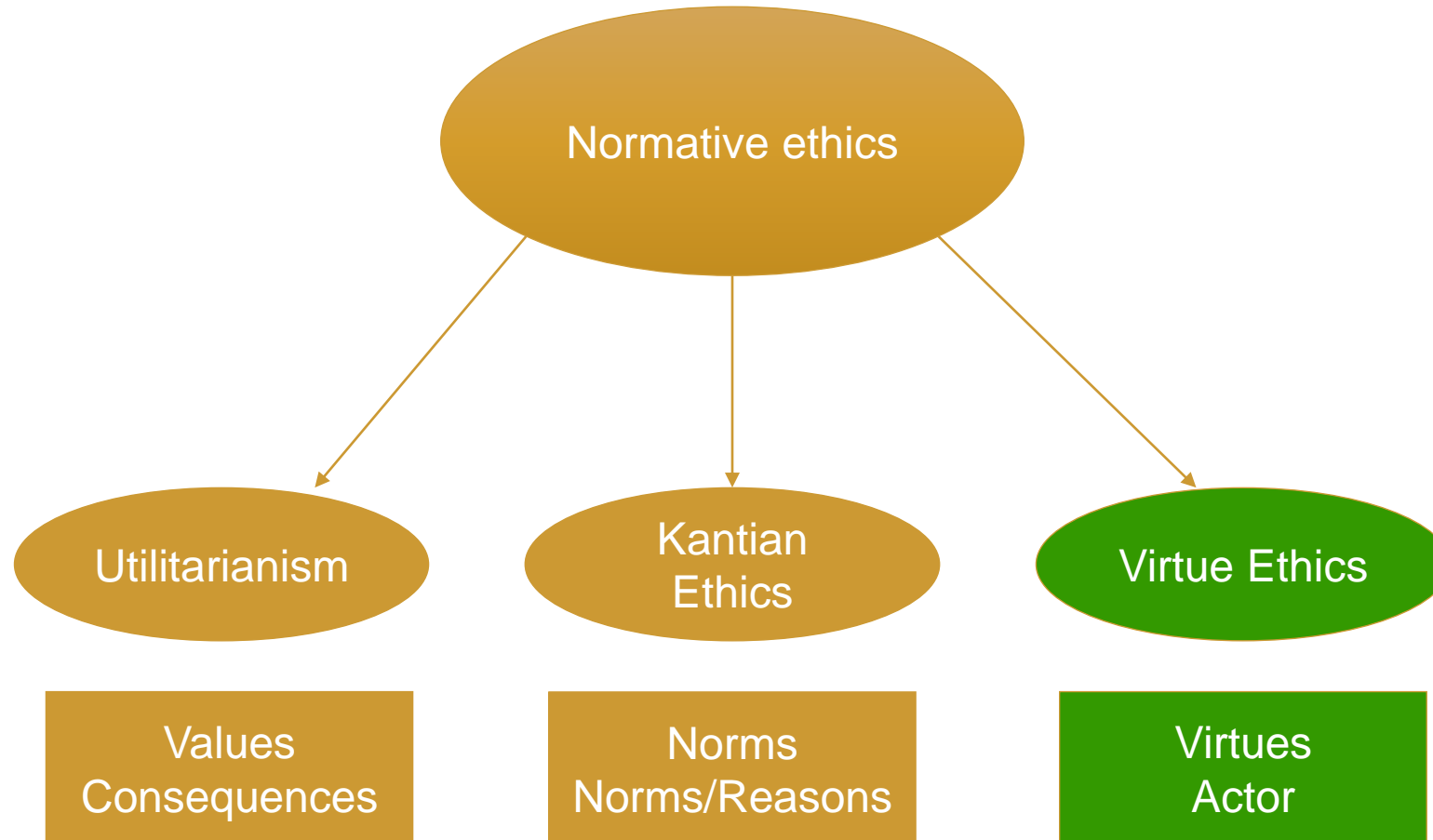Dr. Gert Meyers (TILT, Tilburg University)
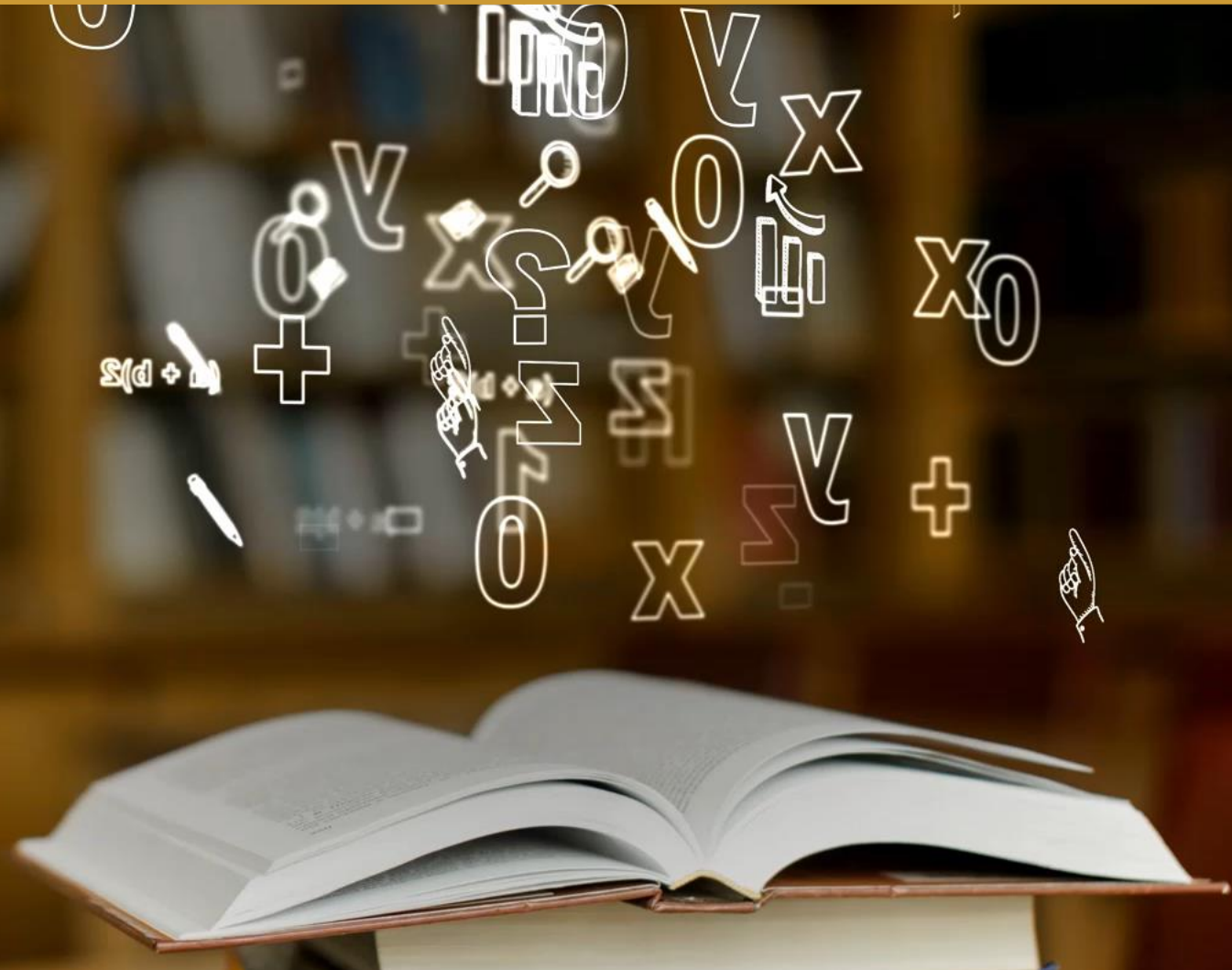
TILBURG UNIVERSITY

Understanding Society
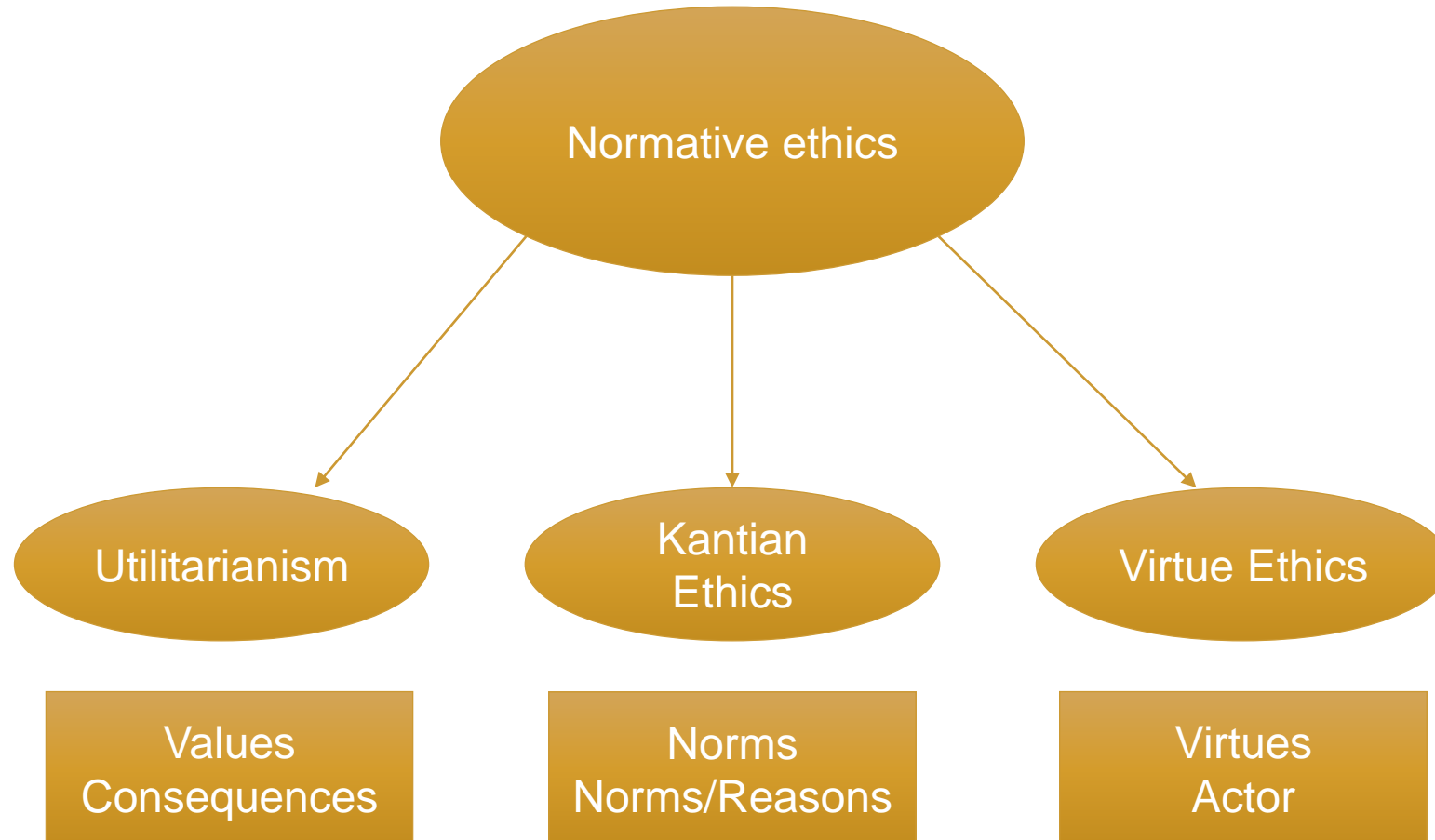
# Ethical theories

# Ethical theories

# Today

- Virtue ethics
- Technomoral virtues
- Data science as political action
- The blogpost assignment

Questions?

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

# Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle (384-322 BC)

- Important philosopher

- Ethics and politics are closely related. Man is in essence a political animal.

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csIW4W_DYX4

- Also Buddhist and Confucian traditions in virtue ethics



TILBURG UNIVERSITY
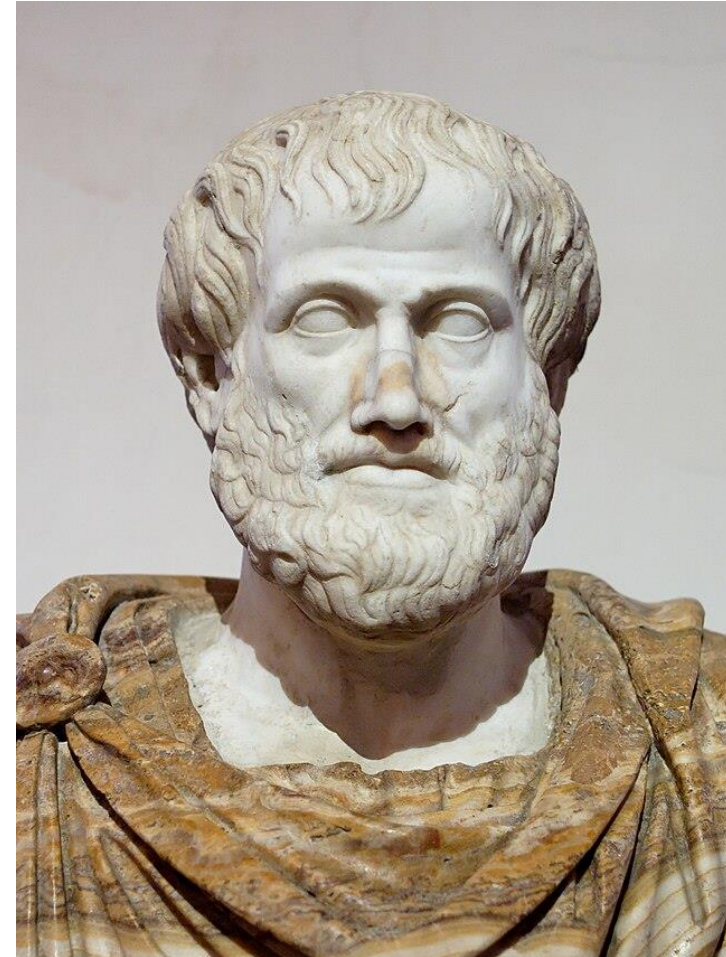
# Contemporary virtue ethicists



G.E.M. Anscombe

Rosalind hursthouse

Philippa Foot

Shannon Vallor

# Virtue Ethics as an anti-theory

- Utilitarians and Kantians begin by asking what is the right thing to do, while they should be asking <u>what traits of character make one a good person</u>?

- A radical version of virtue ethics as anti-theory is not an alternative to utilitarianism and Kantianism, but an <u>alternative to normative **theory**</u>, i.e. an alternative to providing a general criterion of right action in terms of certain principles, rules or norms.

- Virtue ethics as anti-theory influenced the development of **particularism**: the view that <u>moral judgements are radically context dependent </u>and cannot/do not depend on general principles or norms.

- "Now if right action were determined by rules that any clever adolescent could apply correctly, how could this be so? Why are there not **moral whiz-kids**, the way there are mathematical (or quasi-mathematical) whizkids?" (Hursthouse)

- A more moderate version of virtue ethics as anti-theory merely states that (theoretical) knowledge of moral principles and norms is not sufficient to act morally: ethics is about **practical wisdom** (*phronesis*).



TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

# Virtue ethics as a normative theory

- Normative virtue ethics: "An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances" (Hursthouse).

- **Virtue** is a trait of character, manifested in <u>habitual action</u>, that it is good for a person to have.

- Focus on **character**. Versus outcomes (utilitarianism) or maxims/the good will (Kantianism).

- Virtue ethics is about being a **good person**.
  - "A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well" (Hursthouse)

- **Eudaimonia** is sometimes translated with 'happiness,' but a better translation might be 'flourishing.' Eudaimonia is not first and foremost about pleasure/pain, but about being an excellent human being.

TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

# Virtue ethics as a normative theory (2)

1. "An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e. acting in character) do in the circumstances" (Hursthouse).

2. "A virtue is a character trait that a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well" (Hursthouse).

- Virtue ethics is a **teleological** theory: it defines the moral right in terms of the (non-moral) good. Not in terms of maximizing utility (versus utilitarianism), but by defining virtues in terms of the character traits needed to flourish as a human being (**eudaimonia**), the final good/highest good for a human being.

TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

# Virtue ethics as a normative theory (3)

Aristotle's teleology:

1. Everything in nature has a proper (natural) **function**.

2. Norms (including moral norms) specify what it means to function well: "For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or an artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the 'well' is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function." (book 1, part 7)

- The function of a human being is to flourish (eudaimonia). Actions should be evaluated to what extent they contribute to eudaimonia.

- Aristotle describes the virtuous person as *objectively happy*/flourishing

TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

# Virtue ethics as a normative theory (4)

- What it means to flourish is specified in terms of a set of virtues.
  - Aristotle: theory of the golden mean.
  - Virtue is "the mean by reference to two vices: the one of excess and the other of deficiency."
- Virtues are character traits.
  - Stable dispositions
  - Habitual and committed practice
  - One can only become virtuous through acting virtuously: importance of training.
- Moral exemplars are crucial.
- What is virtuous is highly context dependent.



Whenever I'm about to do something, I think, "Would an idiot do that?" And if they would, I do not do that thing.

Benevolence • Civility • Compassion • Conscientiousness • Cooperativeness • Courage • Courteousness • Dependability • Fairness • Friendliness • Generosity • Honesty • Industriousness • Justice • Loyalty • Moderation • Patience • Prudence • Reasonableness • Self-discipline • Self-reliance • Tactfulness • Thoughtfulness • Tolerance

# Objections

- Incomplete: <u>moral problems are often about what we should do.</u> Virtue ethics doesn't really answer that question. Reasons underpinning certain values quickly tend to become Kantian or Utilitarian reasons.

- Moral conflict: what if A is dishonest but kind to do and B is honest but unkind to do. What would you choose?

# Advantages of virtue ethics

- Moral motivation ➤ Acting from an abstract sense of duty or from a desire to do the right thing is generally not what we look for.
  - We have a basic moral obligation to make a consistent and conscious effort to develop our moral character for the better.
  - Confucius said that the real ethical failing is not having faults, 'but rather failing to amend them.'
- Cultivation of practical wisdom: what are our moral obligations in a given situation. Virtue ethics can account for our partiality in special relations. ➤ different virtues (love of family = personal; benevolence=general)
- Where to look for standards of conduct ➤ exemplary human beings

# Technomoral virtues

- 'How can humans hope to live well in a world made increasingly more complex and unpredictable by emerging technologies?'

- **Acute technosocial opacity.** Emerging technologies:

  - Present new problems of collective moral action

  - Are likely to impact future persons, groups and systems (more than present stakeholders)

  - Unpredicted consequences that unfold on an open-ended time-horizon
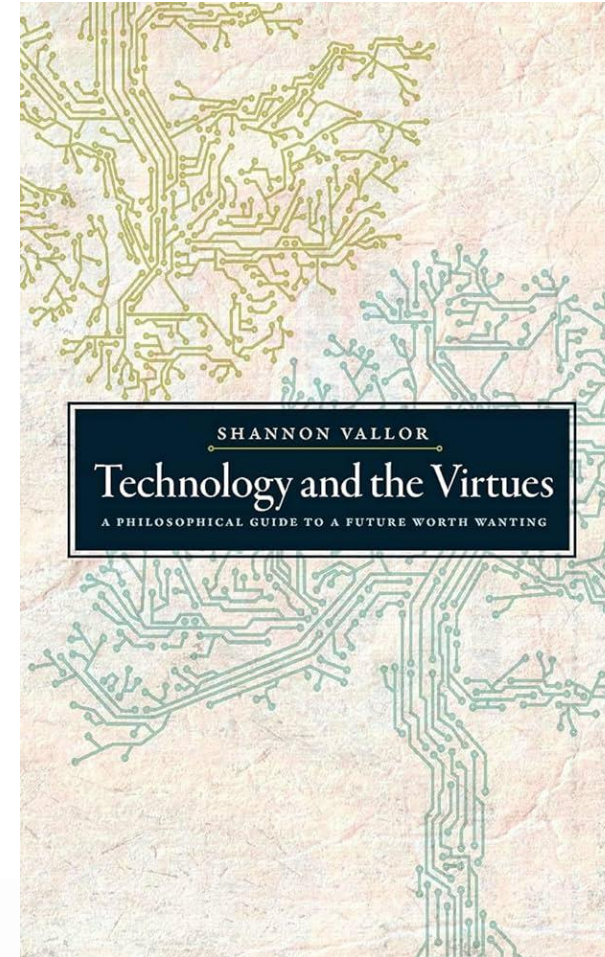
# Technomoral virtues (2)

- 'When our future is opaque, it is harder to envision the specific conditions of life we will face tomorrow that can be improved by following an ethical principle or rule today and such ideals may then fail to motivate us.'

- Virtue ethics to the rescue

- Proposal of new virtues

# Technomoral virtues (3)

- Honesty
- Self-Control
- Humility
- Perspective
- Justice
- Civility
- Care
- Courage
- Empathy
- Flexibility
- Magnanimity
- Technomoral Wisdom

# Technomoral virtues (4)

- **Honesty**: an exemplary respect for truth, along with the practical expertise to express that respect appropriately in technosocial contexts.

- **Self-control**: an exemplary ability in technosocial contexts to choose, and ideally to desire for their own sakes, those goods and experiences that most contribute to contemporary and future human flourishing.

- **Humility**: a recognition of the real limits of our technosocial knowledge and ability; reverence and wonder at the universe's retained power to surprise and confound us; and renunciation of the blind faith that new technologies inevitably lead to human mastery and control of our environment.

  - Mean between two vices: techno-optimism & techno-pessimism

TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

# Technomoral virtues (5)

- **Justice**
  - A reliable disposition to seek a fair and equitable distribution of the benefits and risks of emerging technologies.
  - A charactersitc concern for how emerging technologies impact the basic rights, dignity, or welfare of individuals and groups.
- **Courage**: a reliable disposition toward intelligent fear and hpoe with respect to the moral and material dangers and opportunities presented by emerging technologies.
- **Empathy**: cultivated openness to being morally moved to caring action by the emotions of other members of our technosocial world.
- **Care**: a skillful, attentive, responsible, and emotionally responsive disposition to personally meet the needs of those with whom we share our technosocial environment

# Technomoral virtues (6)

- **Civility**: a sincere disposition to live well with one's feloow citizens of a globally networked information society: to collectively and wisely deliberate about matters of local, national, and global policy and political action; to communicate, entertain, and defend our distinct conceptions of the good life; and to work cooperatively toward those goods of technosocial life that we seek and expect to share with others.

- **Flexibility**: reliable and skillful disposition to modulate action, belief, and feeling as called for by novel, unpredictable, frustrating or unstable technosocial conditions.

- **Perspective**: a reliable disposition to attend to, discern, and understand moral phenomena as meaningful parts of a moral whole

- **Magnamity:** moral leadership

- **Technomoral wisdom**

  - A general condition of well-cultivated and integrated moral expertise that expresses successfully – and in an intelligent, informed, and authentic way – each of the other virtues or character that we, individually and collectively, need in order to live wlel with emerging technologies.

TILBURG ◆ UNIVERSITY

1. "I'm just an engineer"

2. "Our job is not to take political stances"

3. "We should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good"

   1. Definition of 'social good'

   2. Pursuing an incremental "good" can reinforces oppression

Data Science as Political Action: Grounding Data Science in a Politics of Justice (sciopen.com)

# Blogpost assignment

- Three theories
  - Put theories in action
- Inspiration found?
  - Where to find news articles?
  - English, Dutch, French, German
- Note on style

# Next week:Data ethics, a business perspective & ethical reasoning

- Ibo van der Poel and Lamber Royakkers: (2007). The Ethical Cycle. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225126411_The_Ethical_CycleLinks to an external site.

- Peter-Paul Verbeek et al. (2020). Guidance Ethics Approach. https://ecp.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guidance-ethics-approach.pdfLinks to an external site.

- Gry Hasselbach and Pernille Tranberg (2016). Data Ethics: The New Competitive Advantage. https://dataethics.eu/wp-content/uploads/DataEthics-UK-original.pdfLinks to an external site.

- Ben Wagner (2018). Ethics as an Escape from Regulation: From ethics-washing to ethics-shopping?  https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789048550180-016/html?lang=enLinks to an external site.

- Linnet Taylor & Lina Dencik (2020). Constructing Commercial Date thics. https://techreg.org/article/view/10988/11962Links to an external site.

# Next week: Data ethics, a business perspective & ethical reasoning

- **Ibo van der Poel and Lamber Royakkers: (2007). The Ethical Cycle. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225126411_The_Ethical_CycleLinks to an external site.**

- **Peter-Paul Verbeek et al. (2020). Guidance Ethics Approach. https://ecp.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Guidance-ethics-approach.pdfLinks to an external site.**

- Gry Hasselbach and Pernille Tranberg (2016). Data Ethics: The New Competitive Advantage. https://dataethics.eu/wp-content/uploads/DataEthics-UK-original.pdfLinks to an external site.

- Ben Wagner (2018). Ethics as an Escape from Regulation: From ethics-washing to ethics-shopping? https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789048550180-016/html?lang=enLinks to an external site.

- Linnet Taylor & Lina Dencik (2020). Constructing Commercial Date thics. https://techreg.org/article/view/10988/11962Links to an external site.

# Questions on Module 4?

G.Meyers@tilburguniversity.edu

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

Understanding Society