

Introduction to Ethical Theory

OBJECTIVES

After reading this document students will:

- ▶ know the meaning of the terms 'ethical dilemma' and 'ethical principle'
- ▶ understand three key approaches to ethical decision making: consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics
- ▶ recognize that different ethical considerations and principles will apply in the different themes and areas of knowledge to be studied.

Learner profile

Principled

How do ethical considerations affect the way that knowledge is produced and used?

Introduction

While much of our knowledge of the world is descriptive, telling us what sorts of things are in the world, and how those things (and people) work, we are often called to act upon, or in relation to, the knowledge we develop. We have to make choices about what we should do in the world, above and beyond simply describing what is there. We might, for instance, identify facts about the influence of human activity on global temperatures. But simply knowing about these effects isn't enough; these facts seem to obligate us in certain ways. For example, you might know that your friend has not pulled their weight when working on a group presentation, and you have done all the good work. Do you lie to your teacher and allow your friend to accept the good grade, or do you possibly ruin your relationship by speaking honestly and telling the teacher that *you* did all the work? Perhaps your friend has joined a CAS activity helping the poor at a charity outside of school, but you know they only signed up because it will look good for university applications and they never actually attend. Do you tell your CAS supervisor? These types of dilemmas about what we should do or how we should act in the face of certain facts are called **ethical dilemmas** and some people suggest that this type of knowledge comprises an entirely different sort of knowledge, with its own methods, tools and perspectives.

This type of knowledge is unique because it is essentially about how individuals should act, and not about what communities of knowers believe. In the TOK student book we discuss how individuals in various communities of knowers are under certain obligations to behave according to the rules of those communities: mathematicians are not allowed to just make up connections between elements in a mathematical proof. Historians and scientists are obligated to avoid pretending that there is evidence for a claim, when there is none. In almost all cases of knowledge, knowers in a community are obligated to offer justification for a position if they expect others to

◆ **Ethical dilemma:** A situation where a person must choose between two unappealing courses of action (the dilemma) and where the 'correct' action is determined by the application of concepts such as moral goodness, rather than simply aiming at some practical goal.



■ What ethical considerations need to be taken by practitioners in different fields?

believe what they claim. In other words, individuals in these communities have certain ethical obligations imposed by the proper use of the methods of that community.

Outside these specific communities we are all faced with ethical decisions and dilemmas. Not all choices of this sort are ‘dilemmas’, sometimes you know that you need to act, but are not sure how *best* to act. You might know for instance that you *should* help the poor in your community but are not sure how *best* to help them, or even what principles justify *why* you know you should help them. How we as individuals choose to act often depends on what **ethical principles** we choose to apply in the situation. However, as with other forms of knowledge, just how these principles are developed can be difficult to determine. Principles tell us what sorts of things to take into consideration when making decisions. An ethical principle doesn’t often tell us which particular action to follow. Instead, it makes a claim about which sorts of actions are acceptable or not and what sort of method you might employ to work out just what to do in a particular case. While your choice of ethical principle might lead you to measure how much happiness some action would bring, your friend’s ethical principles might lead them to think about what an action would mean for their character. Interestingly the actual action might be the same, but the reasons for doing it might be significantly different.

While being part of a community can help provide principles upon which to act, we nevertheless must make our own decisions about how to behave. When we make such choices, or at least when we have the time to consider them, we might make these decisions by applying the ethical principles we hold. Making an ethical decision implies understanding or accepting some ethical principle, then putting that principle into action.

One of the challenges faced by people who wish to construct ethical principles that they can share is that it is notoriously difficult to agree on a method by which the principles can be constructed. Unlike mathematics (with its loyalty to logical inference) and science (which has its scientific method), the construction of ethical principles doesn’t seem to have a clear method. Despite this, we all accept, in our more clear-headed moments, that there are things we would say are right or good or that are wrong or bad. Suppose, for instance, your IB Examiner decides to simply roll a dice to assign you a grade because he has to leave to visit friends at the beach. None of us would accept this as good or just; our intuitions suggest this is wrong. We have, in other words, particular intuitions about what sorts of actions should be condemned as bad or wrong and what sorts should be praised as good or right. Any reliable ethical principle or ethical theory should therefore help us make sense of these intuitions.

Even though we accept that ethical principles are hard to develop, and that our individual intuitions might vary, we really don’t accept that all ethical claims about what is right or wrong should be equally valued or accepted. For instance, I would not accept the views of a psychopathic murderer when it comes to principles on how best to treat people. Someone may try to disagree and say, ‘but HE thinks it’s a good thing’, but just saying that he thinks it’s okay, does not make it so, nor does it change the fact that *he might be mistaken* in thinking that it is okay. So, while it’s hard to decide how to establish ethical principles, this doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try. This Introduction to Ethical Theory offers three quite traditional approaches as a way of suggesting that, just because the search for an adequate method is hard, there are responses that we can choose from.

Approaches

What sorts of ethical principles are available? Consider the following set of traditional principles or theories used in ethical decision making. In each case, consider what types of facts are most relevant for each; one of the ways of seeing the differences is to pay attention to what each theory considers important.

◆ **Ethical principles:** A claim about what makes an action right or wrong in some circumstance. ‘Act in a way that maximizes people’s happiness’ is one such principle that a person would try to apply in their actions.

ACTIVITY

Working with a partner, choose a profession or area of knowledge. Think about potential ethical dilemmas that practitioners in that field may have to consider.

ACTIVITY

Work with a partner to draw up a list of general ethical principles and then compare your ideas with those of another pair.

- 1 How do they compare?
- 2 Can you think of any scenarios in which your principles might not be applicable?
- 3 Are there any scenarios in which your principles might be contradictory?

■ Consequentialism

One ethical principle is based around what happens *after* an action has been committed. It looks at the consequences of the action and is called consequentialism. It suggests that if the consequences are what we have decided we want them to be, then that action, because it led to the desired consequences, is the right action. It's what we should have done. This is a principle that seems intuitive and most of us use it most of the time, whether we are conscious of it or not.

Generally, the thing we're looking for in the consequences is something to do with the maximum amount of happiness produced, or the least amount of suffering. The main theory in this category is called utilitarianism and it is central to all sorts of methods of solving real-life ethical dilemmas, such as so-called end-of-life issues (ie, the withdrawal of medical treatments). Applying this theory amounts to predicting the consequences of an action, then tallying up in some way, the supposed benefits. Consequentialists will prioritize the role of reason in making these calculations; while happiness or the absence of suffering might be an emotional state, the calculations about how to achieve the most happiness or the least amount of suffering is a rational process. Intuitive as this principle may seem, it's not clear whether this approach should be used in all cases. An analysis of the principle throws up a few potential issues.

Firstly, it assumes that we can identify with some degree of certainty what will happen if an action is taken. This is not easily done. You might act in a way that you think will benefit people, but in fact it leads to far more suffering than you intended; your intuitions about what will happen might be way off reality. When to measure the happiness and how far into the future is not clear either.

ACTIVITY

Think about the opposing sides of an ethical dilemma.

- 1 Can you apply a consequentialist theory to justify both sides?
- 2 What might this suggest about the reliability of using this approach in creating knowledge about ethical issues?

CASE STUDY

Thalidomide

In the late 1950s, the drug Thalidomide was offered to pregnant women, first in Europe, then elsewhere in the world, as a way of helping with nausea. However, it was discovered later that the drug had a number of sometimes fatal side-effects affecting foetal development, including deformation of the limbs and damage to the heart and other internal organs. So, while the immediate consequences (alleviation of morning sickness) brought some happiness to the mothers, unknown and drastic side-effects would later be found to outweigh any short-term gain.

That long-term effects might reverse short-term gain is the main concern of governmental drug agencies, who are rightly slow to suggest that a drug is safe or effective for human beings. Next time you go to a



doctor, they will tell you all the possible outcomes and dangers for even the smallest procedure, which is to suggest that you must choose which of the possible consequences, both good and bad, you are happy to accept.

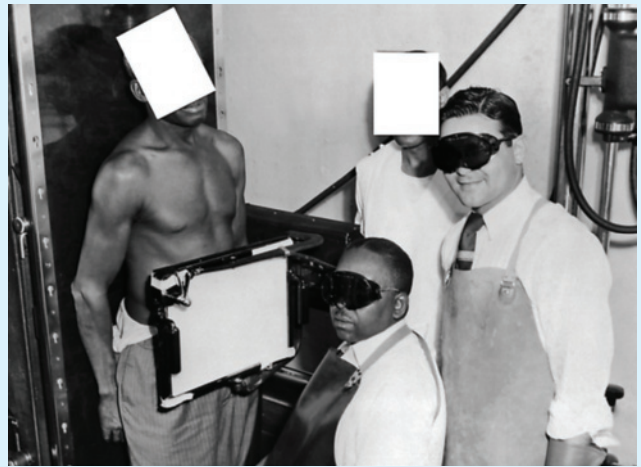
Secondly, it's not at all clear just whose happiness or suffering should be taken into account, or who decides what constitutes a good result. This worry is inherently about power – both social and political.

CASE STUDY

Tuskegee syphilis experiment

A classic example of the challenges of applying a utilitarian perspective comes from Tuskegee, Alabama, where, for 40 years starting in the 1930s, the US Public Health Service (USPHS) ran a detailed study of the effects on the human body of untreated syphilis. This disease was easily transmitted and sometimes fatal, and at the start of the experiment, there was no cure. The USPHS chose a population of black, largely uneducated men who had already contracted the disease and monitored them throughout their illnesses, measuring the progress of the disease and how it affected the community. The USPHS offered the men free hot meals on the examination days and free transport to the clinics, telling the men that they were being treated for their 'bad blood' (which was the local name for the disease).

In fact, the men were not being treated at all. The USPHS wanted simply to observe the long-term progression of the disease. Roughly 10 years into the trial it was discovered elsewhere that penicillin was an effective cure for the disease, but the researchers from the government did not administer this cure to the men, who went on to suffer the side-effects and sometimes transmitted the disease to their wives and children. The benefits of the study were considered to offset the avoidable suffering that the men and their families endured. It was claimed by one leader of the study that the longer the trial went on the better the data would be, regardless of the



suffering of the subjects. In other words, the long-term needs of the many who might benefit from the results would outweigh whatever suffering these men and their families were undergoing.

This is classic utilitarian thinking and might be 'justified' as such, provided you are happy to 'measure' possible benefits of unnamed people against the real suffering of people in the present moment. The glaring dynamic in this case is institutionalized racism. That the USPHS felt it was appropriate to override the black men's consent to participate in the study, to put their lives at risk simply for medical data, suggests that they were not seen as full participants in society. It might simply be a fact that the data would be helpful, but most people's moral intuitions suggest that the means by which the data is collected must also be acceptable (see the Ethics section in Chapter 9 The Natural Sciences).

What this case uncovers is a problem in the assumption that happiness and suffering can be measured in anything like an objective way. Whose happiness and suffering counts? Many animal rights activists suggest that the reason we as a society treat animals as a food source is partly because we have decided that their suffering doesn't count for as much. It's hard to imagine an application of this principle that doesn't place certain values and prejudices (rather than objective facts in the world) at the heart of the actual calculations.

This type of consequentialist approach also asks us to identify in those hypothetical future situations some element which has already been established as desirable. We might, for instance, need to consider what actions we should take to guarantee the best allocation of the financial wealth of society. Applying this principle already assumes that future financial wealth is what needs to be measured and assumes that we can confidently predict (and then measure) how our actions will affect the future financial wealth of individuals. The principle, 'seek the best allocation of financial wealth', however, is only *one* way of thinking about economics. We might, for instance, seek future situations where the opportunity to access wealth is what should be equal, rather than the actual distribution of wealth.

■ Deontology

Another traditional approach developed to explore ethical dilemmas avoids some of the issues with consequentialism by suggesting that the long-term outcome isn't what matters in applying an ethical principle. What matters is the nature of the rule that you are following and whether that rule is a good rule. In the Tuskegee syphilis experiment mentioned on the previous page, one rule might be, 'People must give informed consent if they are to participate in a medical study which might have harmful side-effects'. The USPHS broke this rule and we'd therefore say that their actions were 'wrong'. In the eighteenth century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant suggested something similar when he said treat others as ends in themselves, not means. This means that we must treat individuals as rational beings who are capable of making their own decisions, and it is our duty to respect those decisions when they do not harm others.

This is a deontological, or rule-based, approach, according to which ethical principles are like rules and duties which we must follow. For Kant, the man who devised this approach, the rules themselves are decided upon by the exercise of reason. He worried that ethical principles were far too often grounded in whatever the person happened to want, and Kant saw immediately the problems associated with developing universal ethical principles when people spent their time wanting one thing at one time and wanting something else entirely at another. This could never result in anything ethical, just a never-ending parade of random desires. His task, then, was to establish a method by which we might agree on certain rules to follow which could then apply to everyone. Since humans are rational beings (beings able to understand and apply logical principles), this rationality was the foundation upon which Kant built his ethical principles. In the end, the basic rules are three-fold:

1 Only act on those rules which everyone can agree to, even while you perform the action.

This means that 'Lie when it benefits you' could never be a rule you can follow, because if you tried to tell someone the truth but they and you both agreed that it was acceptable to lie when it suits you, then your 'truth' would never be accepted as the truth. You both would know it could be a lie in this case. So the very concept of truth, when everyone accepts this rule, would cease to exist. 'Make false promises when it suits you' is another similar example. 'Jump the queue when it suits you' would also mean that, if everyone accepted this, there could be no concept of a queue. If trying to follow a rule renders it inconsistent in this way (as in the example above, I want you to accept my 'truth', but we both know that it could be a lie) then the opposite should be the rule: 'Don't lie', 'Don't make false promises', 'Don't jump the queue'.

2 Never treat other people as if they are there only to meet your own needs. This is a rule about treating others with the respect that they deserve as **autonomous** rational beings; that is, beings who can use their reason to make their own rules. Slavery or oppression are clear violations of this rule, because being a slave or being oppressed means that someone else is dictating how you should be behaving, which is often geared to doing something good *for them* and not you. Other examples might include a doctor not telling you all your options for treatment, because they want you to do the thing *they* think you should do. For instance, in places where abortion is legal, were a doctor not to tell you that this is an option, they would be violating your autonomy because you didn't know and so couldn't choose between *all* the options available to you. Lying or otherwise limiting the information available to you might be violating your autonomy, especially if having that other information would be important or useful in making your own decisions. We've seen this worry come up in political campaigns, where information is withheld or otherwise tampered with by news or social media sources. If a social media platform oversees what I see on my news feed, then they might be allowing only certain types of information through, and this would affect my ability to make a clear and reasoned choice.



■ Immanuel Kant's theory of ethics is considered an example of deontological morality

◆ **Autonomous:**

Capable of making one's own decisions. It derives from Greek: 'auto' means self and 'nomos' means laws.

- 3 When making laws, make them with the goal for people to be allowed to make their own choices.** This idea is the bedrock of most liberal democracies, where it is seen as better to let people make their own choices and accept that sometimes they will make poor choices, than to dictate what they are supposed to do. The idea is for the government to refrain from making laws constraining people's freedom, unless their actions are limiting the freedom of others. Free speech laws are like this: those who agree with free speech agree that sometimes people say mean and stupid things, but they should be given the freedom (autonomy) to say them.

The emphasis here on individual autonomy and rational choice has limits, of course, and those limits are generally set where one's autonomy challenges the wellbeing of others. It's unacceptable, for instance, to use my freedom of speech to encourage others to harm you; this is described as incitement to violence. Nor am I allowed to write a newspaper article lying about you in order to damage your reputation; this is known as libel.

Rule-based theories, however, are not always grounded in the rational abilities shared by all humans. Often, rules are given to a group of people through some other source. Cultural rules and religious rules might come from different sources of knowledge like tradition and authority. That Muslims and Jews don't eat pork for instance, is a divine command. Being part of the Jewish or Muslim community means accepting these rules as constraints on your behaviour; your duty is to follow those rules. In these situations, accepting revelation (God's own command revealed to a prophet) as a source of knowledge is needed, and will take priority over an individual's ability to reason it out for themselves.

The weaknesses in deontological ethics stem from the question of who decides what the rules should be. Although Kant wanted to find rules based in the exercise of reason, what seems reasonable to some might not seem reasonable to others, leading to difficult questions about which rule should be followed when there are many conflicting rules. The question of who decides which rules to follow is also prone to abuse by those who have the power to enforce them.

■ Virtue ethics

Another approach states that the best action is that which would be taken by a good person. This is generally called virtue ethics and suggests that virtuous people are virtuous because their character is good, and their actions are the natural expressions of their good character. Think of the characteristics of people we would describe as 'good': they are charitable, merciful, kind, supportive, unselfish, courageous, trustworthy, etc. Virtue ethics suggests that when you're in a challenging ethical dilemma you should think to yourself 'What would a good person do in this case', rather than try to calculate the least worst outcome, or identify a rule you should follow.

This type of principle avoids some of the challenges of the other principles. It doesn't get into trying to make predictions, nor does it suggest that we have to have some pseudo-mathematical way of counting up 'amounts' of happiness or suffering. It also recognizes that each situation could be quite different to the last, and rather than appealing to a plan which is meant to apply to any case, it asks what should you do in *this* case? It also recognizes that we are different people, so 'acting bravely' might mean different things depending on the particular abilities of each person. This places the burden of the responsibility on the person taking the action; the person cannot deny responsibility by saying something like, 'I had to do it, because the rule (or the consequences) said I had to'.

However, one worry with this principle is that simply saying that you did what you thought was right in the situation might not be enough. Just because you acted in a way that you thought you should act, the action itself might have made other people suffer unnecessarily. Similarly, it is not clear just what virtues you should be acting upon: the types of virtues which one might choose to act in accordance with (compassion, mercy, charity, kindness, truthfulness, etc) are many and varied and it's not clear which should take precedence when deciding the right thing to do.

ACTIVITY

In economics, it is often assumed that people always act in a rational manner. Deontology adds to this by suggesting that they *should* act in a rational manner.

- 1 Do you agree that we should always act according to what our reason tells us?
- 2 Might some situations call for a different approach to understanding the world or other people?

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

Do some AOKs or communities of knowers require more ethical thinking than others?

What we've considered here are three traditional foundations for ethical principles. The principles provide a sort of map for guiding an individual faced with an ethical dilemma. Each of the principles will require the identification of different facts and weight to be apportioned to them differently. A good TOK analysis of these principles would consider the reliability of these principles, given what sorts of features the principles ask us to measure or consider.

We are all faced with ethical dilemmas and ethical choices, and a TOK analysis will help us reflect on the principles we use to make decisions. But within the communities of knowers we will be studying there are also important considerations. When we construct knowledge, we are also acting in the world, and we will see how ethical considerations add another layer to the methods of knowledge makers.

TOK trap

When applying a TOK analysis to ethical knowledge or ethical decisions, students must take care to avoid some pitfalls:

- 1 **Don't try to 'solve' the ethical dilemma.** When considering an ethical dilemma, the TOK student should focus their analysis on the processes, methods and assumptions of the principles they would employ, rather than trying to identify what one should actually do in the situation.
- 2 **Don't focus on decisions.** Instead, focus on the ethical principles at work in the decisions, how they are formed, their assumptions and their reliability.
- 3 **Don't treat ethics as entirely subjective.** Thinking about ethical principles helps to move our thinking away from the idea that ethical behaviour or ethical decision making is all about our current state of emotions or that ethics is entirely subjective. The whole idea of a principle is to create a guide for everyone to follow; principles are meant to be applied in all cases, not just the immediate case. Principles are inherently rational, that is, they seek to establish rationally justifiable truths which we apply in the world. In the principles we look at in this document, reason is the primary intellectual tool used to apply the principle. One cannot simply assume that ethical principles are all about emotion or necessarily subjective, even though ethical decision making might be different between people.
- 4 **Don't assume that the application of one principle or another will necessarily lead to one specific outcome.** The ethical principles are tools which people use to make sense of the situation. We discussed maps in the Introduction to the TOK student book: maps help you see the landscape and navigate through it; they don't necessarily tell you the only way that you can get from Point A to Point B. That decision is up to you. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that just because you apply the principle in one way, others will apply it in the same way.

ACTIVITY

Think of an ethical dilemma or ethical choice. It could be one that you have encountered in your own life, or one that you have read about in the news. Try applying each of the three different approaches to define appropriate ethical principles for this dilemma.

- 1 How did your decisions differ with each approach?
- 2 What problems did you encounter using each approach?
- 3 Which approach do you think helped guide you through the ethical question most effectively?

Learner profile

Thinkers

Do ethical principles owe more to emotion or reason?

The ethics of knowledge-making

The three theories above are called 'normative' ethical theories because they are used in the development of rules to live by ('norms' from *nomos*, the Latin for 'law'). They are principles that are meant to be used to decide what course of action we would take when presented with an ethical choice. Each, however, is based on a more fundamental or more foundational set of *values*. Utilitarianism, for instance, is based on the deeper principle that *happiness* or *pleasure* is a good thing and should be sought after. Deontology starts from the basic value that human *rationality* is the source of 'right' behaviour and virtue ethics' starting point is the belief that the 'function' or proper activity of human beings is to flourish or live as fulfilling a life as possible.

In addition to making choices on how to live, humans are also often engaged in the construction of knowledge, and we might ask what the basic values underlying this activity are. What responsibilities do we have when constructing knowledge?

As we have seen, knowledge does not have to be absolutely certain. It does, however, have to be reliable. If we can't use our knowledge to make predictions and to make good decisions, then it isn't really knowledge at all. If you have to decide whether or not to buy a particular house, you have to have accurate knowledge: about the cost of purchase and upkeep, of the size of the house and the number of rooms you need for your family, of the neighbourhood and whether you can get to all the places you need to get to from that location easily, and so on. When the United States decided to develop a space programme and put a man on the Moon, NASA (National Air and Space Administration) had to have accurate knowledge about many thousands of things, including the distance to the Moon, the effect of gravity on a rocket trying to escape the atmosphere, the weight of the fuel needed to power the rocket, the effect of solar radiation on materials used to build the rocket and so on. If any of that knowledge had been inaccurate, that is to say, *not* knowledge, then the mission would never have been accomplished.

Accuracy and thoroughness, then, are two ethical imperatives which people have a duty to uphold when developing knowledge. As we have already seen, accuracy is a reflection of the degree to which knowledge – the map – matches reality. Thoroughness might be considered to mean the amount of relevant knowledge needed to act in each case. It's no use knowing how to leave Earth and get to the Moon if we don't have some knowledge of other facts like what the ground will likely be like when we arrive. It follows naturally that those who are in the business of making knowledge – whether that is personal knowledge or knowledge intended to benefit all of society or even the world – have an ethical obligation to make accurate knowledge, to draw an accurate and full map of the part of reality that they are investigating. Failure to make every effort to ensure that the knowledge claims offered to the world are accurate and truthful could result in tremendous harm.

However, we also recognize that the quest for full and accurate knowledge has certain limits. We cannot, for instance, simply test a medicine on a human being who isn't fully aware of what is happening. This would be to violate deeply held ethical principles about how to treat others. So, the construction of knowledge has certain constraints and we must limit our drive for knowledge to within accepted ethical boundaries. We will explore several cases of the kind of negative consequences that can ensue from failing to make a conscientious effort to make truthful knowledge claims without consideration of people's wellbeing.

There seems, then, to be two types of ethical obligation when we are constructing knowledge:

- Firstly, we must make conscientious efforts to get it right in terms of finding accurate and thorough knowledge. Simply lying about facts or hiding relevant facts leads to disinformation and potentially considerable suffering.
- Secondly, we have an obligation to conduct our knowledge-making activities responsibly. The history of the sciences is full of scientists mistaking the need for knowledge as outweighing the need to behave ethically towards others. Many of these cases might now make us cringe or evoke our outright condemnation, like the case of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments described earlier in this document.

Considering our ethical obligations in the context of creating knowledge is challenging. We have to acknowledge that we cannot always achieve the goal. Sometimes we make mistakes, sometimes we have insufficient data from which to work and sometimes we interpret the data that we have incorrectly. Claims that we believed to be true sometimes have to be revised or discarded altogether and replaced. We don't say, therefore, that we have an ethical obligation to be absolutely correct at all times. That would be an impossible task. We do, however, have an ethical obligation to make every honest effort to make accurate claims. We must do the very best we can to ensure that our knowledge is sound, and we must hasten to correct any error as soon as it is clear that an error has been made.

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

In what ways do communities of knowers create *duties* which their members must follow? Is there an expectation that members of the community will behave responsibly and what does 'responsible' mean in that community?

Ethical aspects of knowledge-making are explored in depth in the Ethics section of each of the chapters of the TOK student book, establishing the recognition that there is an ethical obligation for knowledge makers to make every ethically responsible effort to make accurate and thorough knowledge claims.

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