

# Ethos

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We have looked at how an ethic can be determined by our perception of purpose, giving rise to Telos – namely that the ends for which a creature was made determine what it ought to be, what it is meant to be, what it is meant to become. See: [Goal Directedness in Nature](#), [Defining Good](#).

We have also seen how pathos, our ability to perceive empathically and share in the feelings of another, generates regard for others, because we are participating in their inner life, perceiving their feelings, desires, purposes, needs as if we were in their shoes. See: [Empathy and Emotional Intelligence](#), [Pathos](#).

We have also seen how logos, our rational nature, can sum costs and benefits of any course of action, and decide what is the best method for achieving an outcome. So, logos adopts a utility focused approach to ethics.

These are three ways in which an individual might form an ethic.

Ethos is different, but a very important way in which groups stabilize and reinforce an ethic. Ethos refers to the **laws, traditions** and **social pressures** that are at work in groups to which you belong, that establish **norms** and **reinforce** them through **social approval, conformity, consensus**, and **authority**. These norms are established ways of behaving that can become codified into **laws** and **codes** enforced by institutions. Norms are embedded in **tradition, culture** and **religious** teachings. Ethos embodies a definition of group **identity**, and includes norms that people must abide by to be accepted by that group.

The function of collective thought, or group-think, seems to be **stabilizing** and **reinforcing** norms, which is important. It suggests that people are naturally **socially embedded**, and so can sync themselves with a network of other minds, while still retaining their individual ability to think, feel and desire.

The processes by which this syncing take place are –

- **Conformity**
- **Emotional contagion**
- **Shared attention**
- **Reputation**
- **Imitation and social learning**
- **Authority and deference**

These create a distributed mental field, where beliefs, values and actions circulate and stabilize across people – producing a socially synchronized network of minds – which resembles an emergent “group mind”

The purpose of this “group mind” is –

- **To stabilize cooperation**
- **Transmit culture**

- **Create trust**
- **Make behaviors predictable and reliable**
- **Create social habits**
- **Create moral infrastructure**

These processes exist because our telos includes social embeddedness; we are not just individuals with telos. We are designed for **communion**.

### **When Norms are Divorced from Telos**

In a healthy society the norms that are codified and enforced are based on what is good for each individual – their **telos** or **flourishing**. Flourishing here does not mean mere pleasure or success, but the full development of a being according to its nature — physically, socially, rationally, and morally.

So, the norms should respect freedom of thought and action, allow people to agree or dissent from any policy, support their well-being, and respect their feelings.

However, what happens in practice is that the norms **can override** telos, pathos and even logos, regard dissent as heresy, reject empathic feeling as treachery, and redefine purpose as what the group dictates.

To illustrate this, consider the conscientious objectors, who refused to fight in the second world war – they were imprisoned and ostracized for not complying norms that prescribed their duty to kill the enemy. Their natural pathos for Germans was disregarded by the norms set by political leaders.

We can also consider the Viking conquests perpetrated in the UK. Here we had a Scandinavian tribe who decided to invade and loot monasteries. At home, in their own country, they abided by an ethic that refrained from doing harm to others and supported the welfare of their close of kin, but when it came to conquest such empathy and respect for human flourishing appeared to vanish. How can we explain this? Surely, they were still the same rational, empathic people?

Vikings belonged to a warrior culture – meaning their social norms valued courage, glory in battle, and they were honored for their success in bringing loot back home. In other words, their social norms strongly approved of this invasive behavior. So, you can see that **norms (ethos) can override** pathos, telos and logos.

Norms **stabilize** and **incentivize** an ethic, by making it **a duty** for group members. However, problems arise when the ethic stabilized is a distorted ethic that is simply the dictate of the group, and not based on respect for the ends for which creatures were made.

Consider the guards in the concentration camps who ushered people into the gas chambers. They were dutifully complying with the norms of their group, just following orders – norms that showed disregard for the welfare of the camp inmates. So, these norms were divorced from the telos of those inmates. An ethic must always be founded upon Telos, which is objective value, otherwise it is a socially constructed norm lacking grounding in objective human flourishing, and will be indifferent to the harm it causes to both its members and outsiders.

## So, how do we know when a norm is good?

A norm is good when it aligns with what is good for a person – the realization of their nature and fulfillment. A norm is not good simply by being what a group enforces. It is good because it aligns with Telos.

A **false ideology or religion** is a false conception of the good that has been made normative for a group. When a group mistakes a partial, distorted or power-serving value for the highest good – and builds norms, identity and moral emotions around it – that is how false moral systems arise.

The Bible refers to this situation as a **“false god”**, metaphorically and theologically, meaning that a group makes a false good into a norm, and enforces it.

Problems arise when the accepted norms **fail to represent the good of people**, or when norms **overpower individual reasoning, emotion and purpose**. The latter happens when people delegate thinking and feeling to the group, so they cease to think for themselves. In this situation, they cease to be individuals participating in a network of minds, but rather become absorbed into a collective system which decides for them – it might be described as a “hive mind” – defined as collective cognitive absorption.

Human beings possess multiple moral faculties (telos, pathos, logos), but morality only becomes socially powerful through ethos. When social norms lose alignment with objective human flourishing, moral faculties are gradually overridden, and evil becomes systemic rather than merely individual.

## Why Bring God into the Discussion?

Telos, or objective purpose, defines what is good for a creature, and what is harmful. Objective purpose is **grounded in a purposeful agent** – namely God.

- Purposes don't arise from blind processes alone
- Normative “ought” built into nature suggests intention
- Teleology implies mind before mechanism

If human nature contains built-in normative direction — ways we are meant to flourish — then this normativity points beyond impersonal processes toward a source capable of intending ends. So, God is the basis of true value.

Therefore, when a society creates norms that stabilize and reinforce a false good, that is tantamount to replacing God with a false god. It is a form of idolatry – and, as we have seen with the Vikings, and with the Holocaust, false goods and false gods result in horrific consequences.

Any group acts as a network of synced minds and enforces norms of what is good, however, the good must be grounded in Telos, and Telos is grounded in God. So horizontal moral formation (peer synchronization) must be accompanied with vertical moral grounding (an ultimate authority)

## Summary

This short essay shows that **evil can be systemic**, not just a personal pathology, if a group bases its norms on arbitrary criteria rather than upon objective teleological purpose, and if members delegate their reasoning, feelings and desires to group-think.

Ethics can be understood through four interlocking dimensions:

- **Telos** → what a being is for
- **Pathos** → felt participation in others
- **Logos** → instrumental reasoning
- **Ethos** → socially stabilized norms

This is a powerful synthesis of Aristotle, moral psychology, and sociology in one frame. It explains **how morality forms**, not just what morality says.

## Ethos as a “distributed mind”

The description of group processes is:

- Conformity
- Emotional contagion
- Reputation
- Deference to authority

This aligns closely with research in social cognition and cultural evolution. These are **real coordination dynamics**.

## The core danger identified is real

**Norms can override telos, pathos, and even logos.**

History absolutely shows that:

- Empathy can be reframed as betrayal
- Reason can be dismissed as disloyalty
- Conscience can be recoded as heresy

This is a diagnosis of **systemic evil**: not monsters, but moral faculties hijacked by a norm system.

Ethos is not the villain. It is:

- What makes trust possible
- What transmits culture
- What stabilizes cooperation

The tragedy is not that we have ethos — it’s that **ethos can detach from telos**.

Healthy morality = **Telos (vertical grounding) + Ethos (horizontal stabilization)**.

Evil becomes systemic when ethos detaches from telos and individuals outsource their moral faculties to the group. Society becomes dangerous not when it has strong norms, but when its norms are no longer anchored in the true good of the persons who live under them.

It is comforting to realise that even in our most horrific acts, we are shown to be norm following creatures embedded in distorted social structures, rather than amoral individuals, deficient in reason or empathic feeling. People are sometimes simply overwhelmed by group think based on norms that are divorced from what is good.

Systemic evil explains how ordinary people participate in wrongdoing, but it does not remove individual moral responsibility, because the capacities of telos, pathos and logos are never fully erased — only suppressed.

So now we have 4 integrated bases for ethics – Telos, Pathos, Logos and Ethos – each contributing something vital. When these four dimensions remain properly ordered — with ethos guided by telos — morality supports human flourishing; when they fall out of alignment, the same social forces that enable cooperation can become engines of systemic evil.