

# What is an Ethical Impact?



## PRESCIENT FINAL CONFERENCE

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# Ethical Impact: Operationalizing Ethics



**WHAT IS OPERATIONALISING?  
OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS**

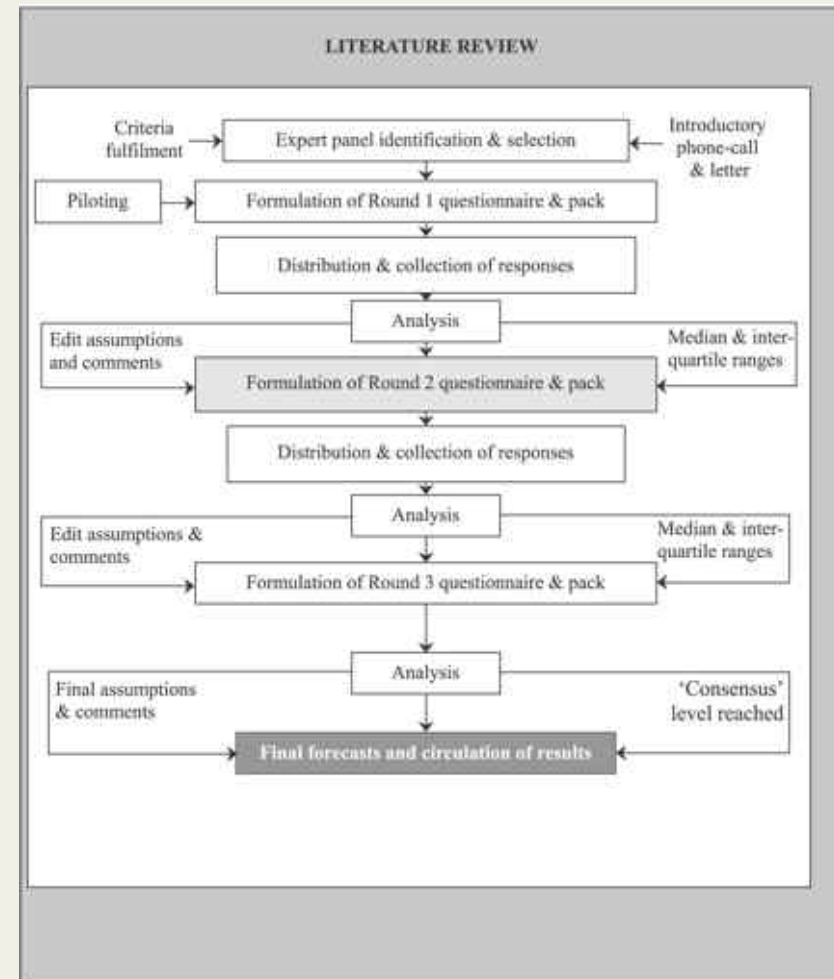
# Why Operationalizing?

- In complex, pluralist, societies, we need to set up procedures that may be verified and assessed in a transparent way, also in order to identify clear cut, and unambiguous responsibilities.
- In other words, operationalization is a strategy of governance of complex or delicate decisions.



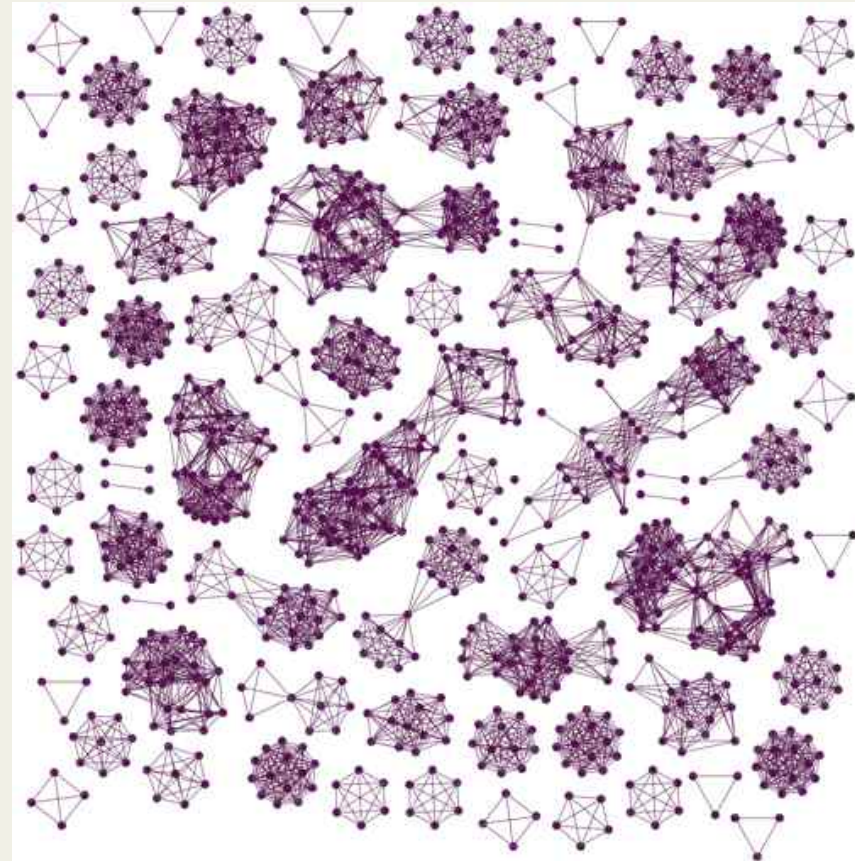
# What does it mean?

- Operationalising means to translate into protocols complex decisions. Rather than allowing common sense or ad hoc professional/expert judgment to govern what is to be done, appropriate decisions are stipulated by formulae, algorithms, decisional softwares, best practices guidelines, etc.



# What is it needed?

- In order to operationalise one needs to be able to
  - 1) Split the action/decision into discrete and clear cut steps
  - 2) Establish causal relations between steps
  - 3) Define a metrics which allows to validate and assess regularly the system
  - 4) Create a routine based on a follow-the-rule approach which substitute previous seat-of-the pants decision making processes.



# Positive Aspects

- Precautionary approach (avoiding harm and major errors at least)
- More transparency
- Clearer allocation of responsibilities
- Possibility of public review



## Negative Aspects

- Defensive observance of protocols
- The blame game
- Mechanical following of inappropriate procedures
- Difficulty in reprogramming protocols
- Iatrogenic risks



# Is ethics operationalisable?



**NO DOUBTS THAT YOU CAN OPERATIONALISE NORMS,  
INCLUDING ETHICAL (MORAL) NORMS, BUT COULD YOU  
OPERATIONALISE ETHICAL REASONING?**



# Morality and Ethics

**‘Morality’** refers to an actual or an ideal set of principles, virtues, standards, etc. according to which people should live and/or act.

**‘Ethics’** refers either

- 1) to the process of enquiring about morality, its nature and rationale,
- 2) or to the result of that enquiry



# Ethics is not Etiquette

The term “ethics” has been often misused in the current debate on privacy. People tend to confuse ethics with morality, as though ethics were matter of providing individuals and society with guidance to behave.

Yet ethics is not etiquette, it is not a manual to be followed, rather it is a philosophical enquiry about concepts involved in practical reasoning.



# What is finally ethics?



- **Investigation on notions involved in actions**, say, notions such as good and evil, right and duty, virtues, obligations, free will, etc., their foundation and their rationale
- **Investigation on claims made in these terms**, their soundness and consistency.
- **Investigation on practical problems** which involve the notions of good and evil, right and duty, virtues, obligations, free will, etc, and the assessment of the rationale behind each option of action.

# Metaphysics Foundation of Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is based on a central metaphysics assumption, say the existence of free will (or in more secular terms of “free agency”). Only if there is free agency there are “actions”, say, events that are controlled, at least in part, by an agent.

If there were not agency, all actions would be just facts determined by causal chains, actors would not have any responsibility for their actions, and normative ethics would not simply make sense.



# Is normative ethics illusory? - 1



- **Buddha:**

There is free action, there is retribution, but I see no agent that passes out from one set of momentary elements into another one, except the [connection] of those elements

- **Baruch Spinoza:**

Experience teaches us no less clearly than reason, that men believe themselves free, simply because they are conscious of their actions, and unconscious of the causes whereby those actions are determined

- **David Hume:**

- The doctrine of liberty [is] absurd... in one sense, and unintelligible in any other.

- The action itself may be blameable... . But the person is not responsible for it; and as it proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable or constant, and leaves nothing of that nature behind it, 'tis impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment or vengeance

## Is normative ethics illusory? - 2



- **Thrasymachus:**

I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger

- **John Locke:**

The will in truth, signifies nothing but a power, or ability, to prefer or choose

- **Friedrich Nietzsche**

The noble type of man experiences itself as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, "what is injurious to me is injurious in itself"; it knows itself to be that which first accords honor to things; it is value-creating

# Is normative ethics illusory? - 3



- **Karl Marx**

The phantoms formed in the human brain are, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.

- **Sigmund Freud**

'Natural' ethics, as it is called, has nothing to offer here except the narcissistic satisfaction of being able to think oneself better than others. At this point the ethics based on religion introduces its promises of a better after-life. But so long as virtue is not rewarded here on earth, ethics will, I fancy, preach in vain. I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction than any ethical commands; but the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured and made useless for practical purposes by a fresh idealistic misconception of human nature

Ethics is a never ending enquiry, ethics is not about norms, is about liberty





Ethics is not the point of arrival, ethics is the journey



# Journey to the end of the night (L.F.Celine) - 1

- Why struggle, waiting is good enough, since everything is bound to end up in the street. Basically, only the street counts. Why deny it? It's waiting for us. One of these days we'll have to make up our minds and go down into the street, not one or two or three of us, but all. We stand on the brink, we simmer and fuss, but never mind, the time will come.



## Journey to the end of the night (L.F.Celine) - 2

- Interiors are no good. As soon as a door closes on a man, he begins to smell and everything he has on him smells too. Body and soul, he deteriorates. He rots. It serves us right if people stink. We should have looked after them. We should have taken them out, evicted them, exposed them to the air. All things that stink are indoors, they preen themselves, but they stink all the same.



## Journey to the end of the night (L.F.Celine) - 3

- Speaking of families, I know a pharmacist on the Avenue de Saint-Ouen who had a marvelous sign in his window, a lovely advertisement: One bottle (price three francs) will purge the whole family. Isn't that great! They all belch! . . . and shit together, familywise. They hate one another's guts, the essence of home life, but no one complains because after all it's cheaper than living in a hotel.



Don't turn the ethical impact into just an impact





Thank you for your attention

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