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## But Is That Ethical? Ask This App.

By *Steve Kolowich*

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The disclaimer on Santa Clara University's new mobile app strikes an ominous tone:

“In no event will we be liable for any loss or damage arising out of, or in connection with, the use of this website/app.”

Then again the [Ethical Decision Making](#) app, developed by the university's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, aims for more-consequential uses than, say, Fruit Ninja or Angry Birds. The Santa Clara ethicists hope that people who make decisions that will change lives—business leaders, hospital administrators, and school officials, for instance—will use the app as a guide.

The Ethical Decision Making app is an attempt to bring applied ethics into 21st century. It is not so much a [Magic 8-Ball](#) as a pocket [Socrates](#), which is to say the app asks more questions than it answers. The idea is that someone facing a decision can use it to evaluate each possible option.

Once the user gets past the disclaimer, the app asks him or her to list all the stakeholders in the decision. The app then asks the user to consider the implications of the option at hand according to five categories of “good”: utility (“Does this action produce the most good and do the least harm for all who are affected?”), rights (“Does my action best respect the rights of all who have a stake?”), justice (“Does this action treat people equally or proportionally?”), virtue (“Does this option lead me to act as the sort of person I want to be?”), and the common good (“Does this action best serve the community as a whole, not just some members?”).

For each of the five categories, the user rates where the option would fall on a scale of “more good” to “more harm,” and so on. The app also asks the user to assign a weight to each of the five categories that reflects how important it is.

Then the app spits out a number. The number supposedly represents how ethical the option would be on a scale of 1 to 100, according to the values supplied by the user.

Not surprisingly, the idea of using a mobile app as an ethical consultant has struck some people as silly. “It references terms the noneducated in ethics won’t understand & is hilariously oversimplistic for those who are,” [wrote one skeptic](#) on Twitter.

But simplicity is part of the idea, says Miriam Schulman, assistant director of the applied-ethics center.

“We tend to work with people where the rubber meets the road,” she says. The point is not to get a client up to speed on thousands of years of moral philosophy, says Ms.

Schulman. Instead, it's to get him or her to deliberate in a slightly more organized way.

It remains to be seen whether anybody will use the Ethical Decision Making app. Ms. Schulman says it has been downloaded 1,580 times since its release, in mid-April. The app can also be used on the web, where it has received just over 2,300 unique page views. However, Ms. Schulman does not know how many times those users actually consulted the app in making decisions.



### Steve Kolowich

Steve Kolowich was a senior reporter for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He wrote about extraordinary people in ordinary times, and ordinary people in extraordinary times.



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