

Ethics as Emergent Constraint Regimes — A Structural Account

© 2025-2026 Michael Semprevivo

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You cannot fail to give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

To view a copy of this license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

This paper offers a structural account of ethics as an emergent coordination regime arising from interactions among purposive systems under constraint. Ethics is not treated as a source of normativity, obligation, or moral authority, nor as a domain of evaluative truth. Instead, ethical regimes are shown to arise inevitably when purposive systems share constrained possibility spaces and interfere with one another's trajectories. The account explains why ethical salience tracks harm, coercion, freedom, and responsibility; why institutions and enforcement mechanisms appear; and why moral disagreement persists, without answering questions about what ought to be done, which actions are justified, or which systems are legitimate. Ethics is situated as a downstream structural phenomenon: a stabilizing response to coordination pressure, not a foundation for moral verdicts.

1. Scope, Authority, and Structural Firewalls

This paper operates strictly downstream of Informational Ontology (revision 5.1) and presupposes the fixed regime sequence $\Delta \rightarrow R \rightarrow I \rightarrow A \rightarrow V \rightarrow M \rightarrow P$. No definitions from the ontology or its derivative papers are revised, supplemented, or reinterpreted. No moral primitives are introduced.

Where evaluative or ethical language appears, it is treated explicitly as a downstream interpretive overlay on structural phenomena rather than as a source of obligation, correctness, or authority.

Structural Firewall (Non-Normativity Enforcement): Terms such as ethical, harm, coercion, freedom, responsibility, regulation, or stability do not function normatively in this paper. They denote patterns of constraint interaction, salience distribution, and trajectory interference. References to stability or persistence describe descriptive attractors of coordination under constraint, not standards of legitimacy or endorsement.

2. Why Ethics Arises at All

Once purposive systems exist, they generate trajectories: extended patterns of constraint modulation across time. When multiple purposive systems occupy overlapping constraint spaces, their trajectories interfere. Such interference is structurally unavoidable wherever systems coexist.

Interference produces coordination pressure: a condition in which unconstrained pursuit of individual trajectories destabilizes shared persistence. Ethics arises when this pressure becomes durable and salient enough that unmanaged interference threatens the continued viability of shared constraint spaces.

3. Ethics as a Coordination Regime

Ethics is not ontological. It is not a foundational feature of reality, a value theory, or an extension of meaning. Ethical regimes are coordination regimes: stable patterns that structure how purposes may be pursued in shared possibility spaces.

Ethical regimes do not declare purposes right or wrong. They stabilize interaction without conferring moral authority or legitimacy.

4. When Coordination Becomes Ethical

Not all coordination constitutes ethics. An ethical regime arises only when:

1. Multiple purposive systems occupy overlapping possibility spaces;
2. Trajectory interference constrains future continuations;
3. Responsibility attribution becomes operationally necessary to stabilize coordination;
4. Constraint-scaling or enforcement mechanisms become relevant;
5. Persistent justificatory discourse becomes a coordination handle.

These conditions distinguish ethical regimes from technical, mechanical, or purely economic coordination.

5. Trajectory Interference and Ethical Salience

Ethical salience attaches to trajectories, not isolated acts. Three forms of interference generate ethical salience:

- Constraint-collapsing interference: elimination of alternatives;
- Constraint-channeling interference: bias without closure;
- Constraint-saturating interference: cumulative closure over time.

Folk ethical terms such as harm, coercion, and freedom track these interference patterns as downstream interpretive overlays.

6. Responsibility Without Desert

Responsibility is structural traceability under constraint. It tracks availability of alternatives, salience access, and participation in constraint propagation. Responsibility is graded and regime-relative. It does not imply desert, intrinsic blameworthiness, or justification of suffering.

7. Institutions as Constraint-Scaling Mechanisms

Institutions emerge as coordination amplifiers under scale. They shape salience, allocate responsibility, and stabilize ethical regimes across time. Institutions carry no presumption of legitimacy and may stabilize harmful or exclusionary coordination as readily as cooperative forms.

8. Enforcement Without Retribution

Punishment is treated as a folk label for enforcement interventions. Structurally, enforcement reconfigures salience and constraint distributions upstream. Once constraint collapse has occurred, enforcement cannot reconstruct lost alternatives. This is a structural limit claim, not a policy recommendation.

9. Why Ethical Disagreement Persists

Ethical regimes arise from historically contingent constraint configurations. Disagreement is inevitable because different systems face different interference patterns and path dependencies. The framework brackets stance-level metaethics: realism, anti-realism,

relativism, and nihilism are downstream interpretive positions over the same structural phenomenon.

10. Explicit Non-Claims

This paper does not provide action guidance, ground obligations, justify institutions or punishment, resolve ethical dilemmas, rank moral systems, or claim moral authority.

11. Conclusion

Ethics is an emergent coordination regime arising when purposive systems interfere under shared constraint. It explains how systems continue together without normativity, desert, or moral truth.