Solving Ethical Contradictions

Meaningful Change In An Edge-Of-Chaos World

By

Darrell Mann

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*"We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity
to the other-centred concept of truth.
We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey,
but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly
and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.
Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility;
whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity
of the moral life and the opacity of persons.
We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of
our being;
it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress
takes place.
Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention not of will.
We need a new vocabulary of attention."*

Iris Murdoch

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These are times of ethical overload. Decision-making environments are more complex, stakeholders more diverse, and moral expectations more demanding than ever. In the face of this complexity, humans often search for clarity through frameworks, values, or principles that promise stability. But what if real ethical progress requires doing the opposite – not to resolve ambiguity too quickly, but to stay with it long enough to understand what it's trying to teach?

This book takes its starting point from Iris Murdoch's powerful call for a "new vocabulary of attention." In a few short lines, she reverses many of the assumptions of modern ethical thinking: that moral behaviour is the product of individual willpower; that sincerity is a reliable measure of moral worth; that we are self-contained agents acting upon the world.

Instead, Murdoch suggests that lives are lived within systems of meaning that are only partly understand, and that morality is not a matter of assertiveness, but of perception. Attention becomes a moral act – not merely noticing more, but noticing differently. Noticing the relationships between things, the unseen tensions, the contradictions.

This book is about those contradictions.

Across disciplines – leadership, design, innovation, governance – the same patterns are encountered: a leader who must choose between loyalty and fairness; an engineer torn between cost and sustainability; a product team struggling to satisfy both privacy and personalisation. These are not simple problems with obvious answers. They are ethical

contradictions – value-versus-value conflicts with no easy middle ground.

Too often, these dilemmas are framed as trade-offs. But that frame constrains unnecessarily. What if, instead of asking which side wins, the question became what lies between them? What if the contradiction itself – rather than being a flaw to iron out – is the very source of ethical creativity?

The book proposes that many of the most intractable ethical dilemmas being faced today cannot be solved within the existing moral vocabulary. They demand a shift – a language capable of describing tension, paradox, ambiguity, and transformation. That language shift begins here.

Readers will encounter ideas drawn from systems thinking, innovation theory, philosophy, and conflict resolution – but all pointing toward a central aim: to cultivate a new kind of attention. One that sees contradiction not as a deadlock, but as an opportunity for transcendence – a generative act that goes beyond compromise, without denying the legitimacy of the opposing values involved.

Murdoch wrote that humans are "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy." Fantasy, in this context, is not imagination – it is simplification. It is the dream of moral neatness. In contrast, ethical contradiction demands dwelling in the real: tangled, dynamic, relational.

If this book succeeds, it will not be because it offers final answers. It will be because it sharpens the ability to see, name, and navigate the contradictions that abound and surround.

There's a famous line from Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing new under the sun."

It's a humbling thought – and one that might seem to undercut the very idea of progress. But anyone that has spent any time working across multiple disciplines, or trying to make change in complex systems, will likely recognise the deeper truth behind it: the real breakthroughs tend not to come from discovering something entirely new, but from seeing something familiar in an unfamiliar way.

This author has spent the better part of thirty years working with clients across every domain of human endeavour – often those wrestling with thorny, high-stakes, innovation-shaped problems – and through all of that time, has returned again and again to one core idea: someone, somewhere has already solved the problem. The trick is that the someone is almost never working in the domain.

This is where William Gibson's now-ubiquitous line comes in:

"The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed."

Most readers interpret Gibson's words geographically, imagining different technologies emerging in different places. But over time, some have come to see it differently: as a statement about knowledge domains. The future exists in fragments, scattered across professional silos, industry paradigms, and epistemic traditions that rarely speak to one another.

The author's work has largely taken place in the liminal spaces between those domains, a career of building bridges, sometimes literally, between aerospace engineers and city planners, or between policy advisors and AI ethicists. In that sense, he considers himself extraordinarily lucky. He's had a front-row seat to what will be

referred to through the book as horizontal wisdom: the pattern-language of breakthrough ideas that emerges when people stop trying to climb higher in their own field, and instead start walking sideways through others.

This book is the result of that journey. Or rather, one path through the web of contradictions encountered along the way.

Some of what follows may feel familiar. Some will not. The hope is that every reader will find at least one point of resonance – something that connects to what is already known, felt, or intuited. But there is also a hope something else will be found: something strange, surprising, or dissonant. Because that's where the work begins – not in the ideas themselves, but in what happens between them.

It's easy enough to collect dots. Society is awash in insights, case studies, tools, frameworks. The harder – and more valuable – task is learning how to connect them. Not just any connections, though. Not arbitrary lines or easy analogies. But the kind of connections that have structure. Integrity. Coherence. In other words, the kind that are governed not by personal preference, but by what might be called meta-rules. Heuristics for how rules relate to other rules. Patterns for how principles combine.

Tolstoy once wrote that while every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, every happy family is alike. The same is true of ethical contradictions: each one may appear unique, but step back far enough and they all become the self-same clashes. There are a million ways to deal with these clashes badly, and, it turns out, a very small number of ways to deal with them well.

That's the invitation of this book: to look more closely at those clashes, not to flatten them or resolve them prematurely, but to dwell in the

space between. And to learn a new vocabulary – of attention, of transcendence, of connection – that helps leaders, policy-makers and everyone else act more wisely, with more precision, and with more care.

What follows is not a philosophy text, though it draws from deep wells of moral philosophy. Nor is it just a toolkit, though readers will find patterns and heuristics here that can be applied practically. Rather, this book offers a structured method, one that has been made possible by adapting and extending work from one of those rare accidental, world-changing pieces of research that still, nearly eighty years after the work began, almost no-one has heard of, TRIZ[1].

Originally developed as a system for creative problem solving in engineering, TRIZ (the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving) was born from the observation that the most innovative solutions across thousands of patents weren't random acts of genius, they followed identifiable patterns. The exact same patterns that, once they became visible, all used the same inventive principles, repeating again and again across every different domain[sample:2-8].

The same, it turns out, is true of moral and ethical challenges.

By reverse-engineering moral dilemmas – from policy to medicine, from classic novels to corporate boardrooms – and studying cases in which contradictions have been genuinely transcended (not merely resolved or evaded), it became possible to find the outlines of a new kind of method. One that does not aim to resolve ethical conflict by choosing sides or splitting the difference, but by elevating the problem space and changing the question entirely.

This is the heart of what's to come.

Some of the raw material comes from history and real-world case studies. Much comes from literature, that strange territory where, as Picasso said, we tell lies in order to tell the truth. In fiction, problem solvers are often freer to explore the full emotional, psychological, and moral texture of a dilemma. And those explorations, in turn, offer insight into how real people – not idealised rational agents – struggle, grow, and sometimes transcend.

This book is for anyone that has ever felt that ethical overload, that feeling that today's ethical challenges are more complex than traditional frameworks can handle. What the world needs right now isn't another binary or rulebook, it needs new ways for thinking structurally and seeing relationally. A way to surface and examine the assumptions that lock contradictions in place, and to find principled paths through and beyond them.

This is where the story begins. In no-man's land. In the wilderness. In the space between.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Modern society is increasingly defined by impossible choices. In politics, workplaces, families, and communities, individuals find themselves caught in situations that appear to offer no morally satisfying outcome. Climate action versus economic stability. Safety versus privacy. Freedom of expression versus protection from harm. Care for others versus care for oneself.

The pattern is familiar: two cherished values collide, positions harden, and public discourse fragments into opposing camps. The prevailing assumption is that a choice must be made, that one value must be prioritised at the expense of another. Whichever path is taken, something important is sacrificed.

This persistent experience of moral deadlock has left many with a sense that ethical conversations are stuck. Not because people have become less principled, but because inherited ways of thinking about morality no longer match the complexity of the modern world. Ethical tools developed for simpler eras are now being applied to multidimensional problems for which they were never designed.

Before exploring how this book reframes such dilemmas, it is worth beginning with a recent, globally significant example that exposed this pattern with unusual clarity.

The Delusion of Trade-offs

In 2021, the debate over vaccine mandates swept across workplaces, governments, and communities around the world. On one side stood

appeals to public health, solidarity, and protection of the vulnerable. On the other, arguments rooted in personal liberty, bodily autonomy, and distrust in centralised authority.

It looked like a classic ethical impasse: protect the many, or preserve individual choice? Policy-makers, business leaders, and ordinary citizens found themselves split – often bitterly – across these lines. One side accused the other of selfishness; the other responded with accusations of authoritarianism.

But look more closely, and something subtler emerges.

Very few people – on either side – believed that liberty should be absolute. And almost no one believed that collective well-being didn't matter. What differed was where the line was drawn. One person's "necessary precaution" was another's "unacceptable overreach." And both imagined that the only way forward was to choose between values – or split the difference in an uneasy compromise.

This is the central failure being confronting in this book.

Modern day humans are taught to think of moral dilemmas as choices between competing goods, to be traded off or balanced like weights on a scale. But this framing hides something vital: most moral conflicts endure not because the values are incompatible, but because the tools to reconcile them at a higher level are missing.

The work of this book begins with a bold hypothesis:

There is no such thing as a true moral trade-off.

Anyone believing it is necessary to sacrifice liberty to preserve equality, or authority to preserve benevolence, is caught inside the original frame of the problem. Navigating a spectrum, not a solution.

To resolve the contradiction, it is necessary to leave the spectrum entirely.

A third dimension must be found – a different way of framing, structuring, or designing the context in which the dilemma appears. In engineering terms (and plenty from engineering will be borrowed), it means transcending a technical contradiction by redefining system boundaries.

This is not fantasy. It has happened – in organisations, in legal systems, in literature, in history – millions of times. But what's been lacking is a consistent way to understand how such transcendence happens, and therefore, there has been no method for teaching or repeating it.

The STABLE framework introduced in this book provides a way to map moral dimensions systematically. And once these dimensions have been mapped, it becomes possible to not only see where the conflicts arise, but how to escape them.

Across the 15 pairwise contradictions within the framework – Sanctity, Togetherness, Authority, Benevolence, Liberty, Equality – this book will examine real-world and literary case studies where these tensions were at play. But not to show who was right and who was wrong. Instead, the focus will be placed on the rare individuals and groups who, through blood, guts, sweat and tears found new ground – a third perspective – that rendered the original contradiction obsolete.

If that sounds abstract now, don't worry. Here it is in action.

Vaccine Mandates and the Liberty–Togetherness Contradiction

The Contradiction, in STABLE terms, is one between liberty and togetherness. Liberty stands for autonomy, freedom of choice, self-determination. Togetherness stands for social cohesion, mutual responsibility, collective wellbeing. During the COVID pandemic, this contradiction played out dramatically:

Do individuals have the right to decline a vaccine?

Do societies have the right (or duty) to demand compliance for the sake of others?

Most governments defaulted to trade-off logic – either prioritise public health through mandates (sacrificing liberty) or respect liberty fully (risking social harm).

But what might a contradiction-transcending solution look like?

Let's look at how different jurisdictions handled this – and what can be learned.

a) Trade-off Models: Coercion or Abdication

France (2021): France instituted strict vaccine mandates for healthcare workers and implemented a "health pass" system barring unvaccinated individuals from restaurants, trains, and other public places.

Result: High uptake of vaccines, but deepened public distrust and protests. Togetherness was achieved, but at the cost of a large portion of the population feeling coerced and alienated.

Texas, USA (2021): No vaccine mandates; businesses were even banned from requiring proof of vaccination.

Result: Strong preservation of liberty rhetoric, but weakened social cohesion, strain on health services, and extended spread in vulnerable populations.

These are classic trade-offs – privileging one moral value at the expense of the other. No transcendence. No resolution. Only polarisation.

b) "Third Way" Examples: Reframing the System Boundary

Denmark: The "Soft Mandate" and Participatory Framing: Rather than imposing hard mandates, Denmark engaged in widespread public dialogue and trust-building through respected health authorities.

Made vaccines extremely accessible (mobile vans, on-the-spot clinics).

Allowed exemptions, but coupled them with clear explanations and invitations to community solidarity.

Used nudging rather than coercion: vaccine passports were required for certain venues, but people felt it was their choice to engage with those contexts.

Result: Very high vaccine uptake, minimal protest, high trust in public institutions.

Transcendence insight: Instead of collapsing the problem into a forced binary, Denmark redesigned the structure of choice itself. People retained liberty but were invited – not ordered – to act in the name of togetherness.

At a more mundane level came another flash of contradiction-breaking insight. As with many other Western nations, for some reason toilet rolls went through periods of extreme shortage in supermarkets and stores. Not because supply chains were disrupted so much as because many individuals took it upon themselves to stockpile the now seemingly precious commodity. Media channels filled with images of consumers wheeling trolley-loads of toilet rolls out of supermarkets. Once the run became visible, everyone else had little choice but to follow suit. Despite retailers saying that there was no overall shortage, panic-buying quickly created strange boom-and-bust cycles. Social minded retailers started imposing limits on how many rolls consumers were able to purchase. That quickly devolved into security guards patrolling toilet roll aisles to ensure compliance. That further devolved into fights. Otherwise sane individuals literally fighting over toilet rolls.

Danish retailers quickly derived a much simpler solution. Buy one multi-roll pack of toilet rolls for the usual 300DKK price; purchase a second multi-roll pack for 3000DKK. Simple. No need for security guards. No more boom-and-bust purchase cycles. Every consumer was free to purchase a second multi-roll pack should they wish. Other consumers were free to mock them[1].

Bhutan: Cultural Framing of Togetherness

Bhutan achieved one of the fastest and most complete adult vaccination rollouts in the world. How?

Vaccination was framed in spiritual and community terms: seen as an act of compassion, karma, and care for others.

Religious leaders were involved from the beginning.

No mandates – just moral narrative grounded in cultural meaning.

Result: Near-universal voluntary vaccination, no protests, and widespread civic pride.

Transcendence insight: Bhutan didn't pit liberty and togetherness against each other. Instead, it translated public health into the language of belonging, allowing people to act freely as part of something larger.

Japan: Pressure Without Force

No legal mandates.

Heavy use of social expectation, public signage, and community visibility to create a shared norm.

Clear communication about societal roles, without criminalising dissent.

Result: High vaccination rates, especially among elders, with minimal resistance.

Transcendence insight: Japan exploited a third axis – shame vs. blame – encouraging individuals to act for the collective without institutionalising the sacrifice of liberty.

Taiwan: Solving the Contradiction Before It Arrives

While many countries were still debating whether to prioritise liberty or togetherness, Taiwan did something different: it designed a system that wouldn't need to sacrifice either.

What They Did

Pre-emptive preparation: After the 2003 SARS outbreak, Taiwan built the legal, technological, and public health infrastructure to detect and respond to future pandemics swiftly.

Integrated data systems: Within weeks of the first COVID reports, Taiwan connected immigration data with health records to flag potential infection risks in real time – something many Western democracies would have struggled to do because of privacy-law constraints.

Digital fencing: Quarantine monitoring was managed using mobile phones and gentle digital nudging (e.g., texts, location pings), not harsh surveillance.

Transparent communication: Daily press briefings built public trust, and public input was encouraged on how data should be handled.

Civic inclusion: Hacktivist communities (like g0v) were integrated into policymaking and communication efforts, ensuring that liberty was not framed as oppositional to social good – it was embedded in the response.

The Result:

Minimal lockdowns.

High trust in public messaging.

Near universal mask use – voluntarily.

Extremely low case counts and deaths, especially in the first year of the pandemic.

Transcendence Insight:

Taiwan exemplified a different kind of third way: designing for contradiction-resilience ahead of time. Unlike Denmark or Bhutan, Taiwan didn't need to reframe the problem once it arrived. It had already engineered a moral architecture where liberty and togetherness were not in zero-sum tension – because it recognised that the moral dilemma was predictable and designable.

This is a key lesson for readers of this book:

Not all ethical dilemmas need to be solved at the moment of crisis. Some can be anticipated, and their contradictions resolved through structural foresight.

What's New Here?

These "third way" cases are not perfect – in complex adaptive systems, no solution is. But they show how different framings and system boundaries can allow both values to be expressed without collapse into zero-sum logic.

Each example reveals a meta-principle of contradiction-transcendence:

Denmark: Change the architecture of choice.

Bhutan: Reframe the dilemma in cultural-moral language.

Japan: Harness social norms without institutional mandates.

In contrast, the trade-off models (France, Texas and most other Western countries) relied on force versus freedom strategies, producing predictable backlashes.

What It Teaches About Ethical Contradictions

The framework about to be unveiled removes the usual pretence that liberty and togetherness are opposite ends of some kind of moral seesaw. They are dimensions, not endpoints. And, crucially, they can coexist.

The lesson is not about vaccines per se. It's about designing responses to dilemmas that don't just toggle between options, but transform the space in which the options live. Finding a third way. Systematically, repeatably and reliably.

As will be explored in the coming chapters, the tools for doing this are available. Albeit most people – especially those formally tasked with thinking about moral and ethical issues – aren't aware of them. What's been missing is the map, the methodology, and the shared vocabulary. And, tellingly, a common and meaningful understanding of the importance of breaking rules…

What Indiana Jones Teaches Innovators About Ethical Contradictions

…Innovation always begins with a rule being broken. Every breakthrough – scientific, artistic, social, or technological – is, at its inception, an act of disobedience. Yet woven into this truth is a fundamental ethical contradiction:

We are taught to follow the rules. But progress requires us to break them.

Indiana Jones may be a fictional character, but he embodies this tension perfectly. He is not a lawless rebel. He is a professor of archaeology – a custodian of history, culture, and academic rigour. He

represents *the system*. And yet, when the moment demands it, he steps outside the sanctioned script.

Consider the famous marketplace scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: a skilled swordsman flourishes his blade, ready for a cinematic duel. Tradition, honour, and "the rules of engagement" dictate that Jones should draw his whip and fight fair. Instead, Indiana sighs, pulls out a gun, and ends the fight in a single, pragmatic shot.

He breaks the "rule of the duel" – and audiences cheer.

Why?
Because Indy isn't breaking a principle – he's breaking a ritual that no longer serves the principle. The principle is survival, mission, and protecting something sacred. The duel-rule is a convention. A script. A tradition that has outlived its usefulness.

This is the innovator's ethical dilemma in miniature:

Follow the Rules	Break the Rules
Provides safety, trust, and shared expectation	Enables progress, creativity, and better futures
Prevents chaos and exploitation	Prevents stagnation and dogmatic decay
Ethics as compliance	Ethics as courage

Innovation becomes unethical when rules are broken merely for self-gain, ego, or disruption for its own sake.

But it becomes *necessary* when rules obscure the very values they were created to protect.

Indiana Jones is not admired because he ignores rules – he is admired because he knows which rules to honour, which rules to reinterpret, and which rules must be broken to serve a higher ethical purpose.

This is the core of *ethical contradictions*:

A rule can be morally right in principle while being ethically wrong in practice.

And so the question for innovators is not "Should the rules be broken?"
The real question is:

Which rules protect what is worth protecting – and which rules now stand in the way of what is good?

In that gap lies the frontier of ethical progress. And every leader, every inventor, every reformer eventually stands before their own marketplace moment, asking:

Do I follow the script, or do I do what is right?

The heart of this book – the *how* of "doing what is right" – arrives in Chapters 10 and 11. There, it hopefully becomes clear that whatever ethical dilemma an individual, team, institution or nation faces, someone, somewhere, has already solved a version of it. Those solutions are not mysterious or reserved for a select few; they are accessible to anyone who knows where, and how, to look.

But reaching that core requires a journey, a re-examination of the foundational pillars of how humans have evolved to see the world and make meaning: Change. Complexity. Contradiction. Systems. Directionality. Values. Truth. And meaning itself. Solving ethical contradictions becomes *inevitable* when these are understood. And almost impossible when they are not. Individuals often believe they understand them, yet they rarely mean the same thing by them. As a result, people often end up speaking past one another, inhabiting isolated moral worlds.

To repair this fragmentation, Chapters 2–9 dismantle the old conceptual scaffolding and rebuild it on clearer ground. Once that groundwork is laid, and once the world's most comprehensive contradiction-solving knowledge base has been revealed, the pieces are brought together into a practical method. Chapters 14–16 apply that method to real case studies so that, by then, every reader is equipped to work through ethical contradictions of any kind.

A final trio of chapters explores leadership, AI, and wisdom – before returning full circle back to Indiana Jones, a hero who, it transpires, knows a lot about two of the three, and surprisingly more than might be imagined about the third.

Chapter 2
Change?

"All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
is Change.
God
is Change."

Octavia E. Butler

The Man Who Broke the Curve

In the early 1960s, the high jump was a settled science. Coaches, athletes, and commentators all agreed on what "good" technique looked like. The dominant styles – the Straddle, the Western Roll, the Scissors – had been refined over decades. Small improvements were still possible, but only at the margins. A slightly faster run-up, a fractionally stronger take-off, a cleaner bar clearance. The sport was a game of inches, and inching forward had become a way of life.

Athletes trained obsessively to perfect the accepted techniques. Coaches analysed film, angles, foot placement. Every detail was fine-tuned. The belief was simple: the way to jump higher was to do the same thing, but better. That was the script.

And then there was a lanky teenager from Oregon named Dick Fosbury.

By most measures, Fosbury wasn't destined for greatness. He lacked the explosive power of his competitors. He struggled to master the orthodox techniques. At school meets, he was often middling – sometimes closer to last than first. His coaches tried to mould him into the standard form. He tried, failed, tried again. The technique worked for others – why wouldn't it work for him?

But what Fosbury had, without yet realising it, was something far rarer than physical talent. He had permission to question the script.

Out of frustration more than genius, he began to tinker. What if he approached the bar differently? What if he turned his back? What if the body could travel over the bar in a shape no textbook had ever drawn? Most of his early attempts were awkward, ungainly, and frankly ridiculous. Spectators laughed. Other athletes stared. His coach was baffled. High jump was not a sport known for experimental rule-bending. And a teenager contorting himself backwards over the bar looked more like a mistake than an innovation.

Yet, little by little, something changed.

As he refined his unusual technique, Fosbury discovered something the experts had missed. By arching his body backwards over the bar – what would eventually be known as the Fosbury Flop – the jumper's centre of gravity could pass underneath the bar, even while the body went over it. Physics, not tradition, became his ally.

It wasn't another tiny incremental improvement. It was a different game entirely.

By the time he reached the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the awkward experiment had matured into a disciplined method. The world watched, expecting the same styles they had always seen.

Instead, they saw a young man sprint towards the bar, rotate as if mid-flight, and glide backwards over it with a kind of effortless defiance. He cleared 2.24 metres and claimed the gold medal.

Commentators didn't quite know what to say. The crowd roared.

But the most remarkable part was what happened next.

Within a few years, almost every elite high jumper on the planet had abandoned the old techniques and adopted the Flop. The world record surged. The invisible ceiling that the sport had been pressing against for decades suddenly lifted. Fosbury had not improved the old approach – he had rendered it obsolete.

And in doing so, he demonstrated a truth that sits at the heart of all transformative change:

The breakthrough did not come from doing the accepted thing better.

It came from changing the thing being accepted.

Fosbury didn't climb the existing curve; he jumped to a new one.

Most people and most institutions never make that kind of leap. They perfect the familiar. They optimise the known. They trust the script. And yet, every so often, someone like Fosbury appears – not to improve the rules, but to rewrite them.

Then, most stories of innovation end at the triumph – the medal raised, the headlines printed, the old guard silenced. But the deeper lesson in Fosbury's story emerges not from 1968, but from what unfolded long afterwards.