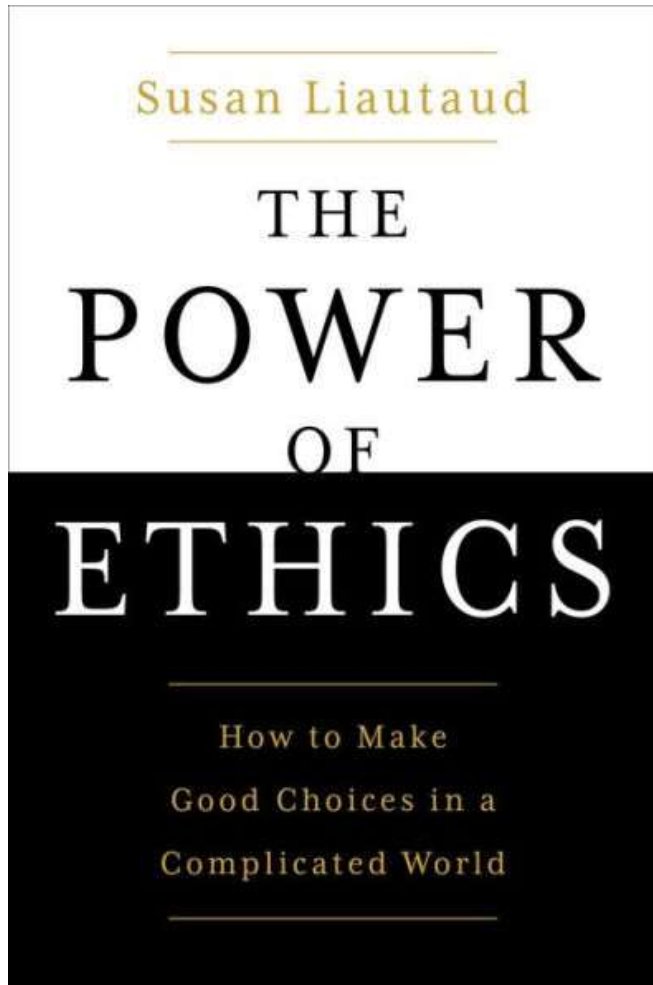


Liautaud provides a map for these trying times

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“The Power of Ethics: How to Make Good Choices in a Complicated World” by Susan Liautaud. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021. 304 pages, \$28 (hardcover).



“Every day we face challenges with uncertain and long-term consequences,” Susan Liautaud cautions in “The Power of Ethics: How to Make Good Choices in a Complicated World,” her new book on a facet of modern life that continues to evolve at an ever-increasing pace. “What do you do if you don’t like any of the candidates in a major election? Should you share a photo of your child on Facebook? What should you consider before you spit into a vial and send your DNA off for genetic analysis? Should you hire a robot caregiver to help look after your elderly parents?”

“The repercussions are not always easy to see, but the first step is to know what to look for,” she continues. “Ethical decision-making is not about seeking perfection. Nor is it about assigning blame or criticism. Rather, I hope to give you a positive, deliberate approach to problem-solving – and a strong foundation for resilience and recovery from those inevitable human moments when we and others make mistakes.”

When I was growing up, questions of good or bad, yes or no, black or white, seemed to be rather straight-forward. In fact, I don’t recall

spending much time even thinking about what I should do when faced with a situation that had ethical considerations. Sadly, those days are no more. Every judgment we make these days seems fraught with potential moral quandaries; determination of the critical distinction between right and wrong seems less obvious. Thankfully, Liautaud provides a framework for deciphering the correct course of action given the murky landscape we all seem to be navigating these days.

One of the features I really enjoyed was the author’s liberal use of everyday examples to illustrate her primary points – examples that often seemed ripped from recent headlines. Her prose is peppered with case studies that serve to bring her thesis to life in a visceral and often profound manner. For instance, Liautaud’s discussion of the ethical challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence, or A.I., in “Blurred Boundaries,” the fifth chapter, is especially intriguing.

“The Power of Ethics” has 65 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, eight comprehensive chapters and epilogue that constitute the main narrative. Moreover, the chapters are structured around the six forces the author says drive all ethics; i.e., the banished binary, scattered

power, contagion, crumbling pillars, blurred boundaries and compromised truth. “These forces are at play in almost every ethical challenge we face: seeking success at work, raising children, engaging in conversations about major stories in the news, navigating tricky friendships, integrating ethics into our spirituality and more.”

Liautaud’s literary style is fairly easy to traverse and would be of interest to a general audience as well as anyone who has a more vested interest in the subject matter; certainly, it is a resource that conscientious leaders in a variety of areas would find extremely useful. “As we consider how humanoid robots fit into society, we can learn from our delayed ethics responses to previous pervasive technologies, such as social media and targeted advertising.” Reflect on that for a moment and you’ll get some sense of what I mean.

I found the entire book mesmerizing, as evidenced by the nights I stayed up way too late because it was tough to find the proverbial “stopping place.” But I was totally enamored by “Compromised Truth,” the sixth chapter – and one I found myself re-reading several times to make sure I was appropriately interpreting what Liautaud was trying to convey. Consider the following: “Truth undergirds the framework and the allocation of responsibility for ethics,” she notes. “The epidemic of ‘alternative facts,’ or what I call ‘compromised truth,’ is one of the most insidious and dangerous global systemic risks of our time. Compromised truth is the single greatest threat to humanity: It topples our ability to make ethical decisions. It undercuts trust and our distinction between right and wrong. It sets every one of the drivers of contagion of unethical behavior into motion, weakening our ability to integrate the other five forces driving ethics into our decision-making. And it undergirds every societal risk we face, from climate change to global pandemics to the demise of democracy.”

Pretty heavy-duty stuff for sure.

The founder and managing director of Susan Liautaud & Associates Limited, a consulting firm with a global client base dedicated to helping today’s organizations circumnavigate contemporary ethical dilemmas, Liautaud holds a Ph.D. in social policy from the London School of Economics and Political Science; a juris doctor from Columbia University Law School; an M.A. in Chinese studies from University of London School of Oriental and African Studies; and an M.A. and two B.A.s from Stanford University. The chair of the Council of the London School of Economics and Political Science, she also teaches at Stanford University and continues to work with The Ethics Incubator, a nonprofit platform she established. This is her first book.

“Ethics are part of all life decisions and lifelong learning, from nursery and elementary school activities, to higher education, to on-the-job training and continuing education,” Liautaud asserts near the end of the book. “We have the power to restore crumbling pillars. We can demand and offer greater transparency; we can withhold our consent when we are not properly informed (whatever the reason); and we can redouble our efforts to listen carefully and compassionately and help those around us do the same.”

It’s an understatement that we live in a complex world where hardly anything can be taken at face value. It is precisely this reality that has precipitated a collective longing for something we can hold on to – philosophically as well as literally. One of the first casualties of ambiguity is almost always truth. I believe Liautaud’s insights and recommendations can provide the roadmap we all desperately need during these trying times. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.