






# On the Role of Ethics in Business Process Modeling and Management

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**Abstract:** The growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data-driven techniques for process modeling, and specifically for Business Process Management (BPM), produces immediate, morally significant implications. These encompass both risks (e.g., unfair discrimination) and opportunities (e.g., sustainability). This dual potential emphasizes the need for ethical reflection, spurring an increasing body of research on “responsible” or “ethical” BPM. To this date, this research focused on adapting responsibility approaches from broader discourses such as responsible AI. In this paper, we argue that the current discourse could benefit from a meta-ethical clarification of its conceptual foundations. Specifically, we demonstrate how narrative analysis can systematically structure the discourse, reduce conceptual ambiguities, and address fragmentation. To illustrate this, we extract and examine two contrasting, archetypal narratives about the purpose of ethics in (responsible) BPM: *avoiding issues* and *doing good*. Furthermore, we outline additional dimensions that we perceive as promising for clarification through narrative analysis. Based on our findings, we derive implications for BPM research (and) practice.


**Keywords:** Process modeling, Responsible BPM, Ethical modeling


## 1 Introduction


The widespread use of data-based techniques and artificial intelligence (AI) in process modeling has fundamentally challenged common assumptions that models are morally neutral technical tools [BG24; Ma22]. Ultimately, an argument for such technical neutrality can only be valid if the purpose of the tools in question is excluded from discussion [Lo74]. However, this does not hold in modeling application: as models are intended to support real-world practice, it is an essential property of models that they are designed for a specific purpose (their *pragmatic* orientation) [BG24; St09]. Furthermore, models often prescribe how organizations *ought* to act in specific situations [BG24] – and thus functionally act as moral principles [Ha52].


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In this paper, we examine the moral and ethical dimension of process modeling, focusing on Business Process Management (BPM) as its primary real-world practice. In this context, the importance of ethical considerations becomes visible both in process execution, e.g., when protected groups experience unfair discrimination [Ma22], and on the management level, e.g., erroneous dismissal of a worker due to misleading analysis results [PQV23]. This is emphasized by the increasing application of BPM in domains with significant societal impact such as justice [Al25] and healthcare [Le25]. Because of this, responsible BPM (RBPM) and related topics such as sustainability [LS25] and privacy [Sc24] have seen significant uptake in recent years [AFM25; Ke24].

RBPM research often relies on external theoretical frameworks like responsible AI [Ma22] or value-based engineering [DFS26]. While this has enabled the development of many BPM-specific responsibility techniques, tools, and methods [AFM25; Ke24], an eclectic adoption of various heterogeneous external theories poses a considerable risk of conceptual fragmentation (theoretical incommensurability) [GL15]. Apparent disagreements between different approaches, e.g., about fairness definitions [AFM25], the nature of responsibility [Ma22; WS19], or the specific purpose of ethics in BPM [Ch26; RBS26] can be interpreted as initial evidence of such fragmentation. To address this, we argue for a shift in ethical examination and conceptualization in RBPM research. Previous work has focused on how morals and ethics are practiced in BPM (*descriptive ethics*) and how BPM and business processes should be conducted (*normative ethics*) [Ha25]. This highlights the need to evaluate how ethics is conceptualized in BPM from a *meta-ethical* perspective [Ha52], i.e., to answer the question: *How is ethics conceptualized in BPM research?*

In the following, we explore how narrative analysis (Sec. 2) might drive such inquiry [Pe99]. We will demonstrate this by discussing two contrasting narratives about the *purpose* of ethics in (R)BPM (Section 3). Then, we summarize additional aspects that we perceive as promising to be analyzed in a similar manner (Section 4). Finally, we draw first implications for RBPM research from our results and discuss possible future work (Section 5).

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Ethics, Morals and Responsibility

To capture and analyze the full scope of (meta-)ethical conceptualization in RBPM, we intentionally adopt broad definitions of ethics and related concepts to encompass the full range of definitions present in the literature. Tab. 1 summarizes the philosophical terminology used in this paper. The general purpose of ethics is to address questions such as “*What should I do?*” [Ge23], or, expressed differently, “*as to the manner in which we wish to, and the way we should, live*” [Ge03]. Ethics is typically divided into three types, i.e., descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and meta-ethics [BG24] (see Tab. 1). We explicitly distinguish the discipline of ethics from its object, i.e., *morals*, which are the principles and

Tab. 1: Philosophical terminology as used in this paper

Term	Definition
Ethics	Philosophical discipline concerned with evaluating the actions and decisions of moral agents
Morals	Principles and norms (and sets thereof) guiding actions and decisions of moral agents
Descriptive Ethics	Branch of ethics concerned with investigating existing morals, e.g., as present in specific communities
Normative Ethics	Branch of ethics aiming to develop ethical theories and general norms or principles, e.g., deontology
Meta-Ethics	Branch of ethics concerned with the procedures and semantics of ethics as a discipline, e.g., the meaning of “good” or “ethical”
Responsibility	The ability of a moral agent to justify their action (or decision)

norms that ethical examination is concerned with [Ge23]. Finally, we take *responsibility* broadly as the ability of moral agents to justify their actions [BG24].

## 2.2 Narrative Analysis

The way issues are framed and presented fundamentally shapes their perception and evaluation, and consequently, the ethical dimension of decisions. Narratives determine which aspects of a topic are highlighted as significant and which are disregarded [KES03]. In BPM, this can result in certain actions (e.g., “sustainable practices”) being presented as morally desirable or even imperative, while others (e.g., “cost-cutting at any expense”) are framed as problematic or unacceptable. Such framings are never neutral; they reflect cultural assumptions including everyday narratives or *imaginaries*, which shape the understanding of responsibility and stakeholder concerns [RB21]. The narrative starting point, perspective, and moral interpretation [Wh80] influence whether actions are judged as “good” or “bad”. Narratives also affect attitudes towards technology [BC25].

Fundamentally, narratives represent a coherent sequence of events [Ab21]. They extend beyond mere chronology by linking events into meaningful sequences and highlighting specific causal relationships. Narratives can be analyzed at varying levels of abstraction [Pe99]: a *text* is an actual, particular document (or utterance) that conveys a *story*, which is a narrative presented from a specific point of view; the generic, abstract form of the narrative is called a *fabula*,<sup>6</sup> which is constrained by underlying structures that are called the *generating mechanisms* of the narrative. This paper adopts an inductive approach: we analyze texts to extract the essential elements of their stories, which are then abstracted into overarching

<sup>6</sup> We use the terms “story” and “fabula” according to Pentland [Pe99]. There is a crucial distinction regarding these terms: while they were originally conceived to describe the elements and mechanisms of *fictional* narratives, e.g., in novels and movies, we analyze the *factual* unfolding of underlying conceptual commitments (explicit or implicit but always necessary) in research papers.

Tab. 2: Overview of the two archetypal fabulas

Aspect	Fabula 1	Fabula 2
<i>Theme</i>	Avoid doing bad	Doing good
<i>Actors</i>	Process owner, data/models	Process owner, analyst
<i>Objectives</i>	Mitigate risks and biases	Actively implement “good” practices
<i>Mechanism</i>	Non-maleficence [Be03]	Beneficence [Be03]
<i>Ambiguities</i>	Opaque/deflected responsibility	Context-specific definition of “good”
<i>Examples</i>	Mitigate bias [AFM25], “reduce discrimination” [DFP25]	Design processes “for good” [Ch26], consider stakeholder welfare [Ke24]

fabulas. Through the analysis and comparison of these fabulas, we seek to understand the mechanisms that underlie their generation.

### 2.3 Source Identification and Selection

Since our primary focus is on how ethics and responsibility are conceptualized in BPM research, we focused on studies addressing responsible BPM and related topics (ethical BPM, sustainable BPM). Analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic literature selection process [BC14]. Papers were identified through scientific search engines,<sup>7</sup> reference searching, and by manually screening the proceedings of related conferences (e.g., the BPM main track and Responsible BPM Forum, ICPM, CAiSE). We used a purposive sampling strategy and iteratively added new texts in the analysis until theoretical saturation [Br25] was achieved, i.e., where adding additional texts did not substantially impact the results (abstracted fabulas).

## 3 Two Narratives about the Purpose of Ethics in BPM

In the following, we report the results of our narrative analysis concerning the *purpose of ethics* in responsible BPM. Based on the extracted stories, we abstracted two fabulas, which are summarized in Tab. 2. By contrasting these fabulas, we can understand them as representing two distinct but closely interrelated meta-ethical positions regarding the BPM-specific conceptualizations of ethics underlying each fabula. The two fabulas are intentionally presented as stylized, archetypal narratives to highlight their contrast, whereas stories observed in actual papers may draw on elements from both.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Query: (responsible OR ethical OR sustainable) AND (BPM OR process mining)

<sup>8</sup> N. B.: In no case do we aim to imply that any particular paper explicitly intends to convey a specific narrative. Below, papers are cited solely to exemplify how *elements* of each fabula show in actual texts.

### 3.1 Fabula 1: Avoiding Issues

The first fabula frames the primary purpose of ethics in BPM as *avoiding issues*, meaning that ethics is posed as (externally) introducing obligations and constraints that need to be considered and complied with when conducting BPM, including process mining and modeling, and stories tend to focus on the risks associated with technology [Ge03]. This commonly shows through various signs. Often, issue avoidance is explicitly stated in paper motivations, e.g., when approaches intend to “mitigate the ethical pitfalls of digital technologies [to] avoid compromising fairness, reducing biases, or eroding trust” [Po26]. Others focus on “identifying and mitigating bias” [AFM25] and “preventing unfair outcomes” [RBS26] to improve fairness in process mining initiatives, or aim to “reduce discrimination” [DFP25], e.g., in predictive process monitoring.

The issue avoidance fabula is commonly associated with technical operationalizations of responsibility, e.g., in the form of fairness measures [PD25], or by organizing responsibility through FACT (fairness, accuracy, confidentiality, transparency) criteria [Ma22]. Essentially, this shifts the focus of responsibility from moral virtue towards quantifiable technical considerations and frames it as a reactive measure required to address issues that increasingly occur in practical application. This coincides with perceived regulatory pressure, e.g., due to legal obligations such as the EU AI Act [Ma22; PD25] or sustainability reporting obligations [LS25]. Consequently, in the most extreme version of the first fabula, ethics can appear as a burden that must be considered to avoid harm both to those affected by a process and to the process owner, who might, for instance, experience reputational harm when failing to appropriately address “ethical challenges” [Ha25].

### 3.2 Fabula 2: Doing Good

In contrast to the first fabula, the second fabula frames the purpose of ethics in BPM as a way of *doing good*. Consequently, rather than focusing exclusively on preventing negative outcomes, this fabula views ethics as a guide towards realizing positive outcomes. For instance, Poss et al. [Po26] state that ethics aims “to understand and guide human actions towards achieving a good life.” In the literature, this narrative typically shows when papers explicitly discuss the incorporation of positive values such as well-being or sustainability [DFS26; LS25]. The research stream of *benevolent BPM* specifically advocates for “designing business processes for good” [Ch26], for instance aiming to “embed pro-social practices, such as benevolence, directly into the core of business processes” [Ch26]. From this perspective, ethical consideration is part of a holistic approach to process improvement [Ke24] that is integrated into all BPM lifecycle phases [DFS26] and improves decision making in process design and execution while simultaneously enabling the consideration of “the welfare and interests of all stakeholders involved” [Ke24].

The second fabula enables a more nuanced account of the role of data, algorithms, bias, and discrimination in RBPM. For instance, papers argue that “not all biases are inherently

negative” [RBS26]. On the contrary, depending on the context, discrimination by protected attributes might even be morally obligated. For instance, a person’s sex and previous medical conditions should generally not influence decisions on credit applications, but are often essential for a physician selecting the most appropriate treatment for a patient’s illness [Kä25]. By focusing primarily on BPM’s primary purpose of improving processes [DFS26] – instead of associated risks – the second fabula ultimately reflects the broader perspective from *critical* information systems research that “[d]esign can be used to implement and reify liberating and emancipatory ideas” [St09].

### 3.3 Contrast

Examining the two fabulas *in contrast* to each other reveals a fundamental conceptual boundary underlying the understanding of ethics in RBPM (research). Where the first fabula generally follows the intention to *avoid doing what is bad*, the second fabula intends to support *doing what is good*. The two intentions often co-occur in specific stories, e.g., when papers aim to mitigate bias and reduce discrimination to “enhance fairness in business processes” [DFP25] or conceptualize fairness as involving “preventing unfair outcomes and recognizing biases” [RBS26]. However, they ultimately represent two distinct ethical principles, which can therefore be understood as the generating mechanisms underlying the two fabulas. This distinction is, for instance, also commonly drawn in clinical ethics, where the two principles are called non-maleficence (avoiding harm) and beneficence (doing good by acting for the benefit of others) [Be03].

Beyond clarifying the mechanisms underlying the different fabulas, this insight also comes with conceptual implications. Most importantly, it becomes clear that – while researchers should explicitly consider this distinction in their papers to avoid conceptual ambiguity and (apparent) conflation of the two principles – the two fabulas observed in RBPM literature may *prima facie* appear competing when contrasted but actually are closely related and equally necessary aspects required for a complete ethics of BPM. As has long been noted elsewhere, the great benefits provided by modern technology are inseparably linked to the risks entailed by this very same technology [Ge03]. Still, we argue that – to facilitate the development of a complete ethical approach to BPM – an increased focus should be laid on beneficence because *doing good* is a conceptually and practically stronger perspective. First, this framing is closer to the foundational purpose of ethics, which is concerned with answering the question “What should I do?” (what is *obligated*) – as opposed to “What should I *not* do?” (what is not *permitted*). Second, beneficence imposes a stronger obligation on BPM practitioners, as it requires them to actively identify and pursue interventions supporting positive values – as opposed to addressing issues reactively. Third, considering the impact of narrative framings on the perception of stakeholders [BC25; KES03], the beneficence narrative can be expected to support easier dissemination of ethical BPM practice. For instance, compare the motivational force of the statement that “organizations can enhance long-term success by embedding benevolence into their everyday business

processes” [Ch26] to stating that responsibility is required due to legal obligations such as the EU AI Act [Ma22; PD25].

## 4 Further Conceptual Tensions

Below, we summarize additional conceptual tensions observed in our narrative analysis that could benefit from conceptual clarification in future work.

A common ambiguity regards the *object* of ethics: texts might refer to the ethics of (i) business processes (“ethical-aware business processes” [PDI26]), (ii) the encompassing practice of BPM (“ethical business process management” [Po26]), or (iii) both (e.g., the same text referring to “responsible BPM” [DFS26] but also “ethical value consequences of business processes” [DFS26]). In essence, this reflects the ambiguous use of the term “ethical”, often denoting both the discipline of ethics and its object (“ethos”) [Ge23]. Such discipline–object conflation is a common source of misunderstanding [Ge23] which can be prevented through explicit conceptual clarification.

A related ambiguity concerns the *subject* of ethics. Particularly in the avoidance fabula, narrative mechanism such as passive voice can drive ambiguous, imprecise, possibly even misleading framings. For instance, training predictors on “biased data” [PD25] might propagate or amplify immoral discrimination. However, biased data alone cannot be blamed for negative consequences, and algorithms alone do not mandate that organizations modify their processes: “Although dressed in technical terminology [...] these ‘actions’ are carried out in the final account by social actors” [LH88]. The responsibility of the BPM analyst becomes especially apparent when BPM is used to study animal behavior such as the case of fattening pigs [LKK23]. There is clearly an ethical obligation, e.g., to promote animal welfare – and unless we want to hold the animals accountable for this obligation, the analyst as the only person immediately involved must be responsible. Note that responsibility and accountability can be distributed across multiple agents just as processes and their analysis can be distributed [REK+25].

Finally, we observe ambiguities when distinguishing descriptive and normative ethics, e.g., when “best practices” form the grounds for ethical guidance and ethical frameworks are imported from related fields such as responsible AI. While established principles are valuable for initial orientation [Ha52], an overly narrow focus on best practices can reinforce asymmetries of power [WSG06] and ultimately limits ethical consideration to what has been considered before [St78]. This can cause an undesirable “ossification” [Ha52] of principles, which hampers their adaption and development in continuously changing contexts and applications.

## 5 Discussion and Outlook

In this paper, we analyzed the conceptualization of ethics in process modeling, specifically within responsible BPM, from a meta-ethical perspective. We applied narrative analysis to identify and contrast two distinct conceptualizations of the purpose of ethics in BPM, i.e., non-maleficence and beneficence.

By uncovering ambiguities in current discourse, our analysis constitutes a first step towards a theoretical foundation of RBPM. Future work should aim to develop a comprehensive analytic framework and conduct a broader and more systematic analysis to further develop this foundation. However, such descriptive analysis is ultimately constrained by the boundaries of current conceptualization. Like process improvement in RBPM requires considering alternatives to what is currently done in a process to show how practice can be improved, the practice of how RBPM is researched also benefits from critical reflection. This demands researchers to be critical of past and present conceptualizations and to actively “think outside the box” during future conceptual development. Only in this manner can RBPM research obtain the normative power required to become more than a mere set of supposedly neutral tools [St78].

As process models gain ethical significance only when and because they affect real-world process executions, an increased focus on the pragmatics of process models is required. Specifically, the link between the theoretical, conceptual, and practical dimensions of process models needs clarification to ethically justify their application. A promising way forward for this might be methodical construction [Ge23]. While initial work exists on constructive process modeling [Me99], it has not specifically addressed ethics.

Methodically clarifying the pragmatics of process models would follow a two-step approach. First, a heuristic reduction of existing modeling practices (and the processes modeled therein) would serve to identify the foundational lifeworld origin of process models. Based on this, a productive methodical construction would allow abstracting from specific, real-world modeling abilities, to situation- and subject-independent knowledge. In this way, process modeling (or BPM) would methodically be *constituted* based on the very same real-world processes it *regulates* with normative models (cf. [Se69]). Incidentally, methodical construction may also contribute to securing the identity of research disciplines such as BPM research [Aa25] or the upcoming interdisciplinary field of “process science” [BVB+24] by methodically grounding their purposes in real-world practice [St78].

Finally, future research could investigate whether analogous narratives also emerge in other modeling domains such as data and software modeling.

## Acknowledgments

The project ProcessPig is funded by the European Union within the framework of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI) and the state program rural areas of the state Schleswig-Holstein (LPLR) ([www.eip-agrar-sh.de](http://www.eip-agrar-sh.de)).

## Disclosure of Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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