

# OPPORTUNISM

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## OPPORTUNISM

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Ecology, Economics, Ethics, Behavioral Science

### 1. Core Definition

Opportunism is fundamentally defined as the strategic and often immediate exploitation of resources, circumstances, or conditions that are uniquely accessible or favorable to the actor, typically leveraging advantages that are not readily available to competitors or the general population. This behavior is characterized by a focus on maximizing immediate, self-serving gain, often involving a shift in strategy or principles to align with transient environmental realities. The core mechanism of **opportunism** lies in the capacity to recognize and utilize gaps--in resources, information, enforcement, or social structure--before others can, making the timing and speed of action paramount to its success.

While purely functional in its application--a successful strategy for achieving specific goals--the concept of opportunism carries significant ethical weight. As noted in common usage, it is frequently "rarely looked highly upon," suggesting a tension between rational self-interest and normative social expectations. This negative perception usually arises when the exploitation involves violating implicit contracts, exploiting vulnerabilities, or abandoning prior commitments or principles purely for transient benefit, thereby undermining trust and cooperation within a system.

In formal academic contexts, particularly in economics and biology, the term can be treated amorally. Biologically, it describes highly adaptive foraging or reproductive strategies. Economically, it often describes self-interest seeking with "guile," referring to the calculated use of deception or misrepresentation to secure an advantage. Regardless of the field, the defining feature remains the adeptness in capitalizing on conditions of **asymmetric information** or temporary market/resource imbalances.

### 2. Opportunism in Evolutionary Ecology

In the realm of evolutionary ecology, opportunism describes a successful survival strategy employed by generalist species capable of rapidly adapting their behavior to utilize novel or highly variable resources. The source content highlights a key context for this behavior: when species are introduced to new habitats where they face minimal or no established predators. This removal of ecological constraints allows for unchecked exploitation of available resources.

The case of the Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) in Argentina serves as a stark illustration of ecological opportunism. Initially, these gulls capitalized on anthropogenic waste, specifically trash discarded by fish processing factories, representing a massive, newly accessible food source. This shift allowed for rapid population growth, demonstrating the species' capacity to swiftly integrate

new, abundant food into their diet--a hallmark of an opportunistic generalist.

The subsequent behavioral evolution demonstrated an even higher degree of exploitation. The gulls acquired the habit of attacking and feeding on the flesh of **Southern right whales** nursing and calving their young in nearby waters. This specialized predation--targeting vulnerable, massive, but temporarily immobile prey--is highly opportunistic. It exploits the critical life stage of the whales, where their defensive capabilities are compromised by the need to nurture their young, securing a unique, protein-rich resource unavailable to most other predators due to the inherent dangers or accessibility issues of tackling mature whales.

### 3. Economic and Business Opportunism

The concept of opportunism is central to certain schools of economic thought, most famously **Transaction Cost Economics** (TCE), pioneered by Oliver E. Williamson. In TCE, opportunism is defined precisely as self-interest seeking with guile, which encompasses various forms of deceptive behavior, including lying, stealing, cheating, or intentionally obscuring or distorting information relevant to a transaction.

In the business arena, opportunism can manifest both externally, in market interactions, and internally, within organizational structures. Externally, it is the capacity to identify temporary inefficiencies, arbitrage opportunities, or regulatory loopholes that allow a firm to gain a competitive edge. This form of strategic opportunism is often viewed as beneficial, as the source notes, because it drives innovation, market dynamism, and resource optimization, rewarding firms that are agile and responsive to market shifts. Examples include pivoting production lines to meet sudden demand or securing essential materials during a supply shock.

Conversely, internal opportunism creates significant managerial challenges. This occurs when employees or managers exploit asymmetric information or vague contractual terms to advance personal goals at the expense of the organization. Classic examples include moral hazard (shirking responsibilities when effort is unobservable) and hold-up problems, where one party exploits asset specificity after a contract is signed to renegotiate terms favorably. Managing this internal risk necessitates robust governance mechanisms, clear contracts, and monitoring systems designed to align individual incentives with organizational objectives and mitigate the potential for self-seeking behavior.

### 4. Key Characteristics of Opportunistic Behavior

Regardless of the domain--be it biological, economic, or political--opportunistic behavior shares several defining characteristics that enable the exploitation of inaccessible resources or fleeting advantages.

**Adaptability and Flexibility:** The opportunistic actor must possess a high degree of adaptability, enabling rapid shifts in strategy, methodology, or resource allocation in response to changing external conditions. This often contrasts with highly specialized or rigid behaviors that succeed only under stable conditions.

**Exploitation of Asymmetry:** Central to opportunism is the utilization of unequal conditions, whether this is informational asymmetry (knowing something a counterparty does not), resource asymmetry (having exclusive access to a scarce supply), or structural asymmetry (exploiting a power imbalance or a temporary lack of enforcement).

**Short-Term Maximization:** Opportunism often prioritizes immediate, high-yield gains over long-term stability or sustained relational success. This focus is predicated on the assumption that the exploitable condition is temporary, necessitating swift action to capture the value before the opportunity closes or competition arrives.

**Low Ethical Constraint:** In socio-ethical contexts, successful opportunism frequently requires setting aside moral or relational constraints. The actor must be willing to violate norms of fairness, reciprocity, or commitment if doing so yields a higher immediate payoff.

**Risk Tolerance:** Pursuing unique, transient advantages often involves a higher degree of risk, as the strategy is untested or may draw negative attention or retaliation from established actors or systems.

## 5. Psychological and Ethical Dimensions

The ethical judgment that opportunism is "rarely looked highly upon" stems from its challenge to fundamental social systems built on trust and predictability. Psychologically, an opportunistic personality may correlate with traits often associated with the Dark Triad, particularly **Machiavellianism**, which involves manipulation, cynicism, and an emphasis on pragmatic power over moral convention. The opportunistic mindset views relationships and agreements instrumentally, valuing them only insofar as they contribute to immediate personal advancement.

Ethically, the criticism against opportunism typically focuses on the element of deceit or the calculated breach of implied trust. When individuals or firms engage in behavior that is technically legal but violates the spirit of a contract or agreement--such as withholding critical information during negotiations--the behavior is deemed unethical because it undermines the foundation of voluntary cooperation. This erosion of trust imposes significant transaction costs on society, forcing reliance on complex legal safeguards rather than simple handshake agreements.

However, ethics sometimes permit forms of self-serving behavior that border on opportunism. A manager who aggressively seizes an unexpected market shift to save a failing company is often

lauded, despite the actions potentially disrupting industry norms. The ethical evaluation often hinges on the distinction between exploiting impersonal structural gaps (often viewed neutrally or positively) and exploiting the personal vulnerability or ignorance of a specific counterparty (almost universally viewed negatively).

## 6. Political Opportunism and Ideological Drift

In the realm of political science, **political opportunism** refers to the practice of sacrificing ideological consistency or core political principles for the sake of immediate political gain, such as winning an election, securing a key policy vote, or obtaining power. A politically opportunistic actor will swiftly alter their platform or publicly held beliefs to align with prevailing public sentiment, even if that sentiment contradicts their historical positions or long-term policy goals.

This behavior is often criticized as corrosive to democratic integrity because it prioritizes short-term popularity over principled leadership and policy stability. It can lead to the marginalization of complex or necessary, though unpopular, long-term policies. For instance, a politician suddenly adopting a fiscally irresponsible spending plan simply because it resonates with voters immediately before an election demonstrates political opportunism--exploiting a temporary public desire for immediate benefit while disregarding the long-term economic stability.

The environment most conducive to political opportunism is one characterized by high political uncertainty, frequent elections, and a public that is highly susceptible to fast-changing media narratives. In such dynamic systems, the capacity to rapidly shift messaging to capture transient support becomes more valuable than maintaining a rigid, consistent ideological position.

## 7. Further Reading

[Transaction Cost Economics](#)

[Asymmetric Information](#)

[Machiavellianism \(psychology\)](#)

[Southern Right Whale](#)