

Lorenzo Magnani, *Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty*

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I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout. (Swift 1729)

Jonathan Swift, famous author of *Gulliver's Travels*, wrote down the opening quote in "A Modest Proposal", a satirical treatment of poverty in Ireland in the early 18th century. He suggested that everybody would be better off if children of the poor were no longer left to fend for themselves but instead put to good social use by being eaten. Lorenzo Magnani seems to follow a similar strategy in his book *Morality in the Technological World*, when he suggests that it would be ethically advisable to treat human beings as things.

The starting point of Magnani's work is easily understood. Technology has gained a tremendous power in the modern world that, without doubt, has ethical implications. It is hard to deny his claim that we need to rethink ethics in order to ensure that the beneficial powers of technology are harnessed while the destructive powers are controlled. He structures his argument by identifying novel ethical issues raised by technology, such as hybrid humans and cloning, which arguably constitute qualitatively new ethical problems that traditional ethical theory may be ill-equipped to address. Many of his claims seem eminently plausible, for example, the ethical quality of knowledge required to understand novel problems and find solutions to them.

There are, nevertheless, aspects of the book that I found difficult to contextualise. Magnani is very optimistic about technological development for example with regards to cyborgs. Depending on the definition of a cyborg, one can follow his

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argument that we are already surrounded by them. It is not necessarily clear, however, whether a human with a brain–computer interface or other advanced technologies that could render a human a cyborg already constitutes a novel ethical issue. One aspect that deserves more attention in this respect is the role that economic incentives play in the development and implementation of ethically relevant technologies. A related problem is that his optimism with regards to technological development is such that it borders on technological determinism. There seems to be a tension in his argument between the ethical claim that things can be improved and the empirical observation that technology progresses autonomously.

With regards to the duty to knowledge that is captured in the subtitle of the book, it is hard to deny the relevance of increased knowledge to ethics, However it is not clear what knowledge exactly we are looking for, who defines knowledge, who can challenge it, and how we deal with competing claims to knowledge. As philosopher, Magnani is surely aware of the extensive epistemological issues surrounding the definition and recognition of knowledge. It is therefore somewhat disappointing to find an unqualified call for an acceptance of a moral duty of knowledge in the book. One of the open questions that are not discussed is what happens if relevant knowledge is not available or maybe not even possible.

Among the more provocative arguments developed in the book, there is a call to treat people as things. Very briefly, the argument seems to be that we offer and treat things better than humans and would therefore be well-advised to transfer such ethical treatment to human beings. There is no doubt that Magnani has a thorough understanding of Kantian philosophy and he references Kant in many places. Realising the fact that he wants to be provocative, one can still object that this is a fundamental misunderstanding. The description is correct that we treat things better than human beings in many respects; however, this is no argument against the categorical imperative.

There are many positive aspects of the book, among them a lively defence of the concept of free will that Magnani does not abandon to neurological or biological determinism. Another positive aspect is an interesting discussion of a link between things and people in terms of what Magnani calls “moral mediators”. I also enjoyed the re-introduction of existentialist ideas, such as the concept of bad faith, which may go some way towards explaining some current ethical problems in technological societies.

There are different ways in which this book can be read. I think the most appropriate one would be as a restatement of the Enlightenment hope that rationality can solve the world’s problems. Morality in a technological world therefore requires a duty to knowledge, which would be a necessary foundation for the solution of ethical questions. A resulting call to ethical reflection may be the best that ethicists can hope for. At the same time one needs to acknowledge that the Enlightenment hope of a rational solution to the world’s problems has been disappointed time and again. The cause is not only a lack of rationality and willingness to apply it, but also the inherent limitations of rationality and therefore of ethics itself. A contribution to the ethics of technology that fails to take into account the disenchantment of ethics during the 20th century runs the risk of raising false hopes.

Jonathan Swift's satirical argument for the culinary enjoyment of Irish babies only worked on the unquestionable assumption that nobody would take it seriously. Such generally shared and unquestionably accepted beliefs are difficult to identify in modern technological societies. Magnani's interesting contribution to the discussion of ethics and technology would have profited from a more explicit treatment of such issues. Otherwise it may turn out that people use his argument as an excuse for treating others as a means only. An example of the results of such an attitude would be the consumption of human babies, something that Magnani surely does not intend.

References

Swift, J. (1729). *A modest proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public*. Accessed September 10, 2008 from <http://art-bin.com/art/omodest.html>.