

# **Book Review : Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty**

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Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty

Lorenzo Magnani

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In his preface to *Morality in a Technological World* Lorenzo Magnani argues for our need to respect people as things rather than as means, and thereby imbue them with respect and enhanced status. Magnani is clear that the rapid growth in areas like ecology, nanotechnology and biotechnology, which have given us cloning and the development of human-cyborg hybrids, and the rapid extension of data management are a collective risk to human freedom and responsibility. As he notes “it has become increasingly difficult to discern where the human body ends and the non-human thing begins. We are in

a sense, folded into 'non humans'•?. This makes it easier for us to give moral attributes to, for example, organisations, nations, books or PCs, rather than humans. As the line between our physical selves and our technological world becomes ever more flexible, we need to engage actively with rational knowledge to promote individual moral agency. Magnani's answer is for us to begin a dialogue around a new ethics, in the context of new technologies.

Magnani's ethical dialogue pivots around the role of what he terms moral mediators, which provide ethical information and knowledge upon which actions can be based. He argues that the use of moral mediators will enable us to come to terms with the pace of technological change and the rate at which new knowledge is produced, and thereby to respect people as things. Tied into this is the notion of understanding one's actions in a technological world, and taking responsibility for them, rather than simply anthropomorphising things and giving them ethical power. It is his focus upon the deployment of cognition, to make sense of the connections between humans and the external things to which we delegate actions that will help twenty-first century societies enhance individual identities and values. This is critical, given the creation of human-cyborg, hybrid people with hybrid senses of self and multiple spaces in which to act. For example, we might act as clones or as avatars in virtual worlds, or be given attributes of agency through our networked "data shadow"•?. This hybridisation impacts upon responsibility, association, ownership and free will, especially where new technologies are increasingly "ready-to-hand"•?.

In an increasingly global world, understanding the ethical status of knowledge will help manage the tensions between the rights of the individual, the corporation and the nation. For Magnani, it is the integration of humanistic knowledge, for instance cognition, philosophy and public policy, with technology that enhances rational knowledge and values. Integration and rationalisation shapes personal ownership of our destinies, and thereby develops ethical agency. As such he usefully opens up a space for the exploration of the use of technology and its specific impact upon socio-cultural discourse and beliefs.

One of the key areas in which Magnani's argument appears light is the discussion of new, web-based technologies; in particular those termed Web 2.0, which promote participation and collaboration. He is right to note that the impact of the internet is to define our identities through "an externally stored quantity of data, information, images, and texts that concern us as individuals and the result is a cyborg of both flesh and electronic data that identifies us."•? This does give external, non-human resources an ethical, mediation role in our lives. However, this is a complex issue, and one that is impacted by network effects and participation by multiple individuals in multiple associations. Concomitant ethical dilemmas, contextualised by Satre's concept of bad faith and Pickering's focus upon the mangle of practice, impacts upon shared and individual privacy and freedom within a technologically-advancing world. Some concrete stories of ethical dilemmas, rather than abstract philosophical development, would help to ground the discourse.

Magnani identifies the potential for the use of Web 2.0 tools to generate good. In particular, he highlights the democratising and universal dissemination of knowledge, great ownership and

transmission of information, and less emphasis on labour as the source of value. Within this approach to the management of information, *Morality in a Technological World* has a very western philosophical view, focused upon a discussion of the Kantian self-realisation of humanity and its impact upon, for instance, ecological imbalances. Whilst Magnani argues for a re-conceptualisation of moral values based upon forms of abductive reasoning, one of the critical ethical dilemmas for the twenty-first century is addressing the concerns of developing nations, who do not share this cultural history. For other cultures, such reasoning may underpin a tension between new moralities and meaningful socio-economic growth. That said, Magnani is clear that his is a global dialogue aimed at removing “a toxic state of ignorance”: “we are cognitively and morally integrated with other beings, so that any changes we inflict on the world are also inflicted on ourselves.”

Magnani clearly articulates the complexity of morality, and the development of a process of treating people as things through which “we can begin to make peace with inevitable technological advances”. He challenges us to think both cognitively and philosophically about moral and ethical dilemmas, in light of new approaches to technological development. In doing so he awakens important discussions around consciousness, humanity, free will and responsibility, and their interconnectedness; in fact, how do we treat people as things, rather than means? He opens up a space in which we can fruitfully discuss the balance between individual, corporate, national and supra-national needs and expectations, in terms of developing individual self-efficacy and agency. In a period of accelerating technological change, where both individually and collectively we are casting longer data shadows within expanding networks, this is an important and timely discussion.