

## BOOK REVIEW

**Lorenzo Magnani, *Morality in a Technological World*.** Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 304 pp. (indexed), ISBN-13: 9780521877695, US \$85.00 (Hb).

The important and innovative theories in Lorenzo Magnani's *Morality in a Technological World* have a dynamical character. They are theories that require us to take change seriously. Magnani's ethical focus is grounded in two traditional assumptions. One is the Platonic idea that wrong-doing is a form of ignorance. The other is the truism that we have a duty to be moral. Jointly, knowledge is also a duty, as is suggested by the subtitle of the book, *Knowledge as Duty*. Given this dynamical turn, one of Magnani's principal tasks is to account for what appears to be moral and, correspondingly, epistemic change. What, for example, was it that we failed to know about women in the fourteenth century that we now know which explains the displacement of our former moral stance to them by the present-day commitment to gender equality?

Another theme of the book is ontological. Magnani skillfully argues that technological changes can alter the identity conditions on a thing. Beings like us are a case in point. Once animated Aristotelian substances, we are now hybrids part flesh and part information packet. This places the changed moral assessment of issues such as gender inequality in choppy waters. One explanation of our morally confident attribution of inequality to fourteenth century women is that the attributions were made in ignorance. There was something we failed to know about women then that we know now. But given the ontological thesis that there are different ways of being human, there are different ways of being a female human. If so, a second possibility presents itself. Women of the fourteenth century are not kind-identical to women of the twenty-first century and, moreover, women of the fourteenth century were indeed unequal to men. One of Magnani's many achievements is the skill with which he resists this possibility.

Magnani's ethical focus reflects the conviction that a central task for most moral theorists is the explanation of moral change. A further presumption is that an adequate moral theory must enable us to elucidate the moral structure of pressing contemporary issues, such as issues of

ecology, biotechnology, hybridization of human beings, cyber-privacy and globalization. On Magnani's approach, an individual human agent is a being who makes his way in life by knowing things. Given the tie between an agent's right-doing and his duty to know, an adequate moral theory must enable us to give due consideration to the make-up of an individual's cognitive agency. It bears on this that also on the list of changes wrought by technology is the nature of knowledge itself. An adequate moral theory must enable us to take account of these changes as well.

Magnani has contributed importantly to the growing literature on abductive inference and model-based reasoning. One of his main contributions to that literature is his account of manipulative abduction, a process of sublinguistic hypothesis selection got by manipulating the environment. Since human beings inhabit environments, they, too, might be in the solution-spaces of abductive problems and hence are themselves subject to manipulation. This has direct consequences for moral theory, requiring suppression of the Kantian prohibition of treating human beings as means, and its replacement by Magnani's requirement that, when treating them as means, they be treated with respect.

*Morality in a Technological World* is a deftly argued and insightful exploration of the interconnections among morally significant kinds of change—technological, epistemic, and ontological. It is a highly valuable original contribution to agent-centered resource-based analyses of human behavior and to moral theory.

John Woods  
Department of Philosophy  
University of British Columbia  
1866 Main Hall E370, Vancouver  
BC, Canada V6T 1Z1