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Re-ontologizing Ethical Tech and Emerging Trends in Digital Technologies

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I. INTRODUCTION

The omnipresence of digital technologies in our daily life; its use and its impact on organisations and individuals, raises ethical questions about its role in our society. These concerns include consent and privacy, security, inclusion and fairness, protection from online harm, transparency and accountability. Disruptive technologies enable tremendous opportunities for organizations to become smarter, more agile, more flexible, and more responsive. But technologies are becoming integral (especially) to e-learning processes before many people have fully considered the ramifications of their usage. A lot of ethical issues are arising on digital technologies; e-learning, some applications, devices, and systems each time they are employed for academic purposes and organisational productivity. Stories of organizations encountering new challenges related to privacy, algorithmic bias, and a range of other technology-related ethical issues illustrate the reputational and even financial risks for organizations. In academics, the issues of data repudiation, manipulation and unethical data mining and governance constitute grievous ethical issues in the new world order.

This paradigm shift brings new ethical and juridical problems which are mainly related to issues

such as the right of access to information, and the right to privacy which is threatened by the emphasis on the free flow of information, and the protection of the economic interest of the owners of intellectual property, advertisement and marketing deception, and questions on the primacy of confidentiality, to mention few.

Indeed, increasing digital technologies may breed a rise in ethical awareness. With respect to specific technologies, for example, the continued growth of artificial intelligence (AI) has led to increased concern about the ethical implications of implementing a technology capable of "higher thought" and decision-making, especially in corporate world. As digital technologies emerge in academics and corporate world, recent studies on AI suggests that individuals and corporate world is more experienced in leveraging AI, specifically, more likely to be concerned with its ethical risks. As the number of AI production systems undertaken by a company increases, people are more concerned with the ethical risks it brings.¹ Fundamentally, ethical questions that should be asked regarding emerging trends in digital technologies include; what is the impact of digital technologies on society's moral standing? What are the effects of digital technology on the new world order and the ethical challenges associated with this? What ontological space does digital technology has on our recent realities (*new life*)? These questions will be critically addressed by first appealing to a foreground understanding of the concept of *ethical tech*.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF ETHICAL TECH

When we consider the question of ethics, it is critical to draw the distinction between corporate and professional ethics—ethics related to questions of business, professional conduct, humane treatment of workers, and/or corporate and social responsibility—and ethics of technology. What do we mean when we use the latter term?

The World Economic Forum argues that "technologies have a clear moral dimension—that is to say, a fundamental aspect that relates to values, ethics, and norms. Technologies reflect the interests, behaviors, and desires of their creators, and shape how

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¹ Susanne Hupfer, Taking a proactive approach to the ethics of AI, Deloitte Insights, May 8, 2019.



the people using them can realize their potential, identities, relationships, and goals.”²

According to Green Brian,³ ethical tech supposes the application of ethical thinking to the practical concerns of technology. The reason technology ethics is growing in prominence is that new technologies give us more power to act, which means that we have to make choices we didn't have to make before. While in the past our actions were involuntarily constrained by our weakness, now, with so much technological power, we have to learn how to be voluntarily constrained by our judgment: our ethics.

Ethical tech is, at its heart, a conversation focused on the relationship between technology and human values, the decisions we make toward technological advances, and the impacts they can have. The notion of ethical tech refers to a set of values governing the organization's approach to its use of technologies as a whole, and the ways in which workers at all levels deploy those technologies to drive business strategy and operations. It is a multifaceted concept that can encompass a wide variety of issues, from data privacy to bias in algorithms, from replacing humans with machines to a commitment to not manipulating data or human responses. And just because organizations may not have developed ethical tech frameworks doesn't mean leaders are ignoring issues: Deloitte's research suggests that leaders' biggest social and ethical concerns brought about by digital innovation apart from privacy are related to cybersecurity risks, job replacement, and the unethical use of data.⁴

As we examine what ethical tech is, it is also important to specify what it is not. It is not limited to general compliance-related issues or questions of legality; it is neither a stand-alone, siloed effort nor a black-and-white set of blanket policies that dictate strict right and wrong answers to every scenario. Ethical situations are unique and varied, and a robust ethical tech program allows leaders and employees to apply a decision framework to each situation to make the most appropriate judgment. Policies that dictate strict right and wrong answers to every scenario. Ethical situations are unique and varied, and a robust ethical tech program allows leaders and employees to apply a decision framework to each situation to make the most appropriate judgment.

² Thomas Philbeck, Nicholas Davis, and Anne Marie Engtoft Larsen, “Values, ethics and innovation: Rethinking technological development in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” World Economic Forum, August 2018.

³ Green, B.P. (2022). What is Ethics of Technology? Available at: <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/technology-ethics/> [accessed 26th July 2022].

⁴ Gerald C. Kane et al., Accelerating digital innovation inside and out: Agile teams, ecosystems, and ethics, *Deloitte Insights*, June 4, 2019.

Having said this, Stair⁵ argues that there is a relationship between a company's digital and technological progress. In other words, its tech savviness—and its focus on various ethical issues related to technology. Our research suggests that companies that are more advanced digitally tend to be more concerned with and focused on technology-related ethics than companies still early in their digital journey. But it is not this technological maturity alone that appears to drive their focus on ethical tech. These companies are also typically supported by leaders committed to exploring and considering the intended and unintended impacts of technology disruptors, surrounding themselves with input from a diverse and inclusive set of stakeholders, and fostering an organizational culture of continuous learning, debate, transparency, and open dialogue.

III. THE *NEW-NORMA*: ETHICS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

a) *Ontologizing Digital Technologies*

According to Floridi,⁶ the being of the of digital technologies make the world entered hyper-history. Not only because we are now able to exchange and process large amounts of information at unprecedented speeds, but because we are witnessing a transformation that is simultaneously epistemological and ontological. Digital technologies are not just transforming the political or existential spheres or creating specific ethical problems. These transformations are the effect of a more radical change: digital technologies are capable of changing the environment or, using a neologism of Floridi, they *re-ontologize* the real.⁷

It is worth clarifying right away that the philosophy of information does not support or presuppose technological determinism. It is not a question of utopia or dystopia, of imagining technological paradises or hells, but to understand what changed. Much emphasis is given to new ethical challenges, such as privacy or cyber-security, but these challenges emerge precisely because digital technologies have brought about changes that are ontological and epistemological in the first instance, with implications at the ethical level.

From the ontological point of view, there are two important ideas. First, in the transition from analogue to digital, there is a progressive convergence of digital resources and digital tools. In duplicating a document with the old mimeograph, there was a technology that produced a new copy of the document. Today, the Word document I am typing is a digital technology, produced by another digital technology (that is, the

⁵ Stair, R.M. (1992). *Principles of Information Systems. A Managerial Approach*. Boston: Boyd & Fraser.

⁶ Floridi, L. (2013). *The ethics of information*. Oxford University Press.

⁷ *ibid*

word-processor software). Second, digital technologies change the degree of ontological friction (i.e., what contrasts the flow of information in a given region of the infosphere). Digital technologies often decrease ontological friction, thus creating information overflows or information surplus. However, more information does not necessarily mean better information. This is why the discourse on ICTs cannot be dichotomous: utopian or dystopian. Changes in ontological friction can do anything along the whole spectrum of possibilities or affordances: from greatly improving to badly worsen a given situation. They can help or hinder information flow in various ways, and this can have important ethical repercussions. In turn, an ethical assessment cannot be issued via the binary reasoning typical of technological determinism, but always requires a much more nuanced analysis.

The above supposes the need to *re-ontologize* the existential order as a result of the *new-norma*. To *re-ontologize* means to design a system or to fundamentally transform the nature of a system. This is what ICTs do, and that Floridi explains with the concept of “in-betweenness,” namely, what stands in between humans and technologies. There are three forms of interactions in which technology interposes between a user and a “prompter,” that is, what stimulates, or suggests, the use of a certain technology: (i) *human-technology-nature*, (ii) *human-technology-technology*, and (iii) *technology-technology-technology*.⁸ In the second and in the third type, ICTs have the power of altering the environment. In the third one, specifically, human beings are outside the chain of dependence and interaction. Digital technologies do something different than just boosting (e.g., a hammer) or increasing (e.g., a washing machine) human abilities

b) *Ontology of Tech Environment and Constructionist Ethics*

From the aforementioned, there is a sense that ethical tech is grounded in an analytical ethics; arises from the idea that ethical questions about technology originated from its applied attributes. This is the framework of an “action-based” ethics, in which the reasoning pertains to a given, specific situation. However, we ought to ask a more fundamental question, often not taken into account: how did we find ourselves in such a situation? The central point of information ethics is that *inforgs* do not simply react to a situation, but they proactively create it. In an informational approach, we look at the source of moral action. Another important feature of constructionist ethics is that it is not centered on the single moral agent, but can instead deal with moral problems at the group level. To Wyatt, an ethical discourse must be able to deal with

⁸ Floridi, L. (Ed.) (2015). *The onlife manifesto. Being human in a hyperconnected era*. Springer.

different levels: the individual inforg (ego-poiesis), groups of inforg (socio-poiesis), or the infosphere (eco-poiesis). We can even think of humanity itself as a moral agent: humanity has a responsibility towards the infosphere, meant as a natural, social, or cultural environment, both present and future.⁹

Ethical tech proposes a general model for analyzing ethical problems that may arise at different levels (the moral evaluation of the single inforg, of a group of hybrids or heterogeneous inforgs, and of humanity itself). The analysis does not start from the question what is right or wrong according to one or the other ethical theory, but from a more fundamental fact: ethical problems in the digital sphere are related to the question whether information be a resource, a target, or a product (as explained above). A correct ethical analysis must, first of all, identify the correct level of abstraction, that is, (i) whether the problem concerns the information as resource, target, or product, (ii) which moral agents are involved, and (iii) how the inforgs created such a situation. Only at that point, we can ask specific questions about what is right or wrong and good or bad, which admittedly are the ultimate goal of an ethical assessment. Constructionist ethics is not another ethical theory, but a conceptual framework for analyzing an ethical problem. The ethical and moral analysis is based on a precise analysis of reality, namely, the aforementioned “onlife” dimension: digital technologies are not a special, apart, problem but they are part and parcel of our reality. If we do not understand this fundamental re-ontologization, we cannot pose any ethical questions in an adequate manner.

Integrating ethical analyses into a global (i.e., ontological and epistemological) understanding of the digital phenomenon allows us to highlight the fundamental difference between human beings and digital artifacts. It is not a question of intelligence or of information processing. What marks the difference between human beings and digital artifacts is our ability and capability to entertain a relation with the world through specific ethical choices. We do not have a privileged place in the infosphere because of our ability to process information, but we continue to have a central place because we have a responsibility towards all the inforgs and the infosphere, and that we cannot delegate to others. In this sense, constructionist ethic allows us to recover other important perspectives, such as the ethics of hospitality¹⁰ or the ethics of the responsibility.¹¹

⁹ Wyatt, S. (2007). *Technological determinism is dead*. In E. J. Hackett, O. Amsterdamska, M. L. Lynch, & J. Wajcman (Eds), *The handbook of science and technology studies*, 3rd ed., (pp. 165-80). The MIT Press.

¹⁰ Lévy, P. (1997). *Collective Intelligence: For an Anthropology of Cyberspace*. The Discovery/Paper 27. Paris: The Discovery.



c) Towards Re-ontologizing Digital Technologies

Digital technologies change reality in a fundamental way. After centuries of scientific studies and of philosophical reflections, we could reasonably claim to master the offline world. But the online world is not just a dimension "added" to the development of digital technologies to be studied in the same way as the offline world. The online dimension has actually led to a confusion and fusion of online and offline. We are onlife, to borrow the neologism of the philosophers of information. Problems such as the privacy of personal data on the Internet, or the right to be forgotten, are clearly generated by digital technologies. But their "onlife" character requires that—before any ethical verdict can be advanced—the nature of the problem is understood. Understanding the nature of the problem implies ontological and epistemological reflections that, together, can inform ethics.

In the philosophy of information has no essential difference between humans and machines. This has repercussions on a number of debates. On the one hand, we must rethink our categories to understand the nature of informational organisms. What makes us humans distinct from animals or computers is not our ability to process information but the responsibility we hold towards other *inborgs* and the infosphere during the whole information cycle. On the other hand, and at a more general epistemological level, the effects of ICTs are profound and pervasive. The creation of knowledge is not an exclusive prerogative of human beings: knowledge becomes situated, embodied, distributed, and relational—and this across humans, machines, institutions, or environments. Recognizing these characteristics of knowledge help mending (philosophy of) technology and (philosophy of) science so that ethical questions can be an integral part of them.

IV. CONCLUSION

In our discussion so far, the dichotomy and demarcation between digital technological world and analogue reality was unraveled; sketched out a new framework in the discourse of ethics. Specifically, discourse on the ethical tech provides an overarching philosophical methodology on how we interrogate digital technological influxes in our recent realities; permeate our philosophical reasoning on three fundamental elements including our ontology (what the world is all about), epistemology (how and what we get to know) and normative perspective to our ethno-political order. Relatedness and interconnectivity of these elements are profoundly essential. However, these grew into variation as result of sciences and philosophy hyper-specialization, they grew into different sub-disciplines

that, by and large, talk past each other rather than to each other. Digital technologies and ethical tech prompt us on the need to bring ethics, epistemology and ontology in a lucid technique. Therefore, ethical tech has more potential to understand the dynamics of new realities imbued in digital technologies; a tool to lead us out the impasse of technological determinism.

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