Philosophy and Ethical Theories: A Reflection on the Morality of New Technologies and Artificial Intelligence [By Peter Murigwa (MA)]

Philosophy as a discipline of study is characterised by many misconceptions. This characterization stems from the fact that the content available for philosophy is both broad and deep. Whereas other disciplines allow for basic assumptions, philosophers cannot be bound by such assumptions. It is precisely for this reason that philosophy has been referred to as the mother of all sciences. Hence, its misconceptions as, philosophy is Just a matter of opinion and it is useless because philosophers simply split hairs and debate endlessly about meaningless problems.

After my graduation in philosophy, the first question I was asked was, "so, what are you going to do with your philosophy?” This question prompted me to wonder if the misconceptions of philosophy were really correct or not. Is philosophy really a matter of opinion or, is it useless like hair-splitting? The excitement, the anxiety, and the expectations I had over such an accomplishment began to fade away.

Etymologically the term philosophy, from its Greek origin *'philos'* which means love, and *'sophia'* which means wisdom, means *‘love of wisdom’.[[1]](#footnote-1)* Wisdom is the condition of the possibility for knowledge or the ‘ground’ that enables, the ‘source’ that engenders knowledge.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hence, philosophy originally covered all intellectual pursuits like, mathematics, politics, religion, morality, cosmology, metaphysics etc. In short a wise person is a pursuer of knowledge. He or she is one who knows and acknowledges that he or she does not know. Plato presents his master Socrates as distinguishing himself from the majority of humankind by the fact that, while they did not know, they did not know that they did not know, whereas Socrates himself knew and acknowledged that he knew that he did not know.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The search is abandoned when one is complacent with the knowledge grasped. Philosophers however, are never complacent with knowledge. All knowledge for them, is hypothetical upon which new and novel arguments can be generated. Hence, their insatiable pursuit of knowledge.

One area in which philosophy has made remarkable strides is morality or ethics. The terms "moral" and "ethics" come from Latin and Greek, respectively ("mores" and "ethos"), which have the idea of "custom”[[4]](#footnote-4), what is right and what is wrong in human relations? Within morality and ethics there are three major areas: *descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and meta-ethics.*

*Descriptive ethics* seeks to identify moral experience in a descriptive way. It seeks to identify, within the range of human conduct, the motives, desires, and intentions as well as overt acts themselves. It considers the conduct of individuals or personal morality; the conduct of groups, or social morality; and the culture patterns of national and racial groups. Descriptive ethics is in part an attempt to distinguish what is from what ought to be. A second level of inquiry in ethics is normative ethics (what ought to be).

In *normative ethics* philosophers try to work out acceptable judgments regarding what ought to be in choice and value. “We ought to keep our promises” and “you ought to be honourable” are examples of normative judgments. From the time of the early Greeks, philosophers have formulated principles of explanation to examine why people act the way they do, and what the principles are by which people ought to live; statements of these principles are called ethical theories. The following are some of these ethical theories

*Deontological Theories* emphasize the nature of the act. The word d*eontology* comes from the Greek word *deon,* which means "duty".  These theories hold that something is inherently right or good about such acts as truth-telling and promise-keeping and inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise-breaking.[[5]](#footnote-5) Illustrations of deontological ethics include Immanuel Kant's theory of the Categorical Imperative. Kant argued that two kinds of commands or imperatives exist:

1. *The hypothetical imperative and*
2. *The categorical imperative*

Hypothetical imperatives are conditional; they rely on the benefit that one will get after performing an action." For example, "If you want a good job, then get a good education," or "If you want to be happy, then stay sober and live a balanced life"[[6]](#footnote-6) In this contemporary world, more specifically in the urban areas, hardly anyone does something for another without asking for a reward. For instance, ‘what will you give me if I help you carry your bag?’ These are some examples of a hypothetical imperative. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, are non-conditional, but universal and rationally necessary. Kant’s primary version of the Categorical Imperative states that, " Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law."[[7]](#footnote-7) Kant in fact, offered three versions of this categorical imperative

Nonetheless, would you or anyone else, will that actions like the advancement of new technologies and Artificial intelligences (AIs) become universal law? Would you will that everyone advances in technology and in creating artificial intelligence? What will the world be like if we substitute most human beings with technology and AIs in our areas of work? In his second formulation of the categorical imperative, known as the formula of humanity, Kant states that we should treat humanity whether in our own person or in the person of another, always as an end and never simply as a means. This principle asserts that people possess intrinsic value, dignity, and purpose, requiring respect in all interactions. Is the humanity of the new technologies and AIs not just a means to an end? Do they possess intrinsic value like human beings? And by the advancement of new technologies and AIs, are we not devaluing human dignity and purpose?

Theories that focus primarily on *consequences* in determining moral rightness and wrongness are called *consequential or teleological ethical theories*. The word teleology comes from the Greek word "telos," which means an end. Consequential theories are goal-oriented. The most famous of these theories is the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), which states that do what is likeliest to have the best consequences. In other words, do the act that will produce the greatest happiness or utility for the greatest number.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If, according to this theory, the advancement in new technologies and AIs produce the greatest utility for the greatest number of people then it is right, otherwise it is wrong. Consider the following questions; are we promoting the well-being of the greatest number when we replace human nurses with robotic nurses in hospitals in the name of new technologies and artificial intelligences? How many people will benefit from the advancement in new technologies and AIs? Are we not only widening the gap between the rich and the poor? Apparently, not many people will afford these new technologies and AIs, hence, the violation of the utility theory.

The Aristotelian theory known as virtue ethics emphasizes on the character or virtue of the agent performing an act. The two types of virtue that Aristotle envisaged are *character virtue,* and *intellectual virtue.* Character virtue comes about through habit—one habituates oneself to character excellence by knowingly practicing virtues[[9]](#footnote-9). Socrates had previously taught that no one desires what is bad, and so if anyone does something that is bad, it must be unwillingly or out of ignorance. Consequently, all virtue, for Socrates is knowledge.

The best life for human beings to live for Aristotle, is the life of human flourishing or happiness (eudaimonia) and the happiest life is a practice of virtue, and this is practiced under the guidance of reason[[10]](#footnote-10).

Since excellence is rare, most people will tend more towards an excess or deficiency than towards the excellent action itself. Aristotle’s advice is to aim for the opposite of one’s typical tendency, and that eventually this will lead one closer to the excellence. For example, if one tends towards the excess of self-indulgence, it might be best to aim for insensibility, which will eventually lead the agent closer to temperance[[11]](#footnote-11).

Aristotle cautions us to avoid being excessive in our actions. We need to strike a balance between an excess or deficiency to achieve excellence. On this view, new technologies and artificial intelligences are morally good if and only if they strike a mean between excess and deficiency. We need new technologies and AIs but only to a moderate extend. New technologies and AIs promotes idleness in human beings since the new technologies and AIs are expected to do most of the work that human beings do.

The last of these *ethical theories* for this article, holds that “the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which one belongs”[[12]](#footnote-12). What is right for one society might be wrong for another. Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times. William Graham Sumner as quoted by Pojman argues that,

We learn the (morals) as unconsciously as we learn to walk and hear and breathe, and [we] never know any reason why the [morals] are what they are. The justification of them is that when we wake to consciousness of life we find them facts which already hold us in the bonds of tradition, custom, and habit.[[13]](#footnote-13)

“Trying to see things from an independent, non-cultural point of view would be like taking out our eyes in order to examine their contours and qualities. We are simply culturally determined beings”[[14]](#footnote-14).

It may seem true that what is right for one is wrong for another, or that morality is relative to cultures or societies, but as the idea goes, one's freedom ends where another's begins. New technologies and AIs know nothing about cultures, societies and customs. In short they know no bounds. Consequently, Moral relativism might seem to be irrelevant or inapplicable to global issues like new technologies and artificial intelligences whose effects (whether good or bad) are felt across all cultures and all generations. It would be relevant if new technologies and AIs concern only some particular societies or cultures which from this research, is not the case.

However, if the present generation chooses to have nothing to do with the advancement of new technologies and AIs, the future generation will wake to consciousness of life to find them facts which already hold it in the bonds of tradition, custom, and habit. Prevention, they say, is better than cure.

Evidently, contrary to its misconceptions, philosophy is not Just a matter of opinion nor do philosophers simply split hairs and debate endlessly about meaningless problems, rather it is a rational and critical inquiry that reflects on its own methods, assumptions and the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, morality and existence. Philosophy, explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to others. Hence, philosophy helps human beings make sense of their experiences and manoeuvre the world with fairness. In the down of the advancement of new technologies and artificial intelligence, philosophy can awaken humanity to the new challenges posed by such initiatives to our existence.

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