

# Revisiting Ethics and Relationships with Others

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### Debate over the Foundation of Ethics and AI

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Ethical considerations are coming to the fore as AI moves toward practical applications. How can we deal with situations in which AI is used to make decisions that impact the human rights and lives of people? We are asked to think of human ethics, which sets and regulates the criteria used for making such decisions. My own response to this is unexpectedly simple: ethics is all about “being nice to others.”

Ethics has long been founded on god or religious authority. However, the modern movement toward emancipation from god as seen in the West drove the need for some new non-religious foundation on which ethics could be founded. While a variety of different arguments have been put forward since the 18th century as people sought to find these foundations in reason or affections, these attempts all ultimately failed, culminating in the world wars of the 20th century.

What the world learned from these wars was the concept of “other.” Seeking to place ethics on a foundation of “self” rather than god only resulted in behavior that caused harm to others. This being so, ethics is nothing more than how we engage with other people. Post-war thought and philosophy were rebuilt on this basis. Since 1980 in particular, this problem has been thoroughly debated in the context of contemporary thought. The consensus that has emerged is of

the impossibility of basing ethics on transcendental concepts such as god or reason. Rather, it can only be based on the concept of the other. For “weak” humans who are neither gods nor purely rational actors, ethical behavior is no more than being nice to others. I expect that future debate will proceed on the basis of accepting new technologies such as AI and the IoT as long as they do not hinder this consensus.

One question that frequently comes up in debate on AI ethics is the trolley problem<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, another question that arises when trying to put being nice to others into practice is how to deal with zero-sum situations<sup>2</sup> in which the benefits to one person offset the benefits to another.

My own opinion, however, is that neither of these are genuine problems, being rather a type of pseudo-problem. This is because they take the form of thought experiments featuring highly contrived conditions. While people tend to think about extreme situations from the standpoint that truth and a correct answer must exist, the real world in which we all live is much more complicated and subject to all sorts of temporal and spatial constraints such that clear-cut situations like these never actually occur. Rather, it is only by treating the various different conditions in abstract terms that such situations can be contrived. Accordingly, rather than playing thought games that lack answers, would our efforts not be better directed at deepening our genuine understanding of others by working to develop our skills for empathizing with and recognizing the affections and needs of others and our ability to engage with them? Nurturing the imagination to do this is itself a major challenge.

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### Is Honesty the Ultimate Value?

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Michael Puett, a professor at Harvard University with an interest in Chinese philosophy has proposed that, when it comes to behaving ethically, the question of “*li*” in Chinese or “*rei*” in Japanese (ritual or rules of behavior) needs to be addressed seriously.

He gives as an example the American habit of telling their partners, “I love you,” a meaningless statement given the awkwardness of questioning how genuine that love really is. In other words, what matters for ethical practice is to love someone “as if” one is loving that person genuinely. It is through this behavior that they create an “as if” reality for their relationship.

While we may often question whether people really believe something in their heart, is this not a situation where honesty might do us harm? This is because honesty does not excuse everything. There are times when being skeptical of honesty itself is the ethical thing to do.

This brings to mind the problem posed by the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant, an advocate for the idea of ethics based on reason, as to whether it is ever acceptable to tell a lie. He uses the example of the "murderer at the door," considering how one should respond to a murderer who asks whether your friend, their intended victim, is sheltering in your home. Kant concluded that lying about the friend's whereabouts, even to a murderer, is wrong. One cannot help but have doubts about this conclusion of honesty being always ethical even when not telling a lie results in your friend being killed.

Another example is that of a person with cancer who does not have much time to live. Is it ethical to be honest with them even in the knowledge that they are not psychologically equipped to deal with knowing how little time they have left to live?

Tracing this honesty back to its origins reveals a deep relationship with the modern process of secularization. Secularization refers to the way in which the religious has been pushed out of the public realm and into the private one. The claim that "God is dead" notwithstanding, God remains alive and well inside people, serving as an inner voice that calls on us to be honest. With this paradox of secularization has come the aggrandizement of honesty and rising anxiety. Moreover, secularization has been steadily depriving us of rituals and other cultural practices that seem irrational at first glance, as a result corroding the robustness that allows people to put up with those things they cannot comprehend. It may be that the world we now live in has reached this extreme.

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## Returning to Ritualized and Beautiful Relationships

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I believe that ritual has a very large role to play in all this. As touched on earlier in connection with the idea of "*li*" or "*rei*," the essence of ritual exists in the "as if" behavior of families or communities engaging with others. What matters here is how these rituals cause the participants to feel and act differently about things.

At a funeral, for example, rather than treating the existence of the deceased's soul as a question of theology, people come

together "as if" the soul is present so that they can find consolation by mourning the person's passing. It is the process itself that is meaningful. To simply transport the person's remains from the hospital to their final resting place offers no means of acknowledging the death and does nothing to relieve the weight that it leaves in people's hearts.

I believe we need to reappraise the value of the ritualistic acts through which we engage with other people. This is something that also enriches our lives by letting ourselves become human in tandem with those around us.

In the contemporary moment, however, it is no longer an option simply to resurrect the ritual practices of the past. We need to develop new rituals and the language to go with them. Moreover, these new rituals will inevitably need a degree of attractiveness and aesthetics. The more attractive they are, the more people will want to participate in, bringing greater opportunities for expanding relationships and activities. The best way forward for capitalism and technology lies in attractive relationships and beauty. Nonetheless, this goes beyond mere pleasure, and indeed there will also be cases that are the very opposite of pleasure. That is, what we want from technology is not just a way to make particular parts of our lives more pleasant, but also a means of constructing a social imaginary that brings more beauty into our lives.

Ultimately, a society emerges out of the behaviors and living practices of all the people who live in it. Technology makes many things possible. Among these are included supporting the activities of a greater number of people or finding ways to encapsulate and share the practices of our predecessors that treat other people well and create attractive relationships. I have high hopes for these possibilities.

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\*1 The trolley problem: A thought experiment that poses the moral dilemma of whether it is okay to save one person at the expense of sacrificing someone else.

\*2 Zero-sum: Situations in which any gain on one side is canceled out by loss on the other, such that the net benefit is zero.