

## Book Review

### **Morality in a Technological World: Knowledge as Duty** **Lorenzo Magnani, Cambridge U. Press, 2007<sup>1</sup>**

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Many of us will be familiar with the Kantian imperative that we must act only on that maxim through which we can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. And many of us will be equally familiar with Kant's related proposition that people are ends in and of themselves and should not be treated solely as a means to an end. As it is Kant's proposition, I will allow him to state it:

*[M]an, and in general every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will: he must in all his actions, whether they are directed to himself or to other rational beings, always be viewed at the same time as an end.*<sup>3</sup>

Relying on rationality and moral agency, Kant separated out humans from other things and posited that they deserve special treatment:

*Beings whose existence depends, not on our will, but on nature, have nonetheless, if they are not rational beings, only a relative value as means and are consequently called things. Rational beings, on the other hand, are called persons because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves – that is, as something which ought not to be used merely as a means – and consequently imposes to that extent a limit on all arbitrary treatment of them (and is an object of reverence).*<sup>4</sup>

In essence, to treat someone solely as a “means” is to inappropriately “instrumentalise” that person, and to so instrumentalise someone is to act immorally (toward them).

Although the above notions, founded on the belief that humans have and deserve dignity, are the foundation of, and find a voice in, many modern human rights instruments,<sup>5</sup> they are just as often observed in the breach as in the realisation. And this is what troubles and thereby moves Magnani to explore the theory he offers in *Morality in a Technological World*; this and an increasingly dehumanised social setting which he describes as having a “ubiquitous technological presence” and through which human behaviour (and the human-generated technosphere) can have a tremendous impact on the world (pp.xiii and 8). By way of example, he cites overpopulation, commercial/industrial/chemical undertakings, biotechnology innovations, and their consequences, which include ozone depletion, noxious gas production, biodiversity destruction and genetic mutation. He claims that this modern techno-culture raises unique moral issues (from ecological rescue, to biotech safety, to

human hybridisation, to cyberprivacy) and duties (the ultimate one being to respect human dignity).

However, Magnani doesn't just offer a further contribution to the philosophical discourse on dignity, rationality, instrumentality and the concomitant moral duty to enhance the respect that is shown to people (and thereby improve the lot of people around the world who truly need assistance). Rather, he turns this discourse on its head. Citing the wildlife preservation context as an example, he says:

*[T]here is a continuous delegation of moral values to externalities; this may [...] cause some people to complain that wildlife [for example] receives greater moral and legal protection than, for example, disappearing cultural traditions. I wondered what reasoning process would result in a nonhuman thing's being valued over a living, breathing person and asked [...] what might be done to elevate the status of human beings. One solution [...] is to re-examine the respect we have developed for particular externalities and then to use those things as a vehicle to return value to people.*  
(p.x)

In short, Magnani offers the radical suggestion that human beings can and should be treated as “things” (a traditionally disparaged proposition), and can thus come to be respected as things that have, in the modern world, been ascribed more value than (some) people. By doing so, he claims that we can “re-appropriate” the moral esteem that we have “lavished” on external things/objects such as endangered species, works of art, information and information systems. An integral element of this approach, he says, is to recognise that our modern techno- and knowledge-based world imposes on us a duty to produce and apply ethical knowledge in keeping with scientific knowledge. In short, (scientific) knowledge imposes on us duties, not only to produce more knowledge, but also to use it to effect positive change in the world, and that means improving the lives of humans who suffer.

To the above end, Magnani begins in chapter 1 by exploring the idea that humans and nonhuman things are co-dependent, and people can and should be respected as “things” of value. As the basis of his argument, he claims that people are information- and knowledge-carriers and might be valued as such, saying:

*Human beings are no less important than the nonhuman artefacts to which they [...] are so closely related. Because we already respect nonhuman artefactual repositories of knowledge – libraries, medical machines like PETs and MRIs, computers, databases, and so on – it should be easy to learn to respect human ones; we need only expand our idea of “knowledge carrier” to include people [...] The widespread hybridisation of our era makes it necessary – but also easy – “to respect people as things”. (p.28)*

Moreover, he argues that humans are deeply integrated with these information artefacts (and other nonhuman objects). Humans and nonhumans are “folded into” one another insofar as we delegate action to external things (objects, tools, artefacts) that thereby share our human existence with us; we experience “an exchange of

human and nonhuman properties” which causes a “mixing up of objectivity and subjectivity”. Given that this state is the hallmark of the modern “civilised life”, the characterisation of “people as means” is all the more appropriate and helpful.

In chapter 2, drawing on scholars like Baker,<sup>6</sup> Beauchamp,<sup>7</sup> Harris,<sup>8</sup> and Steinbock,<sup>9</sup> Magnani explores some of the moral issues and arguments surrounding reproductive technologies (particularly *in vitro* fertilisation) as well as various other (soon-to-exist) medical technologies (reproductive cloning, cortical micro-electrodes, and so on), many of which evince at least a tacit acceptance of organic and inorganic marriages for curative purposes. In rehearsing these arguments and technological possibilities, Magnani seeks to demonstrate that humans are increasingly integrated with nonhuman artefacts and technical processes, and are therefore deserving of a new understanding (p.42, note 4). His overall purpose is to demonstrate that it is moral to recognise people – who are increasingly human-artefact hybrids – as “things”. Indeed, given the pace and direction of technology, there is an increasingly urgent need for people to be “respected as things”.

Chapter 3 commences from the proposition that knowledge, in the technological age, has become a much more profoundly important duty than ever before because of the profound consequences it can have on our wellbeing and dignity (p.65). Scientific knowledge allows us to better understand the external events of nature (and to develop artefacts that serve us within that environment), and moral knowledge helps us to better anticipate what artefacts might jeopardise our dignity. As such, we must be committed to knowledge-generation, for knowledge shapes how and what we think, makes possible intentionality and free will, heightens consciousness and makes possible the realisation of dignity (p.91).

In chapter 4, Magnani makes the case for knowledge-generation and -dissemination as a means of encouraging creative, model-based, manipulative ethical thinking, particularly around “moral mediators” (which are generally the artefacts to which we give value and choose to use as value-comparators or value-transferors on behalf of people) (pp.93-118). However, he cautions that judgments must be made about the quality and type of information considered morally valuable, and to that end, he explores some of the moral issues that are implicated by our informational capabilities in the “Cyber Age”. He states that information technologies are increasingly ubiquitous, are compounding our hybridisation, and are threatening human dignity in more insidious ways (than the reproductive technologies discussed in chapter 2). Though greatly valued, they can be immoral through their erosion of privacy, which is fundamental to human freedom and intimacy (and therefore dignity). If dignity is to flourish in this new, informational environment, we must interrogate some of the internal conditions which erode it.

Thus, chapter 5 explores our personal relationship with knowledge and the part that relationship plays in determining the level of freedom we enjoy. It is premised on the belief that people frequently deny the fact that choice exists; they create a simple world in which there are no alternatives so as to shield themselves from the responsibility and anxiety of difficult decision-making – they self-delude and thereby

commit “bad faith” insofar as decisions are externalised and limited (p.129). As a result, they artificially reduce their own freedom and that of others who are affected by their actions (or inactions). Magnani concludes that living without important information – whether we have resisted it or are unaware of it – is to create a “toxic state of ignorance” which feeds “bad faith” and leads to poor decisions and a corrosion of wellbeing (p.160).

In the final two chapters of the book, Magnani shifts focus, offering the methodological foundation associated with the moral reasoning/deliberation he is espousing. In chapter 6, he contends that morality is the effort to guide one’s conduct by reasons (ie, to do what there are the best reasons for doing while giving weight to the interests of individuals affected by the conduct). As such, we need to develop sound principles for choosing actions and appropriate ways of reasoning that permit us to apply them so as to facilitate “moral coherence”, which, in turn, helps us to explore the multidimensional character of ethical problems. To that end, he suggests “manipulative abduction” (ie, discovering new ideas and theories by manipulating external objects and representations as is done in the scientific realm), or moral thinking through doing (pp.184-197). In chapter 7, Magnani challenges casuistry and attempts to illustrate that “abduction” (ie, reasoning to hypotheses) is central to ethical deliberation insofar as it demonstrates that judgments, especially those in complicated scenarios, do not always derive from rigid, well-established principles, but often from verbal argument that takes into account particular circumstances, precedents and exceptions. This, of course, is particularly the case in techno-settings where advances create unanticipated challenges (pp.215-240).

Ultimately, Magnani’s theory can be characterised as a “combination of ethics, epistemology, and cognitive science”, and he sums up by stating:

*I am convinced that moral concerns involve reasoning that bears important parallels to reasoning in the sciences and that these similarities can help us to address the problem of moral deliberation in cases and problems not anticipated by moral philosophers (p.248)*

In applying that reasoning, he relies on “moral mediators”, which are “entities we can construct in order to bring about certain ethical effects [and which] may exist as beings, objects or structures” (p.248).

On the claim that our modern (techno) capabilities impose greater efforts of foresight (and the generation of information to facilitate that foresight) than ever before, I fully agree with Magnani, who says:

*As the global stakes grow higher, knowledge becomes a more critically important duty than ever before and must be used to inform new ethics and new behaviors in both public policy and private conduct [...] [E]thical behaviour requires that we assume long-range responsibility commensurate with the scope of our power to affect the planet (p.95)*

Additionally, I can appreciate the desire to find new ways to integrate morality and the modern world (ie, to increase the effectiveness of morality in modern contexts). And though I'm not convinced that existing ethical theories are not up to the task of evaluating behaviour and pointing it in the "proper" direction,<sup>10</sup> the exploration of a theory specifically tailored for the new techno-setting is valuable. As such, I believe this is a useful contribution to the techno-moral discourse and to scholarship more generally.

As I worked my way through Magnani's treatise, I was baffled, delighted, bemused, and enlightened in turns, and, as a consequence, I am the better for it. But this was no easy journey, and Magnani's assurance that his approach "allow[s] us to reorient and modernize philosophical discussions [...] in a way that avoids the formal treatments of traditional moral philosophy," (p.248, note 4) did not, as it turns out, mean that his theory was any more comprehensible (to the non-philosopher) than any of his antecedents. In short, I believe that *Morality in a Technological World* suffers spectacularly from an accessibility standpoint. I found it dense and demanding, and though this may be the fault of the reviewer's mind rather than the theory or the prose, I feel safe in saying that this book is *not* for everyone.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, I'm not at all convinced that I "got it",<sup>12</sup> and my struggles were compounded by the structure of the book/argument; it did not, in my opinion, flow from one topic to the next, building the argument as it went. For example:

1. Given that it was continually referred to throughout, I would have preferred to see the methodological content (chapters 6 and 7) at the outset, followed by (chapter 1) arguments about the importance of knowledge, (chapter 2) defences of knowledge as duty, and (chapter 3) explorations and defences of the new way of treating/conceptualising people within the moral evaluative process.

2. The concept of humans as "knowledge carriers" or "repositories" is briefly introduced and relied on in chapter 1, re-introduced in chapter 4, and further explored in chapter 5, but done so in such a way as to give the impression of several temporally distinct works pieced together. I would have preferred it to be fully described and defended at the outset (ie, in the first chapter after the methodological treatment) so that one has a firm grasp of what is meant and its potential implications.

This structural problem may be a function of the book trying to serve multiple ends (eg, to offer and defend a science-based methodology, to explore "knowledge as duty", to reverse thinking about "humans as things/means"), but structuring it in accordance with those ends would have helped.

Having said that, the broad message contained in this book – that our burgeoning knowledge imposes on us multiplying duties and the need to be absolutely vigilant about meeting them – is something that can and should be embraced by all. Although the idea of "duties" may not resonate universally, the limitations of "rights talk" is starkly exposed in the plight of millions, so a discourse reliant on duties is both helpful and welcome. Finally, and also importantly, Magnani rightly reminds us that

we are not entitled to forget or ignore the global-scale consequences of our localised actions, nor to reduce our moral obligations simply because they are embedded in complex systems (whether commercial, political or social) (pp.98-103). As such, I congratulate Magnani on his attempt to promote knowledge and duty (and knowledge as duty) and to contemporise certain elements of moral thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo Magnani. 2007. *Morality In A Technological World: Knowledge As Duty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 304 pages. ISBN-13 978-0-521-87769-5

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<sup>3</sup> I. Kant. 1785. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. (Edited and translated by H. Paton in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd ed. 1964. London: Hutchinson & Co.): p.95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp.95-96.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the Council of Europe's Biomedicine Convention (1997), UNESCO's Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights (1997).

<sup>6</sup> R. Baker. 2001. *Sex in the Future: The Reproductive Revolution and How It Will Change Us*. NY: Arcade Publishing.

<sup>7</sup> T. Beauchamp. 1999. Principles and Other Emerging Paradigms in Bioethics. In *A Health Law Reader: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. H. Robinson et al. eds. Durham: Carolina Academic Press: 22-27.

<sup>8</sup> J. Harris. 1998. *Clones, Genes and Immortality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>9</sup> B. Steinbock. 2001. Respect for Human Embryos. In *Cloning and the Future of Embryo Research* P. Lauritzen, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 21-33.

<sup>10</sup> Rather, I think we simply need to heed what evidence and rationality are telling us. In short, it is not a failure of existing ethical theories that has brought us to where we are, but rather a failure of actors to act within moral parameters. I'm not sure a new theory will change that.

<sup>11</sup> And it may well be that this book is not intended for a non-philosophical audience.

<sup>12</sup> To be fair, I believe I understood the general thrust and, indeed, large(ish) portions of the discourse, but I got lost in some of the detail, particularly around methodology, and I came away confident that I could not apply the theory in a practical setting, never, to my knowledge, having seen it simply, explicitly and practically applied by the author.