The Moral of the Ethics of AI
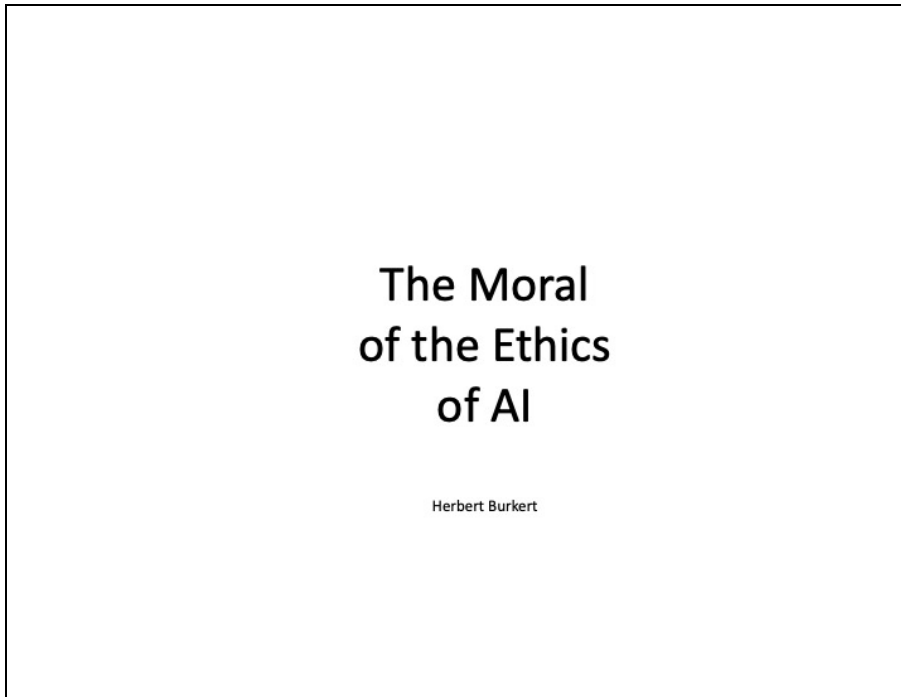
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The Moral of the Ethics of AI

SLIDE 1

The purpose of my presentation is to curb your enthusiasm. And then - may be - rebuilt it.   *Purpose of the Presentation*

By the term "moral" I refer to the actual behavior of people in terms of what they regard as being right and wrong. The term "Ethics" I use to describe the discourse on what is right and wrong. The question therefore is: Is there anything wrong with the discussion about the ethics of AI? The enormous rise of ethical principles brought forward in the context of AI should be a reason for questions rather than for unrestrained optimism.
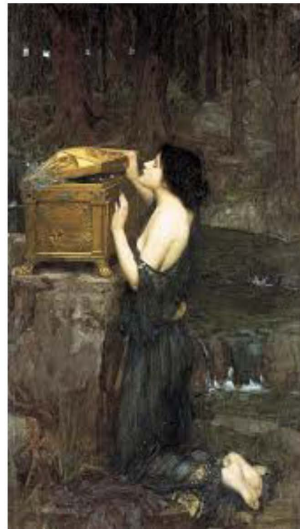
Let me start with a story from Greek mythology which has so much influenced Western thinking.   *A Story*

AI has often been referred to as a Pandora's box.

SLIDE 2

John William Waterhouse 1896

A brief summary of this story has to suffice here:

Zeus decided to punish Prometheus for having stolen the fire and given it to mankind. Zeus put *The Story of Pandora*
Prometheus against a rock and had an eagle regularly nibbling at his liver. Zeus' anger was not cooled
he also decided to punish mankind. With the help of other Gods he built a woman endowed with a
couple of dubious character elements: She was made seductively beautiful, idle, mischievous, and
foolish and was sent to Prometheus' brother as a present together with a box and the instruction
never to open this box. Zeus named the woman Pandora. Prometheus' brother, although warned, was
afraid to refuse the present since he remembered what had happened to his brother; he accepted
Pandora, and Pandora, of course, eventually opened the box and all evil befell humankind.

The image of the woman in this story is somewhat questionable. It coincides to some extent with the *A Short Intermission –*
character traits attributed to Eve in the Old Testament. The misogynic moral of this moral story is *Questioning the Myth*
obvious. A bit too obvious. Research has shown that the original myth was different: Pandora – the
all giving – had referred to Gaia, Mother Earth, who was giving the bad as well as the good to
humankind. It was with the change from a matriarchic society to a patriarchic society that a new
legitimizing myth was needed and thus constructed.

The moral of this story that should also guide us here: Do not trust moral stories. There is an interest *The Moral of that Story?*
behind them usually either legitimizing new power distributions or questioning existing ones.

3

SLIDE 3

The Hippocratic Oath is usually referred to as the classical example of an Ethical Code having guided mankind through the ages. And it has been brought forward as a guidance for how to handle AI as well.

Hippocrates Oath

"Mathematicians, computer engineers and scientists in related fields should take a Hippocratic oath to protect the public from powerful new technologies under development in laboratories and tech firms," Hannah Fry, an associate professor in the mathematics of cities at University College London has recently stated according to the English newspaper "The Guardian".

A Guidance for AI?

On the other hand the Harvard Health Blog had stated in 2015 :

"In a 2011 study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, about 80% of practicing physicians reported participating in an oath ceremony, but only a quarter felt that the oath significantly affected how they practiced." Furthermore: "According to a 1989 survey, barely half of U.S. medical schools used any form of the Hippocratic Oath and only 2% used the original." Maybe because the original oath contains a condemnation of abortion?

The Relevance of the Hippocratic Oath Empirics

This poses the question : What is the function of such oaths? They seem primarily serve to help to create professional associations, lift their social standing, and serve as assurance to the general public that power will not be misused. Simultaneously they help to control access to the profession and insulate the professionals against outside criticism by propagating the existence of an ethical code. Of course, in the context of AI it is already a bit difficult to delimit the profession, as also the ACM had witnessed when they were drawing up their code.

*Analyzing the Function of Professional Oaths*

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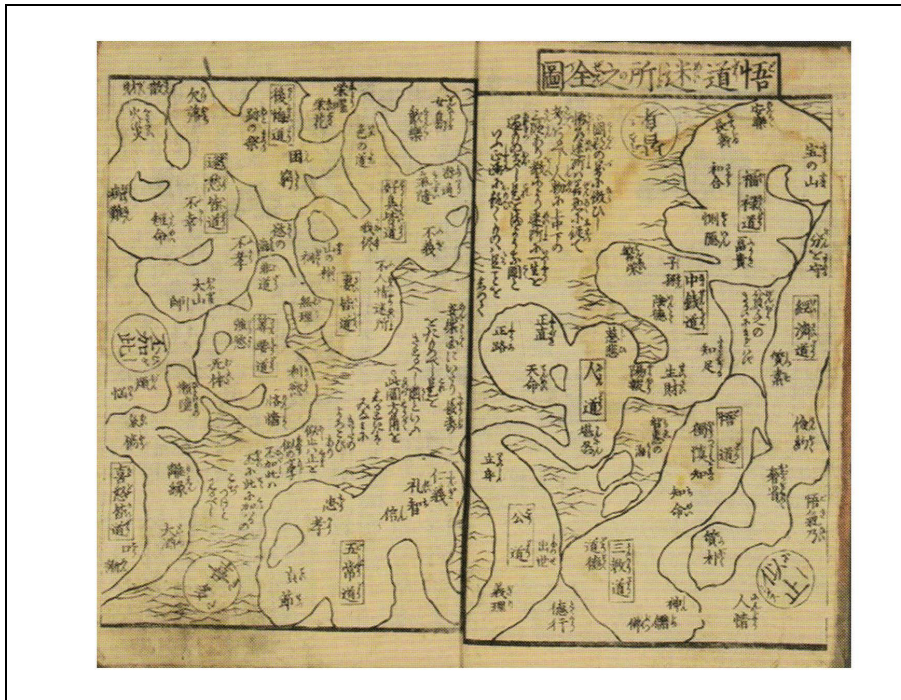
What you see here is "The Complete Map of Delusional Landmarks along the Road to Enlightenment" *The Map* taken from "The Illustrated Landmarks of Delusion in the Realm of Good and Evil" created by the Japanese woodprint maker Keisai Eisen in 1846. You can look at it in the Waseda University Library in Tokyo. [Source: "Cartographic Japan – A History in Maps – edited by Kären Widen, Sugimoto Fumiko, and Cary Karacas , The University of Chicago Press 2016].

It shows – among other things - precarious paths you have to take to avoid dangerous sites such as "Adultery" or the "Sea of Desire". Keisai Eisen knew by experience, because he had been strongly criticized for his Shunga woodblocks (erotic art) and the way he was depicting Japanese women.

Why am I mentioning him here: Because he addresses the most important and the mostly neglected *Temptations* part of ethical rules: the temptations not to follow them. Ethical Rules may tell you what not to do, but they rarely tell you how to properly respond to temptations.

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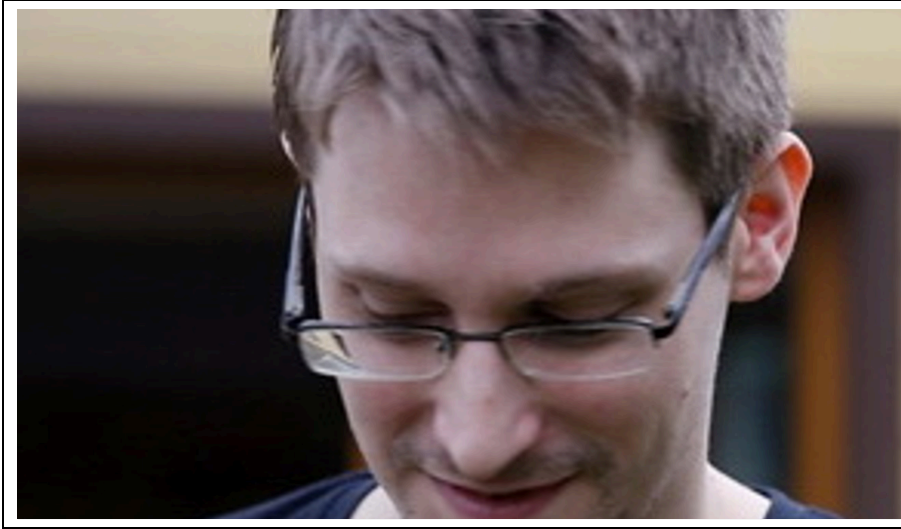
Closely connected to issue of temptations is the issue of justifications when rules have not been followed. Ethical Codes do little providing guidance in the case of conflicts between presumed or accepted values, between for example loyalty to a country and the need to inform humankind about harm, or between conflicts between rules in one code.

Justifications

The ACM Code, for example, while providing at least some case studies on such conflicts in most cases concludes with the extremely practical advice "Reflect!".

Reflect!?

SLIDE 6

Louis C Moeller

The handling of temptations and justifications of why not to follow Ethical Codes point to another *Advice* problem: Most Ethical Codes lack referral to trusted institutions or persons to whom you can go for advice. Ethical decisions while demanded by society are regarded -at least in Western societies - as individual decisions with only very limited help before and after the decision. Advice, and in particular institutional advice, is a rare resource for those who have to decide.

SLIDE 7

Pieter Bruegel the Elder

When we recall the difference initially made between Ethics as a set of rules demanding a kind of *Empirics* behavior including reflective behavior and /or as theories about such rules and when we refer to Morals as the way in which people actually follow or do not follow such rules then we have to restate again – and certainly so with regard to AI – that there is big output of Ethics but very little with regard to morals – i.e. empirical descriptions of how people in this business go about to make actual decisions and how they reason about them. Many norms, very little empirical material.

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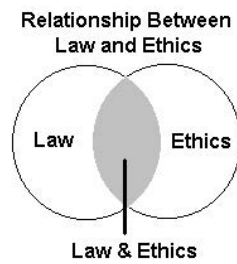
And finally, since we are in a Law School here, there is, of course, the relation between Ethics and the *Law and Ethics* Law. This is issue is Law 101.

The point I want to make is – and maybe it's a "grandfather mumbles to his grandchildren" point: When I was young, or rather when I was younger, at the advent of the Internet, the emphasis of the normative discussion was on how to regulate the internet, and even when and where self-regulation was mentioned there was reference to a legal framework that would install such self-regulation. But when we look at AI, there is an abundance of ethical codes but very little discussion about a legal framework. There may be reasons for that, but there is no such sufficient discussion of that phenomenon in my view.

SLIDE 9

Hyronimus Bosch

So let me now sum up what I would call the Seven Deadly Sins of Ethical Codes: *Deadly Sins*

- their un-reflected relation to dominant political and social power
- their insulating function against distrust in the power of those to whom the code is addressed
- the neglect of temptations
- the shying away from ethical conflicts
- the failure to implement trusted sources of advice
- the lack of an empirical basis
- the distrust in law

SLIDE 10

   The Seven Deadly Sins of Ethical Codes

1. unreflecting attitude towards power
2. insulating against distrust
3. neglect of temptations
4. shying away from conflicts between ethical norms
5. lack of trusted sources of advice
6. lack of sufficient empirical analysis
7. no trust in law

What had remained in Pandora's box according to the myth was hope.

Towards A Toolbox

There is a cynical explanation for this: Because otherwise humankind would have given up in view of all the evils they had received, and hope just forced them to endure them.

I take a more positive view:

SLIDE 11

Enoch Wood Perry

Let us develop a toolbox to put Ethical Codes under more scrutiny and not to accept them at face value, and make them more viable.

SLIDE 12

How to Question Ethical Codes

1. Do they know how people actually behave?
2. Made by whom, for whom, why and why now?
3. What is the social, political, economic and cultural context?
4. Any guidance how to face temptations and how to get advice?
5. Why no legal regulation?

When facing Ethical Codes ask:

- Have they reflected on the way people actually behave?

- Why are they there, for whom are they there, by whom are they made and why now?

- What is their social, political, economic and cultural context?

- Do they provide sufficient guidance and backup to face temptations?

- Why is there no legal regulation?

This is not to discredit Ethica Codes, it is to reflect on them, to make them sustainable.

They are worth to be scrutinized.

They need to be scrutinized.

The Questions to be asked

SLIDE 13

Thank you!

SLIDE 14 SOURCES

Sources

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