

Distributed Morality in a Technological World Knowledge as Duty¹

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Abstract: This paper aims at presenting a concise treatment of some key themes of my recent book *Morality in a Technological World. Knowledge as Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007). In recent times, non-human beings, objects, and structures – for example computational tools and devices – have acquired new moral worth and intrinsic values. Kantian tradition in ethics teaches that human beings do not have to be treated solely as “means”, or as “things”, that is in a merely instrumental way, but also have to be treated as “ends”. I contend that human beings can be treated as “things” in the sense that they have to be “respected” as things are sometimes. People have to reclaim instrumental and moral values already dedicated to external things and objects. To the aim of reconfiguring human dignity in our technological world I introduce the concept of *moral mediator*, which takes advantage of some suggestions deriving from my previous research on epistemic mediators and on manipulative abduction. I also contend that through technology people can simplify and solve moral tasks when they are in presence of incomplete information and possess a diminished capacity to act morally. Moreover, many external things, usually inert from the moral point of view, can be transformed into what we call moral mediators. Hence, not all of the moral tools are inside the head, many of them are shared and distributed in “external” objects and structures which function as ethical devices. For example we can use external “tools”, like computer or biotechnology, to reconfigure previously given social orders morally unsatisfactory.

Respecting People as Things

When my institution, the University of Pavia, was founded near Milan in 1361, women were viewed very differently from the way we see women today. Back then, a woman living in one of the centuries-old houses I pass each day on my way to work here in Pavia would not have been considered as “human” as men: seven hundred years ago, she would have essentially been property – first her father’s then, later, her husband’s, and she would probably have had little control over matters concerning her family or her own destiny. There is a very good chance that she would have been illiterate, as were most women and many men in medieval Europe, and she would certainly not have been permitted to attend the city’s then-new university. In the fourteenth century, the centers of learning in northern Italy were among the most advanced in the world, yet even they considered women to be unworthy or incapable of being educated. Indeed, it took nearly 400 years for women to gain admission to the University of Pavia, and not until the eighteenth century was a degree awarded to a woman: Maria Pellegrini Amoretti, who was from a wealthy family, not surprisingly, took a law degree amid in 1777.

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At the institution today, however, women work alongside men as both students and faculty members, and while we must continue to strive for gender equity, the current level of intellectual interaction between female and male scholars would have been unimaginable to medieval peoples. Attitudes towards gender roles did not evolve because of some inherent change in women, of course, but because people have learned a great deal more about the human condition since 1361. By what mechanism did this shift occur? What knowledge allowed humankind to change the way it views women? And for the purposes of the book, how can we learn from that transformation so that others may enjoy greater status as well?

Before turning to my book's central theme of regarding knowledge as a duty, it is useful to think about how knowledge can affect an entity's moral status. In addition to women, many other kinds of entities – both living and non-living – that were once considered much less valuable than they are today have also acquired a different kind of moral worth: *intrinsic* value, or value as an end in itself. An entity's intrinsic value, of course, arises not from a change in the thing itself but from changes in human thinking and knowledge; if various acts of cognition can imbue things with new moral value, I submit that certain undervalued human beings can reclaim the sort of moral esteem currently held by some "external things," like endangered species, artwork, data bases, or even some overvalued political institutions.

As the subtitle of the book - *Knowledge as a Duty* - suggests, morality is distributed in our technological world in a way that makes some scientific problems particularly relevant to ethics: ecological imbalances, the medicalization of life, and advances in biotechnology – themselves all products of knowledge – seem to me to be especially pertinent topics of discussion. The system of designating certain animals as endangered, for example, teaches us that there is a continuous delegation of moral values to externalities; it may also cause some people to complain that wildlife receives greater moral and legal protection than, for example, disappearing cultural traditions. I wondered what reasoning process would result in a non-human thing's being valued over a living, breathing person and asked myself what might be done to elevate the status of human beings. One solution, I believe, is to re-examine the respect we have developed for particular externalities and then use those things as a vehicle to return value to people.

The well-known Kantian tradition in ethics teaches that human beings should not be treated solely as "means" or "things" in a merely instrumental way but should, instead, be regarded as "ends." I believe, however, that if we rigidly adhere to Kant's directive, then we make it impossible to embrace an important new strategy I propose in chapter one of my book: "respecting people as things," the notion that people must be regarded as "means" (things) insofar these means involve "ends." In essence, the idea holds that human beings often can and even *should* be treated as "things," and that in the process they become "respected as things" that had been ascribed more value than some people. We must reappropriate the instrumental and moral values that people have lavished on external things and objects, which I contend is central to reconfiguring human dignity in our technological world.

The potential benefits of "respecting people as things," then, undermine Kant's traditional distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value, and they are not the only factors to do so: in chapter three I argue that more advanced and more pervasive technology has also blurred the line between humans and things – machines, for example – and between natural things and artifacts, and it has become increasingly difficult to discern where the human body ends and the non-human thing begins. We are in a sense "folded" into non-humans, so that we delegate action to external things (objects, tools, artifacts) that in turn share our human existence with us. It is just this *hybridization* that necessitates treating people as things and, fortunately, that makes this course of action easier to pursue. Again, my counterintuitive conclusion is that instead of treating people

like means, we can improve their lives by recognizing their part-thingness and respecting them as things.

In turn, the concept of “respecting people as things” provides an ethical framework through which to analyze the condition of modern people, who, as increasingly commodified beings, are becoming more and more thing-like anyway. In my book, I use this construct to interrogate the medicalization of life (chapter two), cybernetic factors (chapter four), and the influences of globalization (chapter five).

Moral Mediators

We have said that only human acts of cognition can add worth to or subtract value from an entity, and that revealing the similarities between people and things can help us to attribute to human beings the kind of worth that is now held by many highly valued non-human things. This process suggests a new perspective on ethical thinking: indeed, these objects and structures can mediate moral ideas and recalibrate the value of human beings by playing the role of what I call *moral mediators*.

What exactly is a moral mediator? As I explain in chapter six, I derived the concept of the moral mediator from that of the epistemic mediator, which I introduced in my previous research on abduction and creative and explanatory reasoning (Magnani, 2001). First of all, moral mediators can extend value from already prized things to human beings, as well as to other non-human things and even “non-things” like future people and animals. We are surrounded by human-made and artificial, entities, whether they are concrete objects like a hammer or a PC or abstractions like an institution or society; all of these things have the potential to serve as moral mediators. For this reason, I say it is critically important for current ethics to address not only the relationships among human beings, but also those between human and non-human entities. Moreover, by exploiting the concepts of “thinking through doing” and of manipulative abduction, we can see that a considerable part of moral action is performed in a tacit way, so to say, “through doing.” Part of this “doing” can be considered a manipulation of the external world to build various moral mediators that function as enormous new sources of ethical information and knowledge. I call these schemes of action “templates of moral doing.”

In the cases above, moral mediators are purposefully constructed to achieve particular ethical effects, but other aspects and cognitive roles of moral mediators are equally important: moral mediators are also beings, entities, objects, structures, that objectively, even beyond human beings’ intentions, carry possible ethical or unethical consequences.

External moral mediators function as components of a memory system that crosses the boundary between person and environment. For instance, when a society moves an abused child into a foster home, an example I use in chapter six, it is seeking both to protect her and to reconfigure her social relationships; in this case, the new setting functions as a moral mediator that changes how she relates to the world – it can supply her with new emotions that bring positive moral and psychological effects and help her gain new perspectives on her past abuse and on adults in general. In *Morality in a technological World*, I depict these processes as “model-based” inferences, and indeed one way moral mediators transform moral tasks is by promoting further moral inferences in agents at the level of model-based abduction, a concept I introduced in a previous book on abductive reasoning. I use the term “model-based reasoning” to mean the constructing and manipulating of certain representations, not mainly sentential and/or formal, but mental and/or related to external mediators: obvious examples of model-based inferences include building and using visual representations, conducting thought experiments, and engaging in analogical reasoning. In this light, an emotional feeling also can be interpreted as a kind of model-based cognition. Of course, abductive reasoning – the process of

reasoning to hypotheses – can be performed in a model-based way either internally or with the help of external mediators.

Moreover, I can use manipulation to alter my bodily experience of pain; I can, for example, follow the behavior template “control of sense data” described in chapter six, during which I might shift – often unconsciously – the position of my body. Through manipulation I can also change my body’s relationships with other humans and non-humans experiencing distress, as did Mother Theresa, whose rich, personal moral feeling and consideration of pain was certainly shaped by her physical proximity to starving and miserable people and by her manipulation of their bodies. In many people, moral training is often related to the spontaneous (and sometimes fortuitous) manipulations of both sense data and their own bodies, for these actions can build morality immediately and non-reflectively “through doing.”

Technological artifacts serve as moral mediators in many situations, as is the case when certain machines affect privacy. Chapter four addresses the fact that the Internet mediates human interaction in a much more profound way than do traditional forms of communication like paper, the telephone, or the media, even going so far as to record interactions in many situations. The problem is that because the Internet mediates human identity, it has the power to affect human freedom. Thanks to the Internet, our identities today largely consist of externally stored amount of data, information, images, and texts that concern us as individuals, and the result is a “cyborg” of both flesh and electronic data that identifies us. In that, I contend that this complex new “information being” depicts new ontologies that in turn involve new moral problems. We can no longer apply old moral rules and old-fashioned arguments to beings that are simultaneously biological and virtual, situated in a three-dimensional local space yet “globally omnipresent” as information packets. Our cybernetic locations are no longer simple to define, and increasing telepresence technologies will exacerbate this effect, giving external, non-biological resources even greater powers to mediate ethical endowments such as those related to our sense of who and what we are and what we can do. These and other effects – of the Internet – almost all of which were unanticipated – are powerful motivators of our duty to construct new knowledge.

I believe that in the context of this abstract but ubiquitous technological presence, certain moral approaches that ethics has traditionally tended to disparage are worth a new look. Taking care of both people and external things through personal, particular acts – a moral orientation often associated with women – rather than relating to others through an impersonal, general concern about humanity has new appeal. The ethics of care does not consider the abstract “obligation” as essential; moreover, because it does not require that we impartially promote the interests of everyone alike, it allows us to focus on those who most need assistance.

In short, a considerable part of morality occurs in a implicit way, so to say, “through doing,” and part of this “doing” features manipulating the external world in order to build various external “moral mediators” that can provide vast amounts of new information and knowledge, transform ethical features and effects, and sometimes, of course, generate unethical outcomes.

Moral Reasoning

In my book, I consider numerous ethical issues related to technology: ecology, biotechnology, the hybridization of human beings, cyberprivacy, bad faith, globalization, and the unethical effects of external systems and technologies in general. Each of these discussions underscores the importance of producing and exploiting appropriate ethical knowledge and reinforces my argument that knowledge is a duty. If, as I contend, new ethical, scientific, and other kind of understandings must be developed and implemented,

then cognitive concerns also become fundamentally important. In chapters six and seven², I closely examine the cognitive aspects of moral mediators and of other methodological problems related to ethical reasoning and moral deliberation.

Ethical knowledge and reasoning are not only expressed at the verbal/propositional level – they can also involve model-based (visual, for example) and manipulative/“through doing” aspects: for example, an important component in ethics is imagination, which is, together with analogy, visualization, simulation, and thought experiment, etc., a form of model-based reasoning. Creativity is also important, for through it human beings expand knowledge and create new perspectives. To explain morality “through doing,” I illustrate manipulative ethical reasoning using a list of invariant behaviors that I call “moral templates,” which represent embodied patterns of possible moral behavior, either pre-existing or newly created in people’s mind-body system, that enable a kind of moral “doing.” I also think it is useful to cognitively compare moral deliberation with diagnosis, a strategy that reveals the logical details of the intrinsic “incompleteness” of knowledge in ethical inferences

Using a cognitive and epistemological approach to the concept of abduction and model-based reasoning, as I am proposing, produces an important and valuable side effect: an integrated view that forms a unique framework through which to study the multiple aspects of moral reasoning, including those that are verbal/propositional, model-based, distributed (“moral mediators”), and embodied (“templates of moral doing”).

Knowledge as a Duty

Chapter four is dedicated to explicitly clarifying the motto “knowledge as a duty.” In our technological world, it has become critically important for us to produce and apply ethical knowledge that keeps pace with the rapid changes around us. We are no less obligated to pursuing this knowledge than we are to seeking scientific advances; indeed, to neglect the ethical dimension of modern technology is to court disaster. Recent advances have brought about consequences of such magnitude that old policies and ethics can no longer contain them, and we must be willing to approach problems in wholly new ways. Our technology has, for example, turned nature into an object of human responsibility, and if we are to restore and ensure her health, we must employ clever new approaches and rich, updated ethical knowledge. The scope and impact of our current technological abilities have handed human beings the responsibility for, say, “nature” or “the future,” which were previously left to God or to fate. Consequently, I declare early in the book – chapter three – my hope for knowledge that maintains and enhances our endowments of intentionality, consciousness, and free will choices, strengthens our ability to undertake responsible action, and preserves ownership of our futures. To offer a personal example, while I respect new objects or artifacts that integrate my cognitive activities, I believe it is imperative to explore the moral implications of such devices before embracing their use.

Indeed, basic aspects of human dignity are constantly jeopardized not only by human mistakes and wrongdoing but also through technological products. Constant challenges also come from natural events and transformations, both ordinary ones, like the birth of one’s first child, and extraordinary ones, like epidemics, tsunamis, or hurricanes. I think that preserving and improving the present aspects and characteristics of human beings depends on their own choices about knowledge and morality, and I believe strongly that knowledge is a primary duty that must receive much greater emphasis than ever before and that the knowledge we create must be commensurate with the causal scale of

² These chapters are largely autonomous and methodological and can be usefully read before the other chapters or independently from them. We can say they are twin and complementary, because they systematically treat similar methodological issues from an epistemological and cognitive perspective (chapter seven) as well as from a moral perspective (chapter six).

our action. I propose that one way to achieve this and other goals is by accepting “knowledge as a duty” and by using disciplines like ethics, epistemology, and cognitive science to rethink and retool research on the philosophy of technology.

The Case of Globalization and of Commodification

The blurring of traditional distinctions between people and things that makes us a kind of cyborg is certainly due not only to our relationships with technological products, but also the externalization we achieve through our intertwining with other external artifacts, like institutions, roles, and social duties. These aspects are connected to the increasing “commodification” of our lives, a trend that is multiplying the potential situations in which we function as cyborgs, and it is therefore useful to briefly analyze how commodification, wrought mainly by modern globalization, is affecting our lives.

We know that many modern languages are being reduced to “kitchen languages”³; that is, they are increasingly relegated to the home and social situations and generally eschewed in work settings. This is becoming the fate, for example, of my first language, Italian, which Galileo used for political and epistemological purposes in his early modern writings: he defied tradition by using that language to invent modern science at a time when Latin was the expected language of scholars. The use of Italian and many other languages is declining, as everyone knows, because the inexorable process of globalization is establishing one dominant language – English. This shift, however, is just one effect of globalization, whose repercussions reach far beyond the way we communicate with each other.

The condition of human beings in the globalized world is depicted in similar ways by many authors,⁴ and while the descriptions vary in political slant, they are surprisingly consistent in actual content. In these writings, the new world is afflicted by powers of oppression and destruction, but it also features new possibilities and chances for humanity. It seems that neo-liberal policies seek to create a global system of internationalized capitals and supranational banking networks and institutions controlled by hegemonic corporations and maintained by the free movement of capital across national borders: as Teeple writes, “The formation of cartels, oligopolies, or monopolies to control supply and demand, geographic markets, and prices; and the growth of the advertising sector, which is in effect an attempt to control and create demand,” reflects corporate planning that “is simply the recognition that the unreliability of the market [...] cannot be tolerated given the enormity of capital investment.”⁵

In the era of globalization, all people are welcome as potential contributors regardless of race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. Nevertheless, it seems that, at least since the late 1970s, this new international system has brought with it greater economic inequality, and, as a result, many global problems are worsening: low wages, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, child labor, forced emigration and transmigration, forced labor, the social and professional subordination of women, war, slaughter, bribery and corruption, and disease and morbidity.

The list of globalization’s negative effects goes on and on: pollution and environmental destruction seem out of control, as we’ve mentioned before; the sovereignty of the old nation states is declining; labor and trade union rights, healthcare, social assistance, support for the elderly, and educational standards are all decreasing; legislative assaults on wages are being launched by governments around the world at a

³ Teeple, 2000, p. 16.

⁴ Sachs, 2000.

⁵ Teeple, 2000, p. 37. Rajan and Zingales, in the recent *Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists*, describe how strong economical groups tend to hind capitalistic competition, taking advantage of their leading position in the market.

time when Keynesian welfare reform has become less popular; corporations control most mass-media outlets, which negatively affects local cultures;⁶ the increasing privatization of public services like education, healthcare, and pension plans is bringing few benefits for the young, the ill, and the elderly; state funds are more and more often redirected to the private sector (take the American school-voucher system, for example); human and civil rights⁷ as well as liberal democracy are circumscribed and threatened; and the old national strategies assisting developing nations seem to have been destroyed. Finally, a growing sense of disillusionment and cynicism is affecting people of all political tendencies.⁸

There is a general crisis regarding established institutions - for example, many believe that the nuclear family is under threat as its worth is questioned and its effectiveness challenged: "Children, moreover, remain by and large the property of their parents or wards of the state, poorly protected by civil rights and largely unrecognized and unseen as embodiments of humanity, but they are increasingly made the objects of consumer marketing."⁹

The global market is the new reality, together with the globalization of production, distribution, and exchange. Unlike the United Nations, the new transnational institutions are primarily economic or commercial in nature; as such, they lack democratic and political legitimacy because they are not products of free elections,¹⁰ yet they wield enormous power in the world: the result is, as Rosenau has put it, "governance without government."¹¹ Those who work to counter the effect of such institutions are few in number and limited in their aims (and unfortunately their behavior is not always transparent) – I'm thinking here of such collectivities as religious and ecological organizations, Aboriginal alliances, consumer protection groups, old age advocacy coalitions, civil liberty associations like Amnesty International, women's movements, anti-nuclear groups, and organizations like Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières.¹²

Globalized human beings seem disenfranchised: because they are fragmented – paradoxically, their communications are obstructed in this era of heightened communications – they cannot be represented in the global theatre.¹³ Unscrupulousness at both village and global levels exacerbates their basic segmentation and renders them more and more marginalized. Corruption, disease, and frustration begin to take the form of psychosis, substance abuse, anguish, and boredom.¹⁴

Moreover, human beings' activity and labor have shifted from energy-intensive to information-intensive; information is increasingly objectified in computers and networks and so is more often located outside of human carriers. Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life that can be separated from the rest; it now seems to permeate all aspects of all of our objectives.

For example, let us draw from the topic of biotechnology I describe in chapter two of the book and consider the case of computational and informational "non-human" objects and tools. An increasing number of institutions have been transformed into "virtual"

⁶ According to the french antropologist Jean Loup Amselle (2001), the process of globalization would not destroy all the local cultures. On the contrary, it can uncover the existence of those cultures that otherwise would still remain unknown.

⁷ McGinn, 2000; Dyson, 2000.

⁸ Teeple, 2000, pp. 2-4.

⁹ Cit., p. 41.

¹⁰ Schiller, 2000.

¹¹ Rosenau, 1992.

¹² Paddis and Pech, 2004, shed light on some controversial aspects concerning the financial management of the so called NGO (Non governative organizations).

¹³ Teeple, 2000, p. 197.

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri, 2001, pp. 389-392.

entities: banks, for example, corporate headquarters, government offices, universities and schools, healthcare organizations, entertainment, or advertising. Businesses have made it possible to buy airline tickets and other goods from online sources. In all these cases, computer systems store, distribute, transform, and apply information.

Human beings have been excised from many transactions – economic and otherwise – as the tasks they once managed have been transferred to external things like computer systems and networks. It seems many professionals have been affected by this process: certainly in fields such as medicine, law, engineering, architecture, and teaching, human beings are embodiments of specialized accumulated knowledge, and as a result, they serve as “biological” repositories, disseminators, and processors. The current trend, however, is to fill these roles, many of which require significant skill, with non-human computers and other tools. This movement signals a kind of “demise of the expert,” with the term “expert” conveying the idea of knowledge monopolies held by members of particular groups. It is true that technology has loosened the grip once held by various professions and nations on certain information, but, at the same time, an increase in patents and intellectual copyrights means that corporate monopolies are growing.

While globalization’s negative effects are widely known – the subordination of local cultural traditions to large-scale market and corporate interests, for instance – I contend that this new era of locating knowledge outside human carriers also brings potential for at least some good. As knowledge and skill are objectified in non-human mediators (things that start to think and things that make us smart),¹⁵ outside of human carriers, many positive outcomes become possible: 1) the democratizing and universal dissemination of knowledge; 2) greater ownership and wider transmission of information once controlled by corporate monopolies; and 3) less emphasis on labor as the source of value, which would transform the relationship between labor and capital.¹⁶ Globalization’s tendency to shift knowledge to non-human repositories could be beneficial, for in doing so, it makes information universally accessible. A greater pool of available knowledge could lead to interesting new possibilities while enhancing freedom and increasing free choice.

Finally, some authors maintain that the era of globalization presents an increasing and all-encompassing commodification of socio-cultural needs, that is, of human “cultures,” features, and actions.¹⁷ Many subjectivities have become more and more enmeshed with economic relationships; almost all aspects of our lives and the entire realm of reproduction, for instance, are influenced by economic transactions. In this light, the ethical problems of market rhetoric – “partial alienability” and “market inalienability” (aspiring to noncommodification) become particularly important when it comes to human endowments. Are babies, human organs, blood, labor, fetal gestation (surrogate motherhood) alienable or not? What about sexual services, genetic enhancement, cloning, and bodily integrity? Finally, can we alienate the traditional liberal life-liberty-property triad or our voting rights?¹⁸

To think something personal – a right or attribute, say – is fungible implies that it is “separate,” and thus its owner is dichotomized and alienated.

I agree with Radin’s comment: workers who adopt market rhetoric dichotomize their own labor as a commodity and themselves as persons; they dissociate their daily life from their self-conceptions. On the contrary, workers who do not consider their labor a commodity are alienated from others who do, because, from the workers’ perspective, people who conceive of their labor as a commodity fail to consider themselves as whole persons: “To conceive of something personal not fungible also assumes that persons

¹⁵ Cf. Gershenfeld, 1999 and Norman, 1993.

¹⁶ Teeple, 2000, pp. 70-71.

¹⁷ Postman, 2000.

¹⁸ Cf. Posner, 1981 and Radin, 1999.

cannot freely give of themselves to others. At best they can bestow commodities. At worst – in universal commodification – the gift is conceived of as a bargain. [...] Commodified sex leaves the parties as separated individuals and perhaps reinforce their separateness [...]. Noncommodified sex ideally diminishes separateness; it is conceived of as a union because it is ideally a sharing of selves.”¹⁹

In some cases, the increasing commodification of human aspects and actions generates uncertainty. In a divorce, for instance, how is the monetary value of a spouse’s professional degree or work as a stay-at-home parent decided? Does rape damage bodily integrity in ways that can be economically quantified? When human beings’ features are alienable, we immediately think they have become a “means.” Imagine a person who has decided to sell sex so that he or she can be a “means” for other people. A society can consider this behavior immoral, but this does not imply that the sexually commodified body of that person should be less respected or that his or her problems are less worthy of moral consideration. The concept of “respecting people as things” also provides an ethical framework that allows us to interrogate and analyze the condition of modern people and then develop ways to support them – even as nearly all parts of their lives are increasingly commodified.

Commodification of Human Dignity?

In this time of increasing technology, a time when we seem to be commodifying nearly everything in sight, is it possible to turn even intangible values like human dignity into commodities? The prospect sounds ominous, but I believe doing so could actually bring positive change; attaching economic worth to human dignity could generate a certain degree of social demand and need for it. Indeed, in our current collectivities there is already a call for improvements in human dignity, and its commodification could serve as a beach head for those working to spread dignity. Take, for example, a university that offers special support to students (more tutoring, more capacity to “listen to” the students’ problems, more democracy and participation, etc.) or to its teachers (more time for them to do research or more latitude in deciding whether to teach a course,²⁰ etc.); such an institution could use economic transactions to enhance the lives of its students and faculty members. There could be an option for families and parents to “pay more” for a level of treatment that ensures greater dignity for both students and teachers, which would create an environment that would attract higher quality instructors and generally enhance the reputation of the institution. Similar arrangements could be implemented in hospitals and other enterprises. But we would need to consider and manage the downside of such a strategy – namely, that such a system would allow the wealthy to buy even greater dignity than they are already accorded!

Of course, many new links between commerce and ethics have already been established – companies concerned about sustainability are marketing ecological products,²¹ and so-called ethical banks, which finance humanitarian endeavors, are

¹⁹ Cf. Radin, 1999, p. 122.

²⁰ One time a university “respected” me as a teacher and as a person in the following way: its bureaucracy asked me by email at 1:26 p.m. to decide whether I was able to accept a visiting professorship, and the deadline was 5:00 p.m. of the same day. I read the message at about 3:30 p.m., so I had to decide in an hour and a half! I contend that giving people adequate time to adopt decisions is a form of respecting them. Only in this way are people really able to choose freely and, therefore, take full responsibility for their decisions (for example, by being able to gather and check information needed to make the decision).

²¹ For example, the ones not related to environmental waste or to the exploitation of child laborers, etc. See also chapter one of the book, section “Preserving Things: Technosphere/Biosphere, Human/Non-Human.”

inviting investments that in turn help fund organizations that care for the elderly, treat drug addicts, or work for ecological improvements, etc. “Dignity” products could be clearly labeled as such and promoted, marketed, and sold as items that enhance human lives. Along those lines, some products can now become “Fair Trade Certified,” a designation given by one of the nineteen members of Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International. The groups audit transactions between corporations in wealthy countries and suppliers in developing nations, and for a company to earn and retain certification, it must demonstrate that it has paid farmers and other workers a fair, above-market price. In some American supermarkets, for example, it is now possible to find fair-trade certified bananas or coffee as well as products like Better World Hot Cocoa™. These items are typically more expensive than their conventional counterparts, but we must remember that inhabitants of wealthy countries often enjoy bargains because workers in poor countries are underpaid. Spending a little more money for a bunch of certified bananas means that the farmers who grew them have been compensated with wages that allow them to support themselves and their families.

Some aspects of human dignity are so clear and easy to appreciate that it seems highly possible to create market fungibility for products that promote it. Moreover, if we work harder to commodify aspects of human dignity, we can also counterbalance the current negative effects of commodifying other human aspects, many of which I have illustrated above in this chapter.

Conclusion

What are ethical “reasons”? What is moral progress? What is the role of principles, rules, emotions, and prototypes in ethical reasoning? What is the role of inconsistencies in moral reasoning? Is there a morality “through doing”? These are some of further questions addressed in the book as are the practice of casuistry and an analysis of abduction as a form of hypothetical reasoning that helps clarify processes of “inferring reasons.” The book also discusses the problem of free will and examines the role of objects, structures, and technological artifacts as moral carriers and mediators. What every topic has in common, though, is that it in some way supports the idea that knowledge is our duty. Nearly every thought we have, nearly every action we take, is dictated by the knowledge available to us. In short, if we truly want to effect changes in the world, if we are committed to improving the lives of countless human beings that suffer for a variety of reasons, we must understand that it is only greater knowledge that will allow us to do so.

And so we return to the maxim of “respecting people as things”: if we do not know how to “respect people as things” (or, as Sartre would say, if we reduce people to facticity), we do not respect and appreciate many aspects of ourselves, and the bad faith cycle is continued. Unfortunately, there are also external factors working to perpetuate bad faith, for the increasing commodification of our lives tends to further emphasize the “facticity” part of human beings.

Acknowledging our “condition” is a form of accepting responsibility – it weakens bad faith and is extraordinarily helpful in improving our freedom and the ownership of our destinies. It also heightens awareness of our technologically induced “cyborg” status and of the positive and negative consequences that can accompany it. Here again is yet another version of “knowledge as a duty”: in so many ways, in so many spheres, a commitment to knowledge can help to encourage responsibility, demystify technology, rectify globalization, and enhance social equality.

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