BOOK REVIEW

Right/Wrong: How Technology Transforms our Ethics by Juan Enriquez (2020) MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 304pp., $US25 (hardback) $US17 (paperback) ISBN: 9780262044424

In the American sitcom *The Good Place* (2016–20), a group of characters – all deceased – attempt to upgrade themselves from 'the bad place' to 'the good place'. Among the group is a moral philosophy professor, Chidi Anagonye. Chidi offers lessons on ethics and quips about the need for ethical behaviour when the characters repeatedly make questionable decisions that satisfy their hedonistic tendencies. He is framed as a stick-in-the-ethical-mud, and is regularly reminded that 'everyone hates moral philosophy professors'. By the show's conclusion, however, it is attention to ethics that saves the characters from the bad place, and (spoiler alert!) everyone dies happily ever after.

Moral philosophy professors may not be as disliked in the real world as they are in *The Good Place*, but conversations about ethics still often end in favour of self-indulgence. Ethics gets in the way of the fun. It slows things down. It requires self-reflection upon processes and products, as well as interpersonal understandings that may induce discomfort. Yet ethics, as in *The Good Place*, allows people to live – or even die – in 'good' places. What is more, the general public seems increasingly attuned to questions of ethics with companies, politicians, journalists and Netflix documentaries openly discussing ethical stances and approaches.

Nevertheless, as Thilo Hagendorf (2020, pp.113–14) concludes in a survey of ethics guidelines related to artificial intelligence (AI) in particular:

> Ethics lacks a reinforcement mechanism. Deviations from the various codes of ethics have no consequences. And in cases where ethics is integrated into institutions, it mainly serves as a marketing strategy. Furthermore, empirical experiments show that reading ethics guidelines has no significant influence on the decision-making of software developers. In practice, AI ethics is often considered as extraneous, as surplus or some kind of 'add-on' to technical concerns, as [sic] unbinding framework that is imposed from institutions 'outside' of the technical community.

Put simply, ethical consideration often appears as a tick-box exercise of sorts, with many institutions being so vague in their ethical self-evaluations that they sidestep accountability. To be sure, the fundamental problem with ethics – and with defining what ethics actually means – is related to its inherent subjectivity. What may be considered ethical to one person may not be considered ethical to another. In questions of ethics, there may be wrong answers (most people know, for example, that senseless murder is unacceptable), but there are not necessarily *right* answers. As illustrated by Chidi's behaviour in *The Good Place*, pondering questions of ethics can contribute to chronic indecisiveness, and even the occasional stomach ache.

In *Right/Wrong: How Technology Transforms our Ethics*, Juan Enriquez investigates the subjectivity of ethics. More specifically, he considers how technological development and its resultant implications for scale and affordability prompt us to reconsider what is, and what is not, considered ethical. Although his argument is not wholly novel (see, e.g., Hansson, 2017, and the journal *Ethics and Information Technology*), Enriquez uses current examples from conversations about climate change, citizenship, privacy and personal identity to show how ethics has changed over time, and ties these changes to technological evolution. He discourages retrospective evaluations of ethical behaviour because '[t]echnology is far ahead of ethics' (p.86). Indeed, as he writes in big, bold text, 'Technology Changes Ethics. Do NOT assume what is acceptable today will be acceptable tomorrow' (p.6).

Juan Enriquez is a managing director of Excel Venture Management, a venture capital firm specialising in healthcare and life science technologies. He is perhaps best known for delivering

numerous TED talks wherein he shares his expertise of various facets of human development. In these talks, he offers futuristic assessments of past and present, translating complex scientific concepts into digestible and compelling insights. With *Right/Wrong*, Enriquez channels these insights into an investigation of ethics.

In *Right/Wrong*'s Introduction (p.10), Enriquez explains his motivation for writing the book:

> This is not a classic 'scholarly' book. It is not a book that will provide certainty, much less 'the right answer.' Likely it will provoke question after question. I do not have all the answers. Nor does anyone. So why did I write this? I want other smart people – not just over-enlightened, aggressive activists or absolutist conservatives – thinking and debating ethical dilemmas, questioning the *status quo*, the things we take for granted.

> Many professional ethicists are likely to be seriously bothered by this book. How dare he take on such serious subjects without first regurgitating the canon of our field! Why isn't he more serious and academic in the approach to my hallowed, erudite field? He dares to joke about matters of life and death?

> But let me ask you, the nonprofessional ethicist: when is the last time you voluntarily picked up a book on ethics?

In Enriquez's view, *Right/Wrong* is a book for 'the nonprofessional ethicist', presumably the everyday reader looking for a better understanding of what ethics means in everyday practice. This everyday reader might be a fan of Enriquez's TED talks, a technologist enthusiastic about human factors or someone just beginning to consider the social ramifications of evolving technologies. It is not entirely clear who Enriquez actually imagines his readers to be, though. Complementing his conversational tone with ample usage of slang, chatroom abbreviations and the occasional emoticon, Enriquez signals to 'professional ethicists' that this book is not for them. At the same time, the informality – combined with grammar and spelling errors surprising in an MIT Press publication – suggests that this book is still a work in progress. While Enriquez demonstrates acute awareness of many issues related to technological development and its ethical implications in *Right/Wrong*, the book's presentation of content distracts from its core argument.

Further, Enriquez's question about picking up books on ethics disregards one of the ways that many readers engage in ethical deliberations: fiction. Entire monographs have been written about the value of literature for interpersonal and individual understanding (e.g., Choo, 2021), as have doctoral theses (e.g., Moltow, 2006). Research groups continue to explore what works of fiction can teach about moral complexities (Ethics through Fiction and Film). Literature has also been identified as an especially useful pedagogical tool for engaging students in discussions about ethics (Swanson, 2016). So, 'When is the last time you voluntarily picked up a book on ethics?' The answer could very well be the last time you picked up a work of fiction.

Recognition of diverse avenues for ethical ponderance and growth is vital for appreciating the scale and importance of ethical discussions. In *Right/Wrong*, Enriquez draws primarily from news, magazine and journal articles to support his argument. Though this material has value, depending on such sources means overlooking other ways in which many individuals actually come to understand ethics and build their own ethical frameworks – through works marketed as entertainment. Enriquez nods towards the value of entertainment for ethics (p.122):

> Yet again, technology, especially social networks, TV, and movies, drove a rapid ethical transition. Hollywood changed. Some watched Ellen DeGeneres's ABC sitcom, *Ellen*. Others got their exposure to normal, functional, funny gays through *Will and Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Roseanne*, or *Grey's Anatomy*. Suddenly, movies, actors, news began portraying this lifestyle as something different and cool, within the realm of the everyday. After gays turned up in everyone's living room, many were less terrified of coming out, marching, speaking up. In overwhelmingly Catholic Ireland, *Growing Up Gay*, a documentary telling the stories of eight LGBTQIA folks, got huge ratings, so more family members and friends came out.

This passage shows precisely why we cannot depend upon any single type of source for ethical deliberations. Enriquez's reductionist approach to this discussion of LGBTQIA representation disregards the many other initiatives that have forwarded, and continue to forward, social acceptance of LGBTQIA individuals. Some may have been inspired by *Ellen* to publicly acknowledge their sexualities, but we cannot ignore the value of changing legal and religious doctrine, educational curricula and other social structures in contributing to the establishment and maintenance of spaces in which these sexualities are welcome. We also should not discredit the academic work covering LGBTQIA histories and sociologies, no matter how convoluted or paywalled. Although Enriquez does support some of his points with relevant analytical sources, his engagement with these sources is limited largely to the endnotes, and it is generally not clear how they are being used. Many voices with valuable perspective on the topics addressed throughout *Right/Wrong* are not given due opportunity to speak in the book.

This LGBTQIA discussion exemplifies Enriquez's approach to the many complex and controversial topics covered throughout *Right/Wrong*, an approach evident from the first sentence of the book: 'Sex' (p.1). While there may be some benefit from capturing the reader with a deliberately provocative statement, Enriquez's immediate reference to sex is largely unsubstantiated in the rest of the Introduction. Sex later emerges as a topic of more thorough deliberation in chapter 1, a deliberation supplemented by an emoji diagram implying the value of the contraceptive pill (p.14). Introducing the book with sex, though, is not just unnecessary, but confusing, and this sense of confusion is maintained for the remainder of the book. As Enriquez jumps between topics like a hare racing to the finishing lane, the reader cannot help but feel like a tortoise, slowly muddling through the text.

This muddled feeling is exacerbated by particular grammatical choices. Most notably, Enriquez applies capitals and ellipses liberally throughout the text. While these typographical choices are appropriate for occasional emphasis, their profusion here gives the reader a sense that Enriquez is yelling (capitals) but is not entirely sure what he is yelling about (ellipses). Add to this uncertainty a slew of abbreviations (e.g., BFD, WTF, FUBAR) and the reader is left with the niggling sense that the book is actually unfinished.

Yet this sense of incompleteness illustrates the inconclusive and complicated nature of ethics. It is admirable that Enriquez acknowledges his own personal growth in the ethics space, and repeatedly reminds the reader that he does not have all the answers. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that *Right/Wrong*'s striking black and white cover is remarkably similar to that of Patricia Matthew's edited collection, *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure*, which investigates the unique struggles faced by faculty of colour in academia. *Right/Wrong* highlights the ever-changing nature of moral standards: *Written/Unwritten* highlights just how slow we can be to respond to these changes.

In a discussion about changing ethical frameworks and behaviours, Luciano Floridi distinguishes between 'hard' and 'soft' ethics. The former refers to regulations rooted in moral understandings, and the latter refers to:

> what ought and ought not to be done *over and above* the existing regulation, not against it, or despite its scope, or to change it, or to by-pass it, e.g. in terms of self-regulation. In other words, *soft ethics is post-compliance ethics*. (Floridi, 2018, p.5, emphasis in original)

Floridi identifies the 'space of soft ethics' as existing between human rights and compliance; that is, how do individuals and institutions interpret and practise ethics in the light of legislation? While Floridi argues that soft ethics may be used to establish ethical frameworks, he also notes that soft ethics' dual advantage – providing both social opportunities for individuals and risk management solutions for corporations – 'can only function in an environment of public trust and clear responsibilities more broadly'.

> Public acceptance and adoption of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, will occur only if the benefits are seen as meaningful and risks as potential, yet preventable, or minimizable, or at least something against which one can be protected. These attitudes will depend in turn on public

engagement with the development of digital technologies, openness about how they operate, and understandable, widely accessible mechanisms of regulation and redress. The clear value to any organization of the dual advantage of an ethical approach amply justifies the expense of engagement, openness and contestability that such an approach requires. (Floridi, 2018, p.10)

Enriquez's core argument in *Right/Wrong* – that ethical frameworks are altered in the light of technological development – contributes to conversations about ethics that are ongoing in academic and policymaking circles. *Right/Wrong* acknowledges increasing public engagement in ethical discussions, the need for openness and understandability, and changing regulation. As Enriquez pointedly argues throughout chapter 6, 'legal' is not synonymous with 'ethical', and just because one *can* do something does not mean that one *should*. Moreover, Enriquez observes, choosing not to act or have an opinion can likewise be considered ethically wrong. These are both valuable points to remember in any ethical deliberation. However, Enriquez also stresses a point that is often overlooked: '[c]heap, easy, convenient, often trumps ethical' (p.181). Although this point would have benefited from greater elaboration throughout the book, it is nevertheless a vital addition to conversations on ethics. Enriquez's discussion of the financial costs of climate change in chapter 2 (pp.57–65) is an especially strong, albeit brief, consideration of the interwovenness of financial accessibility and ethical action.

'I may not agree with these folks and their position, but were they, or are they, good people? Are they acting decently within the context of their beliefs?' Enriquez asks in *Right/Wrong*'s Conclusion (p.215). As Enriquez argues, ethics is about empathy, including empathy for those with whom we disagree. It is unfortunate, then, that Enriquez himself occasionally slips away from empathy. Indeed, at times *Right/Wrong* reads like a whistle-stop tour of the things bothering its author. We are presented with largely unsupported arguments against the actions of former United States vice president Mike Pence and president Trump, unexplained figures that depend upon readers' perceptions of numerical data as objective truth, and time-sensitive references that will be only partially intelligible in a decade. 'I want to make it easier for us to talk to one another, to prod one another, to understand and guide one another without an everlasting certainty of strict RIGHT versus WRONG', Enriquez writes towards the end of the book.

Instead of 'I'll never talk to someone with your beliefs,' or 'I'll just wall you off,' maybe, after reading this, you can heatedly debate and then go have a beer together, even if you still disagree. (p.218)

This is a heartening point, to be sure, but it is not entirely clear to this reader how Enriquez actually came to this conclusion.

Right/Wrong offers some valuable insight into how ethical frameworks change over time, and how these changes may be inspired by technological developments. Its author is knowledgeable about the topic, drawing from countless case studies to support his points. Unfortunately, he is so eager to rush through these points that the impact of the core argument – that technology transforms our ethics – is lost in a deluge of popular cultural references, political assessment and what seems like personal uncertainty. More a stream of consciousness than a streamlined argument, *Right/Wrong* may appeal to readers seeking an entry point into ethical discussions. However, this reviewer remains puzzled as to who the book's intended readers actually are. While the title and cover of *Right/Wrong* allude to the notion of black-and-white thinking, the book itself – as with the topics it covers – exists entirely in a grey area.

Selections from *Right/Wrong* may be valuable additions to reading lists for undergraduate seminars. However, *Right/Wrong* should be read alongside more thorough general accounts of technology–ethics interplay, such as Sheila Jasanoff's *The Ethics of Invention: Technology and the Human Future* (2016); subject-specific ethical considerations, such as Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology* (2019); and general fiction promoting interpersonal empathy, such as Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2020).

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