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Luciano Floridi
The ethics of information
Oxford: Oxford University Press
xix plus 357 pages
isbn 987-0-19-964132-1, hardback, publishers price £30

Luciano Floridi is well-known as the leading extant philosopher with a strong interest in information, and his latest book extends his contributions into the area of information ethics (hereafter, as in the book, IE).

IE became recognised as a concept in the 1980s, through pioneering writings such as Koenig, Kostrewski and Oppenheim (1981), as Floridi notes. However, a main theme of this book is that such treatments, and those which stemmed from them, lacked a full philosophical underpinning. This, he seeks to remedy: "Today, philosophy faces the challenge of providing a foundational treatment of the phenomena and the ideas underlying the information revolution, in order to foster our understanding and guide both the responsible construction of our society and the sustainable management of our natural and synthetic environments, In short, we need a *philosophy of information*. [This] investigates the conceptual nature and basic principles of information, including its ethical consequences." (p. xii)

Floridi sees the philosophy of information as a branch of philosophy itself, rather than as an adjunct to information and knowledge management or computer science. Information, in this view is "something as fundamental and significant as knowledge, being, validity, truth, meaning, mind, or good and evil, and so equally worthy of autonomous, philosophical investigation" (p. xii). And therefore, as with other branches of philosophy, ethics plays a major part. Floridi argues that considering the ethical problems of information, and its technologies, can lead us to reconsider some basic principles of ethics in general.

This book is therefore very much a work of serious philosophy, its task being "to contribute to [the] conceptual foundations of IE as a new area of philosophical research" (p. xiii). It is the second of a series of four monographs, entitled – just in case of any doubt as to the status of this work as academic philosophy in the grand tradition - *Principia Philosophiae Informationis*. It follows a monograph on the philosophy of information (Floridi 2011), and will be followed in turn by a text on the politics of information. Floridi locates this work in a merger of the rival traditions of analytical and continental philosophy, and places it in a tradition from Plato and Plotinus through to Augustine and Moore, with some relation to Spinoza, Confucius and others.

The book's arguments are situated in Floridi's contention that we are living through an 'informational turn' or 'fourth revolution', following the scientific revolutions of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud (Floridi 2014). This sees us regarding ourselves as

informationally embodied organisms, 'inforgs', embedded in an informational environment, the 'infosphere', in which the boundaries between online and offline environments merge, so that we live in a manner termed 'onlife' (European Commission 2014). The present book is therefore about the creation of a framework of ethics for inforgs, including humans, but also artificial agents, living in the infosphere.

The book opens with chapters setting the scene by describing the information revolution, and the nature and foundations of the IE which are needed as a consequence. Subsequent chapters explore the moral implications of the actions inforgs in the infosphere, while the closing chapters with issues such as privacy, information and business ethics, and morality in distributed and global information societies.

Arguably the central idea, and one very different from that offered by other philosophical approaches to ethics is the any expression of Being, that is any distinct aspect of the infosphere, has intrinsic worth. This leads to the 'four ethical principles of IE':

- entropy ought not to be caused in the infosphere
- entropy ought to be prevented in the infosphere
- entropy ought to be removed from the infosphere
- the flourishing of informational entities as well as of the whole infosphere ought to be promoted by preserving, cultivating, and enriching their well-being

(Entropy is here understood in both the physical and information theoretic senses: a 'mixed-upness' of physical or information systems.)

This book is not, as the author explicitly concedes, an introduction to information and computer ethics, nor a textbook on professional ethics. "IE is not immediately useful", he tells us, "to solve specific ethical problems ... but nor does a textbook on Newtonian physics solve your car problems. IE is supposed to provide the conceptual grounds that then guide problem-solving procedures" (pp. 313-314). However, there are some links to the sort of ethical issues that occur in information management; librarians' codes of ethics get a mention, and there is a particularly interesting discussion of privacy from the infosphere perspective.

With commendable honesty, Floridi concedes that the book "is not a page-turner" (p. xiv). However, it is, in my view, about as clearly written as a book of this kind can be, and the author's use of summaries and conclusions at the beginnings and ends of chapters – which he charmingly relates to the *Battlestar Galactica* series – are of considerable help to the philosophical tyro. It has to be admitted that those without a strong background in philosophy will have to take much on trust, and will probably need to skip some sections, but this is no excuse for not engaging with this excellent book.

For more immediate guidance on ethical problems in information management, the reader would be better consult the chapters in Floridi's edited text on information and

computer ethics (Floridi 2010), or the literature on library/information ethics summarised by Bawden and Robinson (2012, chapter 11). This monograph will serve an entirely different function: to act as a long-lasting source for debate on our profession's ethical dilemmas, and to provide a novel basis for such debate.

The book is well-produced, seems free from extensive errors, and has an adequate, though not very exhaustive, index. It is also very reasonably priced, by today's standards, for a hardback book of this kind. It deserves to be widely read by advanced students and researchers in the library/information sciences, and by the more reflective kind of information practitioner.

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