

Ethics and Technological Values

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Abstract

Ethics refers to good behavior, while technological values represent concepts developed from scientific knowledge to facilitate convenience and solve various problems. This article explores ethic theories and analyzes their relationship with technological values. It investigates how technology, when aligned with certain ethical principles, is not inherently contradictory to ethics. Conversely, it also identifies aspects of technology that may conflict with ethical standards. Since technology significantly influences human lives, it is crucial to examine its effects on ethical conduct. This analysis divides technological values into three aspects: technological tools, manufacturers, and users. The goal is to provide a framework for applying ethical concepts effectively in daily life.

Keywords: Ethics, Technological Values

Introduction

Technology profoundly influences individuals and society. Tools such as televisions, mobile phones, computers, and the Internet have made information more accessible. While these tools have many benefits, their unregulated use can lead to unethical practices and societal harm. Challenges in areas like politics, economics, and education are often exacerbated by advancing technologies. At the same time, ethics and ethical behavior are frequently neglected. However, blaming technology alone for societal issues is both unreasonable and unjustified.

This article examines ethical principles, including philosophical and Buddhist perspectives, to understand the ethical implications of technological values. By identifying ethical challenges posed by technology, this study aims to offer solutions and establish guidelines for its ethical use. Although this work is a preliminary exploration, it lays the foundation for developing ethical thinking and behavior. The author hopes it will inspire further discussion, contributing to individual and societal development.

Concepts and Theories of Ethics

The term “ethics,” according to the Royal Institute Dictionary (2011), refers to principles or rules for proper conduct, ethics laws, or ethics. Definitions of ethics vary depending on individual or group experiences, environments, and knowledge. This article summarizes key ethical concepts from ancient philosophical traditions, Buddhist ethics, and related theories to facilitate the analysis of technological values.

The Sophist Philosophers’ Perspective

The Sophists argued that humans determine ethical correctness. According to their view, ethical values are subjective, varying with individual perceptions. For example, what one person deems good or right applies only to them, with no universal standard.

Protagoras (480–411 BCE), a prominent Sophist, claimed that ethics is entirely based on personal feelings, making it impossible to establish objective ethical standards. This perspective underscores the relativity of ethical judgments, which depend on individual experience and context.

Plato’s Perspective

Plato believed that human life should be guided by ultimate truths, which can be accessed through reason and knowledge. He argued that virtues like goodness and justice are real and serve as guides for ethical behavior.

To counter the Sophists’ relativistic views, Plato introduced the Theory of Forms, asserting that ethical truths exist independently in an abstract realm. According to Plato, understanding the ultimate form of goodness is the purpose of human life. Virtuous individuals contribute to an orderly society, reflecting ethical truths in their actions.

St. Augustine’s Perspective

St. Augustine adapted Plato’s ideas within a Christian framework, emphasizing adherence to God’s teachings as the path to salvation. He believed ethical behavior aligns with divine principles, guiding individuals toward eternal union with God. Augustine’s approach shifts the source of ethics from abstract forms to divine commandments, portraying ethics as a means to achieve spiritual liberation.

Immanuel Kant's Perspective

Immanuel Kant argued that ethical principles are universal and independent of individual feelings or circumstances. For Kant, ethics is governed by immutable laws, similar to natural laws, and actions are ethical when motivated by pure reason.

Kant's ethics emphasizes intent over consequences, judging actions by their adherence to universal ethical laws. His perspective establishes an objective standard for ethical behavior, applicable to all individuals and societies.

Buddhist Ethics

Ethics has been defined in various ways based on different perspectives. However, in Buddhism, Ethics refers to principles of conduct or living. It encompasses not only behavior and thought but also wisdom. In Buddhism, Ethics is rooted in the Eightfold Path, consisting of Ethics (sīla), concentration (samādhī), and wisdom (paññā). While the foundational Buddhist texts, such as the Tipiṭaka, do not explicitly categorize Ethics into levels, Buddhist scholars have later classified Buddhist ethics into three levels:

1) Basic Buddhist Ethics

This level involves fundamental principles for living harmoniously with oneself and society. The Five Precepts (Pañcasīla) serve as the foundation, guiding individuals toward a peaceful and orderly life. These precepts are paired with the Five Virtues (Pañcadhamma):

- Refraining from killing living beings → Cultivating kindness and compassion
- Refraining from stealing → Upholding honesty and right livelihood
- Refraining from sexual misconduct → Practicing restraint and mindfulness
- Refraining from false speech → Speaking truthfully
- Refraining from intoxicants → Maintaining mindfulness and self-awareness

This level is considered the basic standard of humanity, promoting mutual respect and societal well-being.

2) Intermediate Buddhist Ethics

This level emphasizes a deeper refinement of bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The Ten Wholesome Actions (Kusalakammappatthāna) guide this level of ethical practice:

- Bodily actions: Refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct.

- Verbal actions: Refraining from false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and frivolous talk.
- Mental actions: Avoiding covetousness, ill will, and wrong views.

These principles promote ethical behavior, both individually and collectively, and encourage mental clarity and goodwill.

3) Advanced Buddhist Ethics

This level is aimed at ultimate liberation from suffering. It is based on the Four Noble Truths (Ariyasacca):

- Dukkha: The nature of suffering.
- Samudaya: The cause of suffering, primarily attachment and craving.
- Nirodha: The cessation of suffering through the eradication of craving.
- Magga: The path leading to the cessation of suffering, comprising the Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

The ultimate goal of Buddhist ethics is the attainment of nibbāna (enlightenment), freeing individuals from the cycle of birth, ageing, illness, and death. Buddhist Ethics integrates conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, aiming for holistic self-development and societal harmony. The Buddha taught these principles to help individuals transcend suffering and realize ultimate truths through ethical practice and personal transformation.

Deontological Theory

The Deontological Theory emphasizes that ethical right actions are those that align with ethical rules or principles. These principles may be derived from divine commandments, natural laws, rational principles, or logical reasoning. The rightness of an action, therefore, combines ethical principles with rationality.

Deontological ethics is considered absolutist in nature, asserting that good and evil, right and wrong, are universal and unchanging, regardless of time, environment, or circumstances. Examples include Kant's universal ethic principles and theories rooted in the notion of complete conscience.

Teleological Theory

The Teleological Theory determines the ethical correctness of an action based on its consequences. In other words, an action is deemed right if it leads to the best possible outcomes.

A clear example of this is utilitarianism, which holds that ethically right actions are those that produce the greatest happiness or benefit for the majority.

While the Deontological Theory focuses on the “rightness” of the action itself, the Teleological Theory evaluates actions based on their “goodness” or the resulting benefits. Despite these differing focuses, both theories insist that ethical principles must be grounded in impartiality, which respects the ethical equality of all humans. Ethical rules, therefore, must honour the inherent value of humanity.

In summary, while ethic concepts may share similarities and differences, and numerous theories have been developed over time, the overarching definition of “Ethics” refers to principles of virtuous conduct. These principles encompass both physical and verbal actions, interconnecting thoughts, emotions, religious teachings, and cultural traditions recognized as good by society. Ethics ultimately aims to bring happiness, peace, and harmony to individuals, others, and the surrounding community, fostering love and unity within society.

Technological Values

Definition of “Values”

According to the Royal Institute Dictionary (2011), values refer to principles or beliefs that individuals or societies use as a basis for decision-making and behavior.

Tisna Khemmani (1999) Values are principles, ideas, or beliefs that individuals consider valuable and use as a guide for decision-making and living. When shared broadly within a society, these personal values become societal values.

Yont Chumjit (2015) Values are ideas, behaviors, or practices that individuals or societies recognize as desirable and consistently uphold to achieve personal or societal goals.

In summary, “values” refer to beliefs or attitudes about what individuals or societies perceive as valuable. These beliefs influence decision-making and behavior and may evolve with experience and changing environments.

Definition of “Technology”

The Royal Institute Dictionary (2011) defines technology as scientific knowledge applied to practical use, particularly in industries. It includes tools, equipment, machines, materials, and intangible processes developed by humans to facilitate work and solve problems.

Combined Meaning: “Technological Values”

Technological values refer to concepts and beliefs derived from human inventions and scientific advancements. These inventions, aimed at providing convenience and addressing challenges, are recognized by society as valuable and influential in shaping human behavior.

When people think of “technology,” they often associate it with modern innovations such as computers, smartphones, and online platforms. These have become integral to daily life. For example, mobile phones now serve as wallets, cameras, data storage, restaurants, and more. This demonstrates how technology has created a “second world” for individuals.

Current statistics on technology use in Thailand

According to a 2022 survey by the National Statistical Office (NSO), the technological landscape in Thailand reveals significant trends:

- Internet usage: 55.7 million users (85.0% of the population aged 6 and older).
- Mobile phone usage: 61.8 million users (94.6%).
- Smartphone ownership: 57.5 million users (87.8%).

These statistics reflect the growing reliance on technology, influenced by societal conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people to adapt to remote interactions and virtual transactions. Technology has profoundly impacted behavior, both positively (e.g., ease of access) and negatively (e.g., increased risks such as cybercrimes and mental health issues).

While technology is indispensable in the digital age, its misuse or overuse can lead to personal and societal harm. Recognizing its value should involve ethical analysis to ensure its usage aligns with ethic principles. By doing so, technological advancements can benefit individuals and society without causing unintended consequences.

Analysis of Ethicity and Technological Values

In summary, ethicity is defined as principles of virtuous conduct, encompassing actions of the body and speech, thoughts, emotions, religious teachings, and cultural traditions. It aims to bring happiness, peace, and unity to individuals and society. If technology is accepted by society, it is essential to consider its ethic aspects—what is ethical, what is not, and why—through ethic theories and concepts. This analysis is divided into three aspects: technological tools, technology manufacturers, and technology users.

Technological Tools

Technological tools can be neutral but become instruments of either ethic or emetic actions depending on their use. For instance, social media platforms, which are widely used, may lead to violations of Buddhist precepts such as the second (abstaining from theft), third (abstaining from sexual misconduct), and fourth (abstaining from false speech). These tools require careful and mindful use.

If used mindfully, technological tools can support ethical livelihoods and promote good conduct. However, some technologies inherently carry risks of ethical violations, such as computer viruses, biological weapons, or spam. In the hands of unethical individuals, these tools can cause harm to society or even the world, such as through cyberattacks or data theft.

From a relativist perspective, technology as a tool is neutral, with its ethicity determined by its use and context. In contrast, an absolutist perspective might consider some tools inherently unethical due to their potential for harm. The Sophist philosophy aligns with the relativist view, suggesting that the ethicity of technology depends on the user. However, Buddhist ethics emphasize intention as a key factor while also valuing the foundational precepts (e.g., the Five Precepts and Right Livelihood).

To avoid ethical pitfalls, it is advisable to refrain from possessing harmful technological tools unless necessary for study or prevention. This aligns with the Buddhist principle of living with mindfulness and responsibility.

Technology Manufacturers

An example of ethical concerns among technology manufacturers can be seen with Facebook. Since 2020, Facebook has been used by 70% of the Thai population (46 million users). Allegations have surfaced regarding the platform's potential misuse of user data, such as listening to conversations for targeted advertisements. Although Facebook has denied these claims, stating they outsource tasks to third-party firms, users remain skeptical about data privacy.

From Immanuel Kant's perspective, this practice violates ethical principles due to its lack of universal acceptance and potential infringement on individual rights. Moreover, the intention behind such actions may not align with Kant's concept of "pure intention" (goodwill). However, from a utilitarian perspective, the outcome—providing users with targeted and relevant content—could be considered beneficial, thus justifying the practice as ethically acceptable.

To enhance ethical transparency, manufacturers should adhere to three key principles:

1) Privacy (Information Privacy): Manufacturers must avoid infringing on user rights and should provide clear consent mechanisms for data collection and use.

2) Accuracy (Information Accuracy): Manufacturers should ensure the accurate use of data and avoid creating false records or unauthorized duplication of copyrighted materials.

3) Ownership (Information Property): Manufacturers should respect intellectual property rights and avoid actions that harm societal values or cause distrust.

By following these principles, manufacturers can promote trust and align with global ethical standards, fostering greater societal well-being.

Technology Users

In the modern era, technology has become an integral part of daily life, with users relying on it for communication, work, and convenience. While many use technology ethically, others exploit it for personal gain at the expense of others, such as through online scams, hacking, or identity theft. These actions constitute cybercrimes and ethical violations.

Cybercrimes can be categorized into six types:

1) Financial crimes: Disrupting e-commerce transactions or committing fraud.

2) Copyright infringement: Unauthorized duplication and sale of copyrighted materials.

3) Hacking: Unauthorized access to computer systems to alter or steal information.

4) Cyberterrorism: Using technology to instill fear or harm societal stability.

5) Online pornography: Sharing explicit content that violates ethical and legal norms.

6) School-related cyber offenses: Misuse of technology in educational settings, often unintentional.

Ethically, using technology in ways that do not harm oneself or others and contribute positively to society aligns with ethical principles. However, unethical behavior not only violates ethical standards but also incurs legal consequences, as seen in Thailand's Computer Crime Act of 2017. For example, spamming on social media platforms can result in fines of up to 200,000 THB, while sharing harmful or false content may lead to imprisonment.

Conclusion

Ethical concepts encompass a variety of perspectives and theories, ranging from philosophical, religious, and universal principles to utilitarianism. The choice of ethical framework depends on individual beliefs and interpretations. Similarly, technological values have evolved rapidly, becoming integral to human life. While technology facilitates progress in material and intellectual development, it also poses challenges to ethical principles.

The interplay between ethics and technological values influences various aspects of society, including tools, manufacturers, and users. As discussed in this article, the proper integration of ethics and technological values is essential for fostering societal harmony. The two must advance together, as one cannot exist without the other. Technology can be likened to a great tree, while ethnicity serves as the soil and water that nourishes it. Only when supported by ethical principles can technology flourish and benefit humanity sustainably.

Therefore, individuals should recognize the importance of ethics and avoid complacency in their use of technology. It is insufficient to prioritize material progress or knowledge alone; ethical development must also be cultivated. By fostering good conduct and ethical behavior through thoughtful reflection and analysis, individuals can contribute to societal well-being. This article provides an initial framework for ethical analysis, aiming to inspire further thought and development. The author hopes that readers will build upon these ideas to benefit themselves, their communities, and the nation.

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