

Ethics, Personhood and Morality

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All extant ethical systems are predicated on the notion of a person, whether as moral agent, locus of moral worth, or component of a morally significant collective. The nature of personhood is itself a difficult question, but one that has generally been theoretical rather than practical. We have been able to imagine difficult borderline cases (e.g. cyborgs, intelligent robots) that challenge us to clarify what a person is. But, with the notable exception of abortion, these have largely remained conceptual puzzles rather than practical problems. 4IR changes that, because its core is an increased interaction between human and machine, to the extent that these become intermingled. Previously, you might have referred to your diary as a part of your memory, jokingly; the prospect now is that the diary could literally be a physical part of you, via some sort of implant (of course in digital, not paper, form). Conversely, your thoughts or memories might to some degree be uploaded to a network, much as your photos are now uploaded from your smart phone. If persons become intermingled with artificial systems in this way, how will we decide what to hold to account? I kill an innocent child and blame my self-defense implant. Am I exonerated? Or: how will we decide what counts as a victim of a wrong or beneficiary of a kindness? My memories are central to who I am, but they are stored on the internet, because my brain degenerated due to Alzheimer's. Does the server therefore have some rights that would formerly have accrued to me? And: which systems form morally significant collectives? When human and machine become intermingled, these questions do not have obvious answers. Our entire ethical systems will need to adapt.