

Chapter 9

Luciano Floridi's Metaphysical Theory of Information Ethics: A Critical Appraisal and an Alternative Neo-Gewirthian Information Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper falls into five main parts. Part one, offers a critical analysis and evaluation of Luciano Floridi's metaphysical theory of information ethics (IE). Drawing on part one, part two provides a discussion of what I consider to be the main conceptual and practical difficulties facing Floridi's IE theory. Although in agreement with the overall motivation and objective that informs Floridi's IE position, namely, that "all entities, qua informational objects, have an intrinsic moral value..." and that "there seems to be no good reason not to adopt a higher and more inclusive, ontocentric [moral] perspective" (Floridi, 2007, 10), part three of the paper proposes an alternative New-Gewirthian approach to Information Ethics that avoids some if not all of the difficulties facing Floridi's own position. Part four then examines the implications for Floridi's metaphysical theory of information ethics and finally, offers a conclusion in part five.

FLORIDI'S INFORMATION ETHICS

Information Ethics is an ontocentric, patient-orientated, ecological macroethics. (Floridi, 2007a, p.11)

Being beyond the scope of this paper and unavoidably constrained by space, I can but offer the briefest of expositions of Floridi's rich and

complex theory, but hopefully I can at least provide in a summarised form the direction and main rationale of that theory and importantly not misconstrue it in the process. In addition, I shall offer some well intentioned and hopefully helpful critical observations and then proceed to offer an alternative approach to IE based on Alan Gewirth's rationalist ethical theory; specifically his argument for the foundational moral principle of morality, the Principle of Generic Consistency (PGC), extended and adapted for that purpose.

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Beginning with the uncontroversial empirical observation that our society is evolving, both quantitatively and qualitatively, into an information society, Floridi introduces the concept of *infosphere*, the informational equivalent of “biosphere”. According to Floridi (2007) *infosphere*:

Denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities.....It is an (intended) shift from a semantic (the infosphere understood as a space of contents) to an ontic conception (the infosphere understood as an environment populated by informational entities) (p.4).

Floridi (2007) goes on to claim that this informational shift from the semantic to the ontic, is resulting in the *re-ontologization* of the world, that “transforms its intrinsic nature” (p. 4) so that the world can now be ontologically re-conceived according to Floridi as being fundamentally constituted by the infosphere and not merely the biosphere, as was previously thought. As an example he cites nanotechnologies and biotechnologies that “are not merely changing (re-engineering) the world in a very significant way (as did the invention of gunpowder, for example, but actually reshaping (re-ontologizing) it” (p. 4).

As a result of this ontologization, information is becoming our ecosystem and we, together and in interaction with artificial agents, are evolving into informationally integrated *inforgs* or *connected informational organisms* (Floridi, 2007, pp. 5-6). Floridi (2007) predicts that “in such an environment, the moral status and accountability of artificial agents will become an ever more challenging issue” (p. 5).

From this initial ontological thesis, namely, the ontologization of the infosphere or the metaphysics of information it is easy to anticipate Floridi's next theoretical move. On the basis of his metaphysics of information Floridi (2007) posits a “new environmental ethics” when information ethics ceases to be merely “*microethics* (a practical, field-dependent, applied, and professional eth-

ics)” and becomes instead “a *patient-orientated, ontocentric* {as opposed to merely biocentric}, *ecological macroethics*”. (pp. 7-8). Importantly he goes on to say that “information ethics is an ecological ethics that replaces biocentrism with ontocentrism, a substitution in the concept of biocentrism of the term “life” with that of “existence” (p. 8). According to Floridi (2007a), the substitution of “existence” for “life”,

[..]suggests that there is something even more elemental than life, namely being – that is, the existence and flourishing of all entities and their global environment - and something more fundamental than suffering, namely, entropy. The latter is most emphatically not the physicists' concept of thermodynamic entropy. Entropy here refers to any kind of destruction or corruption of entities understood as informational objects (not as semantic information, take note), that is, any form of impoverishment of being, including nothingness, to phrase it more metaphysically (p. 12).

This substitution of existence for life, as we shall see below, is both crucial and problematic in Floridi's overall thesis of Information Ethics.

The claim that information ethics can be conceived and ought to be conceived as an environmental macroethics is Floridi's most interesting, ambitious and challenging claim in his theory and constitutes the crux of his whole controversial argument that rightly or wrongly is conducive to raising many incredulous stares¹. For the claim amounts to nothing less than the clear implication, as expressed openly by Floridi himself, that existence not life is the mark of morality; that which determines the moral status of not only humans and other sentient beings, including their natural environment – the whole biosphere, but moreover, at the most ultimate level of inclusiveness ever conceived in moral philosophy before, the moral status of the whole caboodle, everything that exists, has existed and ever will exist in the Universe as informational objects. Which essentially insofar

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