

## Ethics in the Digital Age

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### Abstract:

This study aims to provide a comprehensive philosophical analysis of the nature of ethics in the digital age, and to examine how technology particularly artificial intelligence and algorithms affects the concepts of responsibility, freedom, truth, and human dignity. The study is based on the assumption that the digital environment does not merely constitute a technological space, but rather a new cognitive and value-based system that reshapes both the human being and moral action. Through an analytical-critical approach, the research reviews the most important contemporary ethical issues and proposes a philosophical framework that could serve as a foundation for a future digital ethics.

How can a human ethics appropriate to the digital age be established?

**Keywords:** ethics, digital age, technology, responsibility, digital freedom.

### Introduction:

Science has undergone rapid development today, as the contemporary world is witnessing radical transformations driven by digital advances that have changed the nature of communication, work, and knowledge. Technology is no longer a neutral set of tools; it has become an active force that produces meaning, influences consciousness, and reshapes the structure of society. In light of these transformations, the need to rethink moral philosophy becomes increasingly evident.

The central problem of this study is based on the following question:

How does digital technology reshape moral action, and what philosophical framework is appropriate for constructing a human-centered digital ethics that ensures freedom, dignity, and responsibility?

To conduct this research, the following methodological approaches were adopted:

- The analytical approach to understand the ethical concepts related to the subject.
- The critical approach to deconstruct digital phenomena related to digital communication between humans.
- The comparative philosophical approach, particularly in analyzing the concepts of freedom, responsibility, and truth.

The philosophical treatment of this topic led us to draw upon several thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, John Stuart Mill, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Luciano Floridi.

In the 1980s, it was claimed that information ethics is the study of ethical issues arising from communication media, where researchers either neglected the broader scope of information ethics or focused on practical, applied, and professional ethics related to the field, which together provide an appropriate approach to information ethics.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Ethics and Responsibility in the Digital Environment:**

Digitization has led to the emergence of a new form of moral action, where the human being is no longer the sole agent, but action has become distributed among humans, algorithms, networks, and platforms. This has generated new questions concerning the relationship between humans and intelligent machines.

Understanding the relationship between information technology and ethics requires an understanding of the relationship between technology and the human being. Hence arises the issue of the human being between values and technology<sup>2</sup>, and the cognitive shift regarding responsibility: who is responsible for algorithmic decisions?

The contemporary human being lives in a new context unknown to previous philosophies: an interconnected digital world in which algorithms generate decisions, meanings are produced through social networks, and the self moves across multiple identities. This transformation has brought about a revolution in moral philosophy, as ethical questions are no longer limited to the direct relationship between human beings, but have expanded to include their relationship with technology, data, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality. Joseph Weizenbaum was among the first to explicitly raise the ethical question in his book *\*Computer Power and Human Reason\**. One of the most significant ethical challenges raised in the digital age is the question: who bears responsibility? This and similar questions compel us to address the issue of moral responsibility in the digital era.

When artificial intelligence makes a wrong decision, such as promoting content that incites violence or making a discriminatory hiring decision, who is responsible? Is it the programmer? The company? The user? Or the algorithm itself?

#### **A. The Transformation of the Concept of the Moral Agent:**

Traditionally, the moral agent was considered to be a human being endowed with consciousness and freedom. Today, however, algorithms participate in decision-making without being conscious or accountable. For example: hiring algorithms, behavioral classification systems, targeted advertising, and predictive security systems. This leads to the expansion of the concept of the moral agent into a networked agent rather than an individual one.

#### **B. Distributed Responsibility:**

Responsibility can no longer be assigned solely to algorithms, nor solely to users; rather, it has become distributed among the developer, the company, the state, the user, and the technological system itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela McCorduck, *Machines Who Think: A Personal Inquiry into the History and Prospects of Artificial Intelligence*, A. K. Peters, Ltd., 2nd ed., 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Abdullah Al-Ahmad et al., *Digital Ethics and Modernity in Human Communication*, *Jordanian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2017, p. 255.

This interpretation aligns with Hans Jonas's view, which calls for a "future-oriented ethics" that takes into account the consequences of technological action. Jonas argues that the promises made by science to solve humanity's problems and provide improvement have either failed or turned into a burden that requires a new ethical dimension<sup>3</sup>. He emphasizes that modern technology imposes a new ethics on humanity based on the "principle of responsibility," since the effects of technology extend beyond the boundaries of traditional human action.

How have the concepts of moral responsibility changed in light of algorithms?

Hannah Arendt holds that moral responsibility is linked to conscious action capable of judgment and distinction; however, artificial intelligence lacks consciousness or intention, which brings us back to human responsibility for its design and direction.

## **2. Digital Freedom and the Construction of the Self:**

Human freedom has expanded formally in the digital space, yet it has been subjected to unprecedented pressures. Despite the abundance of choices, algorithms reshape the user's will through:

- extreme content personalization
- attention economy
- digital addiction
- filter bubbles

This situation pushes us to reassess the concept of freedom in relation to philosophers. John Stuart Mill argued that freedom is the ability to think and choose without external coercion. However, algorithms represent a new form of invisible coercion, as they do not impose a specific opinion, but rather gradually guide the user through patterns of digital consumption. Thus, a new ethical crisis emerges:

Can human beings be free in an environment designed to exploit their psychological weaknesses? Is digital freedom real or a constructed illusion? In other words, what is the

The consciousness and level of thinking that contemporary individuals in the digital age take pride in is, in reality, a false consciousness, because it is produced by modern technologies based on digital communication. The facts transmitted by these digital technologies are presented to the public as objective, certain truths that do not admit doubt or criticism. As a result, human beings come to think within the framework delivered to them through digital communication, and their awareness and thinking remain dependent on what is transmitted to them alone. This situation led Herbert Marcuse to critically analyze contemporary media and communication in order to reveal their impact on public opinion, which is supposed to be independent, not subject to any authority and serving truth alone. Moreover, these technologies have come to control even our desires through advertising and various forms of propaganda.

In Marcuse's view, communication in the digital age has produced what is known as "one-dimensional man," a human being who thinks and lives within a single framework created by

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Jonas, *Le principe Responsabilité: Une éthique pour la civilisation technologique*, (T. Greisch, trans.), Paris, 1995, p. 15.

media and communication technologies. This raises the question: do we choose freely, or are our freedoms designed for us?

Among the mechanisms through which digital technologies operate is the fact that algorithms present content consistent with the user's previous behavior, leading to: narrowing the cognitive horizon, reinforcing bias, and reducing critical thinking, which contradicts John Stuart Mill's conception of freedom based on the diversity of opinions.

The concept underlying freedom in the digital age is that of informational freedom: freedom today is not only freedom of will, but also freedom of data, freedom of knowledge, and freedom in the formation of digital identity.

### **3. Ethics of Digital Knowledge: Truth between Manipulation and Misinformation**

In the early 1970s, an open debate emerged on the ethics of intelligent machines and the effects they produce on our perception of ourselves and our human rights.<sup>4</sup>

With the rise of social media platforms, truth is no longer merely an epistemological issue; it has become an ethical issue.

The digital environment enables the spread of fake news and the construction of reality through algorithmic manipulation, which Baudrillard calls the "age of simulation," where the simulated copy becomes more influential than reality itself.

Thus, the value of truth as an ethical standard declines, and digital ethics becomes dependent on individuals' ability to:

- \* verify information
- \* become aware of algorithmic biases
- \* resist media manipulation
- \* develop critical thinking

Ethics here becomes a cognitive practice as much as a behavioral one. According to Herbert Marcuse, mass communication and intensified production lead to conformity among individuals and produce a false consciousness through which one-dimensional thought and behavior are formed, resulting in a distorted form of communication.<sup>5</sup>

Within this research, the issue of truth between simulation and algorithmic misinformation is central; we therefore argue that today we need a philosophy based on continuous critique and forward-looking questioning.

Information and communication technologies have become a central topic in applied ethics and contemporary philosophy in general, as these technologies have turned into universally accessible devices. They are global communication tools that connect people worldwide, which has led to the necessity of establishing ethical frameworks regulating communication processes<sup>6</sup>, so that truth does not remain merely subject to distortion and algorithmic misinformation, which in turn leads to the collapse of truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Pamela McCorduck, *Machines Who Think: A Personal Inquiry into the History and Prospects of Artificial Intelligence*, A. K. Peters, Ltd., 2nd ed., 2004, p. 555.

<sup>5</sup> Asma Hussein Malkawi, *Ethics of Communication in the Digital Age: Habermas as a Model*, Arab Center for Research, Qatar, 1st ed., p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Information*, British Library / Oxford University Press, 2013, 1st ed., p. 44.

Contemporary digital technology has led to an increase in images, copies, and simulations, to the point where truth itself has become manipulable. Among the most prominent manifestations of this are fake news, deepfake images, and generative artificial intelligence.

The current challenge lies in grounding moral philosophy as a critique of prevailing intellectual standards and ethical principles. The way out of the crises generated by communication in the digital age requires anticipating future horizons through a philosophical vision that balances scientific progress with human values, and material dimensions with spiritual ones. Philosophy thus becomes a necessary condition for building our human future, a future in which machines also participate.

For this reason, truth must be regarded as an ethical value. Verifying information is no longer merely an epistemological option;

It has become an ethical duty. Even though we live in an age where emotion often prevails over facts, making individuals vulnerable to manipulation.

### **Ethics and Data Privacy: Human Dignity in the Face of Surveillance**

Privacy is no longer merely an individual choice; it has become part of human dignity in the digital age. Personal data today represents an extension of the human self, and therefore its violation constitutes a form of violation of dignity. This raises the importance of privacy and human dignity in the era of big data within the debate on digital communication.

One of the main challenges in this field is regulating the rights resulting from the use of these advanced technologies, especially with the increasing scale and scope of personal data collection. Regulatory laws must ensure a balance between the use of technology and the protection of rights.<sup>7</sup>

Michel Foucault, in his analysis of disciplinary societies, argues that surveillance produces a “docile body,” which is now realized through comprehensive digital monitoring exercised by companies and states via big data collection.

The above analysis raises a central ethical question: can human dignity be protected if one’s digital life becomes fully exposed? What is the relationship between data and human dignity? The discussion of data privacy and human dignity leads us to address the issue through the following points:

#### **Data as an extension of the self:**

Data is the digital image of the human being and represents: tendencies, emotions, history, relationships, and vulnerabilities.

#### **Digital surveillance:**

Foucault introduced the model of the “panopticon,” but today surveillance has gone beyond it to become continuous and invisible, involving companies, governments, and algorithms.

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<sup>7</sup> Saad Al-Tamimi et al., *Developments in Social and Human Sciences in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Al-Liban Publishing Foundation, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, 2024, 1st ed., p. 102.

**Digital dignity:**

Dignity in the digital age requires: data protection, the right to digital erasure, control over digital identity, and transparency in data collection.

**5. Towards a Human-Centered Digital Ethics:**

Global information and computing ethics are grounded in the efforts of pioneering figures, a set of interconnected personalities and works ranging from Norbert Wiener and extending through the contributions of Deborah Johnson, James Moor, Terry Bynum, and many others whose work is relatively well established.<sup>8</sup>

Today, the philosophy of communication has acquired a prominent and new role in our contemporary world, which is witnessing rapid developments in the age of science and its information revolution, where communication has become digital and widely used.

In light of the increasing use of computers connected to the internet in the context of globalization, multiple challenges and crises have emerged, which has required adherence to new ethics and the establishment of information and computing ethics. However, the problem we face is how to develop a global computer ethics that achieves its legitimacy through the rational consent of peoples around the world, while enhancing human communication and preserving local values, norms, and practices embodied in cultural and ethical traditions, and at the same time reinforcing them.

Digital communication has effects at the individual, societal, and international levels, and across all dimensions. It is an important mechanism for achieving understanding and agreement and for rejecting all forms of violence; communication becomes a rational and ethical alternative to violence.

These ontological ethics raise a number of controversial claims. However, one of their main advantages lies precisely in their ability to respond to one of the central challenges of global information and computing ethics, which seeks to preserve and reinforce local cultural and ethical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Digital communication technology appears as a golden opportunity to realize the dream of unifying people under a single moral standard<sup>10</sup>. At the analytical level, this requires establishing an ethics that takes into account the transformations occurring in the digital reality. In order to build an ethics appropriate to the digital age, it is necessary to adopt new principles that integrate traditional values such as justice, freedom, and responsibility with current digital challenges. These principles can be summarized in four guidelines:

**a. Algorithmic transparency:** Artificial intelligence decisions must be understandable, and their mechanisms must be disclosed. The degree of transparency in the use of AI algorithms or any autonomous systems in national and international regulatory processes is linked to the degree of integration of ethical values within artificial intelligence systems.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Ess, "Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information and Information Ethics: Critical Reflections and the State of the Art," *Ethics and Information Technology* (2008), p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Asma Hussein Malkawi, *Ethics of Communication in the Digital Age*, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Anderson, *Machine Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 179.

**b. Shared responsibility:** Responsibility lies between the programmer, the user, companies, and institutions.

**c. Protection of digital dignity:** This is achieved through data protection and the recognition of the human right to “digital forgetting.”

**d. Promotion of digital virtue:** Such as integrity, digital moderation, and mutual respect. Through these principles, it becomes possible to ensure that technology remains an extension of human values rather than a substitute for them.

## **6. Towards a Philosophical Framework for Digital Ethics:**

Contemporary philosophy’s interest in ethics in the age of information technology and digital communication falls within its broader engagement with the problems of its time, aiming to discuss them and reach approaches or solutions to overcome the impasse faced by modern humanity. This topic is of major philosophical importance, as it reopens traditional ethical questions in new forms.

The issue can also be approached from another perspective: philosophical discussion and inquiry are closely tied to the transformations of the contemporary world. Here, we refer to the epistemological significance raised by this subject.

The philosophical discussion of this topic can also be addressed within social and political contexts and what they entail in terms of individual and collective freedoms, since contemporary technology has become a framework for power and economy. This is what led George Grant to argue that “technology is the ideology of the age.”<sup>12</sup>

Philosophical inquiry is not limited to reality or to what is immediate; rather, the philosopher seeks, through thought, to anticipate future horizons that contribute to establishing ethical foundations and rational standards that can serve as a framework for digital communication in the future.

Advanced societies face the urgent task of finding a philosophy appropriate to the new form of life<sup>13</sup>. Digital communication has contributed to strengthening social interaction and opening it to new horizons, making human life easier and more developed. However, communication through digital information technologies has exceeded reasonable limits, producing problems and difficulties that conflict with ethical values. This requires the establishment of ethical standards governing the use of these contemporary technologies. Philosophical critique should not remain at the level of abstract theorization or elevated philosophical debate; rather, these digital ethics must be transformed into a societal culture.

**The necessity of a new ethics:** Digital ethics require a model that integrates multiple disciplines, foremost among them philosophy. Jürgen Habermas has focused on the relationship between philosophy and reality, theory and practice, and thought and application through his theory of discourse ethics, which is clearly reflected in many of his writings. He also devoted a

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<sup>12</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Justice*, Concord, Ontario, House of Anansi, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Abdullah Al-Ahmad et al., *Digital Ethics and Modernity in Human Communication*, p. 252.

major work to this subject, “The Theory of Communicative Action”. This can be justified as follows:

The issue of discourse ethics is intrinsically linked to communicative action and represents the peak of success in establishing effective rational communication<sup>14</sup>. Habermas sought to establish ethical standards that must be observed during public debate in the public sphere.

Norms that claim validity and correctness are those that are accepted by all individuals participating in dialogue and discussion.<sup>15</sup>

**Foundations of Human Digital Ethics:** Contemporary ethics today are based on the following principles: algorithmic transparency, algorithmic non-discrimination, shared responsibility, digital dignity, and digital justice; the promotion of critical thinking and the protection of the private sphere.

**The human being as the center of ethics:** The rapid development of information technology has led researchers and philosophers to launch a new philosophical project known as the philosophy of information. In recent decades, several branches of philosophy have emerged that address the impact of technology on ethics.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion:

The topic of philosophy of ethics in the digital age is of major philosophical importance, as ethics guides our decisions, and human essence is fundamentally ethical. Humanity remains the highest standard according to which technology must be designed, not the other way around. Philosophical and ethical debates must keep pace with scientific and technological developments, and appropriate ethical and legal frameworks must be established.

This research concludes that ethics in the digital age is not merely an extension of traditional ethics; rather, it requires a new philosophical foundation that takes into account the power of algorithms and the dominance of data. Freedom is threatened, truth is at risk of collapse, and dignity faces unprecedented challenges.

However, technology is not a deterministic fate; it can be transformed by humans into an instrument of liberation rather than domination, if they succeed in developing a human-centered digital ethics that restores human value and balances innovation with responsibility.

Philosophy of ethics in the digital age is not merely an attempt to apply traditional ethics to a new reality; it is a call to reconstruct ethics itself in light of the information revolution. Technology is neither ethical nor unethical in itself; rather, it becomes so through its use.

Therefore, the human being despite all transformations remains the center of moral action and the ultimate responsible agent for the future of the digital world.

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<sup>14</sup> Asma Hussein Malkawi, *Ethics of Communication in the Digital Age*, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Nicholsen, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Abdullah Al-Ahmad et al., *Digital Ethics and Modernity in Human Communication*, p. 255.

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