

# A MORAL CODE

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Ethical Concerns & Dilemmas in Government & Private institutions incl. issue of "Conflict of Interest"

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Should technology companies establish a new C-suite position — that of a chief ethics officer? The question is not that far-fetched. We live in unprecedented times. Technological advances occur at an exponentially accelerating pace that changes our world as never before. And this rate of change is only expected to grow, as it is a consequence of the fundamental underpinnings of innovation. These changes can be immensely beneficial, as in healthcare or in helping to eliminate extreme poverty. They can also have unintended consequences that can be equally powerful and long-lasting.

I like the following very simple definition of technology, which I have paraphrased from Brian Arthur: "Technology is leveraging phenomena for useful purposes." A keyword in this definition is "useful". It connects technology to ethics. Technology is, by definition, amoral. It is intent that provides the missing link to ethics.

With this in mind, here are some points that future chief ethics officers must contemplate.

As a successful and powerful technology evolves, it first starts within the intersection of three circles — smart, legal and ethical — within which the core technology lives continuously. However, its evolution can be quite unexpected. One or more of that technology's branches may follow a path outside the intersection of those three circles.

A most obvious example is a deviation or a mutation due to a bad actor. Examples abound: Technology-enhanced violation of privacy rights, cybersecurity breaches, sabotage, etc. These are relatively easy to spot. Malfeasance has been encountered throughout the ages. It leads to deliberate actions, where the useful purpose of the bad actor is detrimental to society at large. It is reminding us that what is useful to someone may not be useful to another.

Less obvious, but no less important, are unintended consequences. These are the unavoidable outcomes of technologies that are ubiquitous, powerful and disruptive, as many of today's technologies are. The genesis of unintended consequences lies in two facts — that our world is not linear, hence, leading to unpredictable phenomena; and that organised society reacts much slower, through the legislative process, to technological change. How we react as a society to technological change has multiple dimensions. The ideal chief ethics officer would seek to meticulously strengthen the core technology that serves useful purposes, namely the branches that continue to reside in the three-circle intersection, and to prune the unwanted or undesirable branches that grow outside of it. This requires a culture of ethically-minded technologists that will discourage the growth of such branches, and much faster policy and legislative processes that are in step with technology and can create the new perimeter that is defining what is acceptable, legally and ethically.

Another crucial dimension for our imagined chief ethics officers is accurate and factual communication to the public of the existing unintended consequences. Through their leadership such officers could have a cascading effect on how we educate today's engineering students

about the importance of technology ethics, acquiring and maintaining of an internal moral compass, the process of decision-making in technology and innovation, and ultimately, the power of technology and its unintended consequences.

Tristan Harris, former design ethicist at [Google](#), once said: “Never before in history have such a small number of designers had such a large influence on two billion people’s thoughts and choices.”

It is likely that innovation and technology cannot wait for society to catch up. But nor can engineers and technologists simply outsource ethics to someone else. It is now becoming our own responsibility.

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