Moral, Social, and Political Responsibility in the Information Age

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INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have penetrated during the last 20 years all human activities everywhere on the Earth. Humanity has entered into the information age, virtual reality and even virtual worlds have been crated, serious discussions are led about possible impacts of Superintelligence that could be created in not so distant future.

Basic questions of moral philosophy stay as they have always been: How are we to live? What are we to be? Basic answers are, of course, that we ought to live good lives and be good persons. Humans are social beings, that is why moral, social and political philosophy overlap. Basic questions of social and political philosophy have been always concerned with informal and formal rules in social and political structures, companies and states being the most relevant for this article. Basic answer is that rules ought to be equilibrated in the sense that social structures function well and are just. Equilibrium is not petrified; it must reflect current conditions of social and political life.

What does responsibility mean? Everybody is morally responsible: she must be able to respond to questions about her life and personality; to explain what she does and why. Leaders in all social and political structures (families, schools, churches, companies, states ..) are socially and politically responsible: they are responsible both for functioning of their structures and for the latter being just.

What are just structures? This is a complicated question with many possible answers. For the purpose of this article, we stress just three important attributes of justice: people are not exploited, are not alienated and are as free as possible.

The aim of this article is:

- To specify what "living a good life" and "being a good person" could be in the information age;
- To identify some challenges and opportunities ICTs offer for good rules in social and political structures.

Having absolutely stabilized basic questions and basic answers makes the methodology of moral, social and political philosophy quite different from the methodology in sciences. In sciences, one starts with a thorough review of previous research, specifies some new and interesting research question, makes hypotheses about possible answers and bases argumentation on data. In moral, social and political philosophy, one reflects problems of the current age in mirrors that were created centuries ago and have been polished by many reflections ever since. Forms of texts are rich: dialogs, even poems, but the most used form is an essay.

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BACKGROUND

Literature review in research articles is used for showing that the research described in the article fits into research themes that are interesting for contemporary research community. Literature review in ethical reflections is used differently, just for illustration of ideas that have been published in the area of interest and for "opening the scene".

Looking into the Web of Science Core Collection database in May 2019 and using keywords "information technology" and ("moral responsibility" OR "social responsibility" OR "political responsibility"), in the whole timespan from 1945 to 2019 there are 108 entries obtained (from that 107 articles or conference proceedings). 20 entries were published from 1992 to 2009, 33 entries from 2010 to 2014 and 55 since 2015. This reveals not high but steady and increasing activity on the interdisciplinary border between ICTs and moral, social or political responsibility.

Looking closer into the content of those articles, following themes can be identified since the year 2010:

- Ethical questions linked with the creation and use of "big data", including creation of agreed standards of good practice - e.g. (Rizk&Choueiri, 2006), (Light,& McGrath, 2010), (Celen, & Seferoglu, 2013), (Chen, B., & Zhang, N., 2016);
- Development of sustainable information society - e.g. (Tsai&Chen, 2013), (Busch, 2011), (Nieme la&Ikonen&Leikas&Kantola&Kulju&Tammela&Ylikauppila, 2014) in the sense of an inclusive and environmentally friendly society; application of precautionary principle in the development of ICTs (Som&Hilty& Kohler, 2009);
- Corporate social responsibility of both ICT suppliers and users – e.g. (Arevalo-Ascanio, J. G., Bayona-Trillos, R. A., & Rico-Bautista, D. W., 2015) (Tsai&Chen, 2013), (Busch, 2011), (Vaccaro&Madsen, 2009), (Chuang, S. P., & Huang, S. J., 2018), including suggestions for standards of good practice (Patrignani&Whitehouse, 2014), (Zompras, A., & Siakas, K., 2015). and how to enable consumers to push companies to behave ethically with the use of ICTs (Watts& Wyner, 2011), (Choi, S. B., Feng, Y. T., Liu, J. J., & Zhu, Q. H., 2019);
- University social responsibility (Arntzen, 2010); new teaching and learning culture based on ICTs (Stepien, 2010), (Kozhamkulova, Z. Z., Amankeldikyzy, N., & Kabaeva, D. A., 2017), (Chen, Y. F., 2016);
- Social responsibility in different ICT supported activities – e.g. bicycles´ sharing (Zhao, X. X., 2017); police service (Ramos, S., Perez-Lopez, J. A., Abreu, R., & Ieee., 2017), media (Lee, C. G., Sung, J., Kim, J. K., Jung, I. S., & Kim, K. J., 2016).

This indicates research activity that is driven by applications and can be contrasted with the research activity from the years before, that was pushed by theoretical considerations. (Lianos, 2000) e.g. starts with sociological concepts and identifies the threat that ICTs can atomize society through making development of personal trust obsolete. Lianos uses credit card as an example: one does not need to be trusted by the provider of money, the only thing that is relevant is the validity of the card. Technical norms replace moral and social norms.

Research fields may have different dynamics. It is quite usual that after the theoretical development some themes or even the whole field dissolve in applications. Nevertheless, after some time, both practitioners and applied researchers may find it useful to return to more generalizing theoretical reflection. In this article, the most general level of ethical reflection is being considered.