

GOOGLE AND FACEBOOK VS RAWLS AND LAO-TZU: HOW SILICON VALLEY'S UTILITARIANISM AND CONFUCIANISM ARE BAD FOR INTERNET ETHICS

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Extended Abstract

The proposed paper presents an argument in favor of a Rawlsian approach to ethics for Internet technology companies (den Hoven & Rooksby, 2008; Hoffman, 2017). Ethics statements from such companies are analyzed and shown to be utilitarian and teleological in nature, and therefore in opposition to Rawls' theories of justice and fairness. The statements are also shown to have traits in common with Confucian virtue ethics (Ames, 2011; Nylan, 2008).

In contrast to popular perception, American moral philosopher John Rawls did not always denounce consequentialism. He wrote that not taking "consequences into account in judging rightness" would be "irrational, crazy" (Rawls, 1971, p. 30). Rawls' critique of utilitarianism, rather, concerned the extent to which utilitarianism relies on consequentialism and also that it is teleological (Rawls, 1971).

Hence, viewing the technology ethics and guidelines presented by Internet corporations through a Rawlsian lens raises the question: What is more teleological than companies such as Google, Facebook, and their associated platforms, whose business models entail collecting personal user data and making predictions based on these data? Their stated telos is to use the collected data to improve user experiences on services offered to the

public for free, and to make contributions to a range of public goods from health care to national security through predictive data analytics. Of course, the data sets are also used to predict the effects of commercial and political advertising, which optimizes the companies' shareholder profits (Zuboff, 2015, 2019).

That the justification for the data collection is presented as the benefits outweighing the harms for the biggest number of people demonstrates the teleological and utilitarian approach taken by these technology companies. The companies' ethics statements are often superficial guidelines with very little adherence to actual ethical practice or theory (Microsoft, 2019; Pichai, 2018). By using what the corporations appear to believe are ethical "buzzwords", these ethics statements often resemble Confucian virtue ethics, in that they present virtues to be adopted without rooting these virtues in empirical knowledge, ethical theory or presenting a solidly reasoned argument for them (separating them substantially from the virtue-based technology ethics presented by Ess (2011) and Vallor (2016)). Similar to Confucius presenting the ethical necessity of virtues such as order and propriety as somewhat self-evident, the virtues proposed in tech company ethics statements are contextless and theoretically unmoored (Wong, 2012). The ethics practices of technology companies share a characteristic with Confucian virtue ethics in that the companies enforce strictly hierarchical decisionmaking (Healey & Woods, 2017). The above-mentioned statements and practices are all contingent on the perceived ability of the technology companies to accurately predict the consequences of their actions and the effect of their products. This confidence in predictions coupled with quasi-Confucianist virtue ethics is yet another demonstration of teleological utilitarianism.

Employing an applied ethics method, public ethics statements from Google, Microsoft, and Facebook are analyzed using the work of two opponents of teleological utilitarianism and Confucianism, John Rawls and Lao-Tzu. More than two thousand years apart, Rawls and Lao-Tzu both made compelling and strong arguments against employing conjectures about the consequences of decisions and actions as the foundation for decision-making (Lin et al., 2013; Vuong et al., 2018). Lao-Tzu, likely a pseudonym, did so in the classic Taoist text *Tao Te Ching*, which also contains simple rebuttals of several Confucian virtues. Several arguments emerge from the perspectives of these two philosophers that call the prediction-heavy, teleological and consequentialism-based ethics approach of technology companies into question, including the demonstrable difficulty associated with achieving high accuracy in forecasts of technological development, adoption, and practices such as online data collection (Meade & Islam, 2006).

After showing how the tech industry's utilitarian-Confucian hegemony clashes with Rawlsian ethics and Taoism, these schools of thought are demonstrated as viable alternatives in the construction of technology ethics. The paper argues that these philosophies are particularly viable when considering the ethics of Internet-related technologies, as the communicative, interactive, and participatory nature of the online realm is, arguably, dominated by rapid change.

The speed with which the torrents of changes and transformations flow and thereby constitute the Internet's many domains is not the only thing that makes prediction difficult.

As Popper (1945) famously pointed out, a constant increase of human knowledge logically leads to a decreased predictability and a heightened risk of unintended consequences being the outcome. In combination, the speed of change, the production of new information, and the proliferation of the latter, makes the Internet a phenomenon characterized much more by unpredictability than, for example, some examples of hardware development. The paper concludes by arguing how these factors demonstrate that Rawlsian, deontological ethics can be a viable alternative to utilitarianism in technology ethics, perhaps even in combination with elements of Taoist thought.

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