

BOOK

Right/Wrong

How Technology Transforms Our Ethics

Juan Enriquez | MIT Press © 2021 | 304 pages

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getAbstract Rating

★ 9 | Eye Opening | Bold | Controversial

What You Will Learn

- How technology and convenience drive evolving ethics and moral standards.
- Why tribalism and social context shape shifting judgments of right and wrong.
- How future generations may judge today's actions as unethical or outdated.
- Why humility and open-mindedness are vital as ethics rapidly transform.

Supported Skills

Executive Leadership

About the Author

Juan Enriquez writes about the profound changes that brain research and genomics will bring about in business, technology, society and politics. He is the managing director of Excel Venture Management and has delivered 10 TED Talks.

Recommendation

Academic and entrepreneur Juan Enriquez challenges your beliefs and ethics in his brilliant, bold, take-no-prisoners look at how morals change over time. Do you protest the caging of immigrant children? Do you eat emotional beings? Have you taken action against gun violence? Your politics don't determine the validity of your ethics, but your answers probably affect how your children and society will judge you in the coming years and decades. People now face ruin over what they said or did 20 or 30 years ago. What you do and say today will likely determine your legacy – and perhaps, in the future, your fate.

Take-Aways

- Technology, societal change and convenience drive the evolution of ethics and morals.
- People change their ethics when their tribe changes its ethics.
- Those who passively accept unethical behavior may face harsh judgment in the future.
- Don't rush to judge your ancestors' ethics or anyone else's. Consider the context of the times.
- Humanity may survive only if people embrace genetic manipulation.
- The debate surrounding climate change exemplifies how ethics change due to cost and convenience.
- Recognize that right and wrong – even basic truth – changes over time.

Summary

Technology, societal change and convenience drive the evolution of ethics and morals.

Most people agree on the basics of right and wrong – stealing, lying and murdering are wrong, for example. But human judgment of other actions changes over time. Today, the revelation that you used certain labels in a careless tweet or told jokes decades ago that society now deems unacceptable may destroy your reputation and career. Meanwhile, 200 years ago, you might have faced ostracism or jail for actively opposing slavery. Even Abraham Lincoln's initial pro-

slavery views evolved over time into fervent abolitionism. Notably, it was industrialization and the advent of labor-replacing machines that ultimately helped facilitate emancipation.

When something desirable becomes faster, better, cheaper, and more convenient, people want it and will bend their ethics to feel good about using it. You might regard it as immoral that the cost of education, health care, food or even freedom has increased dramatically over the past decade or so. But don't expect society's ethics to change those industries until people figure out how to deliver those goods and services faster, cheaper and better.

> *"Do not assume what is acceptable today will be acceptable tomorrow."*

In the United States, people who can't pay for health care may die or go bankrupt, and those who can't afford quality legal advice stand a significant chance of imprisonment. In either case, change may not be on the horizon; an enormous slice of the American economy relies on expensive treatment instead of much cheaper prevention, and on incarceration instead of freedom. This renders the US health care system inferior to that of other developed nations and shamefully expensive. And, many Americans are stuck in jail due to the rampant and unethical enforcement-incarceration economy.

People change their ethics when their tribe changes its ethics.

Many of today's technologies accelerate ethical changes, and with it, people's tendency toward tribalism. Consider homosexuality, for example. Watching likable gay characters in sitcoms or movies helped soften peoples' firmly-held opposition to gay rights. For many, including former Vice President Dick Cheney, those objections dissolved completely when a friend or close relative came out as gay. When the other believes in something or engages in a behavior with which you disagree, you likely have greater ease demonizing that belief or act than when your child or a member of your tribe believes or engages in similar behavior.

Those who passively accept unethical behavior may face harsh judgment in the future.

The United States government recently jailed and/or kidnaped thousands of child migrants; rich nations allow people to starve and die despite having sufficient surplus food and medicines to save them. Have you taken action against these wrongs? In the first part of 2018, more American civilians than soldiers died at the hands of active shooters. Have you worked to address this perversity or do you offer only your "thoughts and prayers?" Arguably, your answer reveals the strength of your ethics. Your current passivity could yield negative ramifications in the not-too-distant future.

Other, perhaps more morally ambiguous choices, will almost certainly evoke censure and shaming from your kids or grandkids as technologies and opinions inevitably change. Driving cars with gas-burning engines will fall out of favor quickly as the cost of clean energy continues its rapid descent below the cost of fossil fuels.

> *"As synthetics or lab grown meat get cheaper, healthier, and safer, most will wonder why we caged and slaughtered billions of sentient beings."*

If you currently eat meat, expect to face judgment once it becomes more convenient to consume alternatives, even if you switch at that point. As science continues to demonstrate the wide range of emotions possessed by the animals we exploit and kill – even as plant-based and laboratory meat become more affordable and abundant – will you be able to defend your insistence on eating sentient beings a decade from now?

Don't rush to judge your ancestors' ethics or anyone else's. Consider the context of the times.

Would you have had the courage to accept social ostracism, job loss, imprisonment or even death for fighting wrongs that few people objected to in their time? As the ethics of the 19th and 20th centuries differ from today's, what the majority find right and wrong in the future will not mirror what the majority find right and wrong today.

You may think you know right from wrong; you may anchor your certainty in religion, for example. The Bible says you shouldn't kill – in other parts it says you should – but religions, like ethics, form around convenience. Jews and Muslims ban certain foods, for example, because those foods were impractical and dangerous to eat in the desert from whence both religions emerged. Religions evolve, as they must, to survive.

> *"We need to be a little less judgmental of our ancestors, even of our own follies decades ago."*

Before you judge, consider whether you take action now – today – against clearly unethical practices that society accepts. Consider extending understanding and mercy for things you and others may have said or done 20 or 30 years ago, when such deeds and utterances were common and socially accepted, even if they prove ethically repugnant by today's standards. Blame less, judge less, and perhaps, you might contribute to healing a fractured and polarized society rather than pushing it further apart.

Humanity may survive only if people embrace genetic manipulation.

Today's exponentially accelerating technology means ethics change faster than they changed in the past. Before long, parents may have the option of editing out defects in a baby's genes or enhancing a child's physical and/or mental abilities through genetic engineering. Those who elect not to make such changes may face blame in the future if a child develops a cancer that science could have eliminated prenatally or at birth.

As bioengineering improves, scientists will have the tools to eradicate malarial mosquitoes; should they do so? What about rats and other pests that carry diseases? When it comes to changing the genetic makeup of humans, you might demur, but do you think the species can survive otherwise?

Genetic diversity in humans pales in comparison to virtually every other species, even grapes. Ever wondered why so many versions of monkeys, cats and whales exist but only one kind of human? Genetic homogeneity makes humanity exceptionally vulnerable – mutations and natural selection take far too long to protect humans against viruses, let alone produce suitable deep space travelers or colonizers.

To live on or even travel to other planets – even in our solar system – humans will have to change. Survival likely depends on creating compact radiation-resistant non-homo sapiens: beings capable of hibernation, and who possess bigger brains.

> *"For most, awareness of just how wrong something is tends to dawn gradually, spread slowly, and then the actual implementation of new laws takes a long time."*

Ethics will catch up to the technologies that permit radical reinvention of humans. Just as millions of people alter their minds and bodies today with pills, genetic alteration of brains will arrive, too. As this occurs, and scientists discover more about how the brain works, the ethics of punishing people who commit crimes due to things they can't control – such as the makeup of their brains, for example – will come back into question.

The debate surrounding climate change exemplifies how ethics change based on cost and convenience.

A catastrophic 200 feet rise in sea level will occur with the melting of the ice caps. Ethically, those living today owe consideration to those who will follow. Yet people and nations do very little about climate change. In fact, no great alteration in action will occur until fossil fuel alternatives become cheaper and more convenient.

> *"Climate change is the ultimate ethical-existential challenge. If we do not change our thoughts and actions on this topic, little else will matter."*

Only as clean energy drops in price and grows in abundance – rendering fossil fuels costly by comparison – will most people change their ethics and shame those who burn dirty fuels. New generations with new ethics will judge those who polluted the planet decades earlier. As the gap between the rich and poor widens, the marginalization of the poor will create growing discontent. As income inequality grows, the ethics of wealth distribution – even of capitalism itself – will change.

Recognize that right and wrong – even basic truth – changes over time.

Imagine going back in time to invite your grandparents when they were in their 20s to have a discussion about sex. They were likely married at that age and would know about sex, but how might they react to reliable birth control that separates the act from its consequences? What would they think about surrogate mothers and in vitro fertilization – that single parents can have kids or that neither parent need be present at conception nor birth? Your grandparents might react with surprise in some cases and disgust in others.

Now imagine yourself transported to the future to meet your grown-up great-grandchildren. What do you think might have changed about sex and creating babies by then? You might not recognize the processes, let alone agree with the ethics. You might hear about how your great-grandchild was a boy, then a girl, and decided to live as a boy again temporarily – mentally and physically. Perhaps another one has married a robot while a third will conceive a child with a mix of genes from a dozen of their closest friends. How would you feel if a fourth asks if they can clone you as their child?

Think about shifting values before you send your next tweet or post a questionable video on TikTok. Consider shifting values when you buy anything online or use your credit card. When you use apps like Waze or Google Maps, or travel through an airport or walk city streets, data reveals your goings and retains them forever.

> *“Most of us now hold ourselves, and others, to higher standards, and somehow we expect our ancestors to have lived up to our newly enlightened benchmarks. ”*

When you visit porn sites or share details about your sexual preferences on dating sites, assume your kids, grandkids and virtually everyone else will have the tools and access to scrutinize those visits and details and judge you against their generation’s ethical standards.

Knowing that ethics and morals change – and will keep changing at an ever-increasing pace – keep an open mind, doubt yourself, stay curious and humble and extend understanding and forgiveness.

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