

INSIGHTS

Gatilok Ethics for AI

CHHEM Kieth Rethy¹, MD, PhD (Edu), and PhD (His)

¹ **CHHEM Kieth Rethy** is a Distinguished Professor of AI and Humanities, Center for Buddhist AI Ethics, Cambodia University of Science and Technology and Advisor to AI Forum

Introduction: Gatilok Parables as Moral Tools for AI

This paper draws on six parables from the *Gatilok* tradition, a corpus of Khmer moral storytelling that has been employed for centuries to cultivate ethical judgment and personal discernment in everyday life (Suttantaprijā Ind., 1921). Far from mere folklore or religious instruction, *Gatilok* tales function as moral case studies. They are designed to trigger reflection on integrity, trust, and responsibility, particularly in the face of deception, hierarchy, and silence.

The relevance of these parables extends well beyond their historical or cultural setting. In this paper, they are interpreted as ethical templates for understanding emerging dilemmas in the design and governance of artificial intelligence. Each story centers on a moral inflection point: a moment where appearances mislead, authority is tested, or wisdom emerges from unexpected places. Their themes are especially salient in the current global conversation on how to ensure AI systems serve human values rather than institutional ambition or technological dominance.

The six parables considered here are summarized below:

1. The Orphan and the King (រឿងក្មេងកំព្រា និងព្រះចៅផែនដី)

A poor boy speaks with honesty and clarity before the king. Though unrewarded, his words subtly reshape the king's understanding of justice.

2. Princess Amaradevi and the Four Gurus (រឿងនាងអមរា និងអាចារ្យទាំង៤ -មហាសថជាកក)

Rather than confront falsehood with accusation, the princess creates a context where each person's true character is revealed through their own choices.

3. The Chief Monk of Wat Koh (រឿងលោកគ្រូចៅអធិការវត្តកោះ)

A revered monk secretly longs for luxury. His desire is exploited, leading to failure. He evades responsibility by blaming others.

4. Ta Then and His Three Students (រឿងតាថេន និងសិស្ស ៣នាក់)

Disguised as monks, impostors deceive a village and suppress the lone voice that speaks the truth. Recognition comes too late.

5. The Polecat and the Rooster (រឿងសត្វសំពោច និងមាន់ចៃ)

A cunning polecat proposes peace to a rooster. The rooster agrees, but only if a watchdog is present. The polecat, exposed, flees.

6. The Tbal Kdoeung (រឿងចៅពាលក្លែងកេរ្តិ៍ជាសង្ឃធ្វើគ្រូមើលស្តី)

A fake monk traps a mother in a moral dilemma using her own love for her child, while he exploits her trust to rob her home.

These parables are not used here as decorative analogies. Rather, they provide a grounded epistemology and ethical grammar through which to reframe the challenges of AI governance.

1. Authority Without Wisdom

One of the central motifs across *Gatilok* tales is the danger of authority performed without ethical substance. In the case of *Ta Then and his students*, religious symbols are co-opted to fabricate trust. The villagers do not question their authority because it is cloaked in recognizable signals: robes, chants, and sacred language (Suttantaprijā Ind., 1921).

In the realm of artificial intelligence, similar dynamics unfold when systems are marketed as “scientific,” “objective,” or “data-driven.” These labels command deference, not because of the underlying integrity of the system, but because of the institutional prestige and technical mystique they evoke (Floridi, 2013). When ethical legitimacy is granted through appearances, systems may become insulated from scrutiny.

2. Truth Outside Power: Listening to the Orphan

In *The Orphan and the King*, moral clarity does not emanate from the throne but from a boy with no status, no wealth, and no protection. He speaks with compassion and reason, not in pursuit of favor but from a sincere understanding of right conduct. Although his words are not rewarded, they leave a lasting impression on the king.

This story cautions against the conflation of institutional authority with ethical insight. In contemporary AI development, some of the most valuable critiques come from outside formal power structures: whistleblowers, civil society organizations, independent researchers, and affected communities, especially in the Global South. Ethical listening, the parable suggests, is not about absorbing critique into existing hierarchies. It is about allowing moral insight to reshape those hierarchies from within.

3. The Silencing of Questions

In several parables, harm is enabled not by overt coercion but by the quiet discouragement of doubt. The cotton thread around Ta Then's ceremonial cottage, the leverage mechanism in the *Tbal Kdoeung*, and the robes worn by impostors all serve to suppress inquiry. In each case, deception persists because fear, reverence, or confusion prevents people from asking questions (Suttantaprijā Ind., 1921).

Modern AI systems frequently replicate this pattern. When algorithmic decisions are shielded behind claims of complexity or intellectual property, they become what has been called “black-box systems” (Floridi, 2013). Users are told that questioning is unnecessary, naive, or disruptive. From a *Gatilok* perspective, this is a moral failing. Systems that cannot be paused, explained, or corrected, especially by those most affected, cease to be ethically justifiable.

4. The Language of Ethics Without Its Structure

In *The Polecat and the Rooster*, the polecat's rhetoric is flawless. He speaks of peace, harmony, and equality. What unravels his performance is not contradiction, but a single request for accountability: the presence of the watchdog. This symbolic moment reveals the core message. Ethical language is meaningless without institutional mechanisms that make abuse visible and prevent harm.

The contemporary landscape of AI ethics often suffers from similar disjunctions. Declarations of responsible AI abound, but are rarely backed by enforceable standards, independent audits, or meaningful public oversight. According to Jobin et al. (2019) the vast majority of AI ethics guidelines worldwide remain voluntary and lack enforcement mechanisms. The parable reminds us that those with genuine ethical intent do not fear scrutiny.

5. Ethical Collapse Begins Within

In *The Chief Monk of Wat Koh*, failure begins not with deception from the outside but with desire unacknowledged within. The monk's longing for fine silk is never declared, yet it shapes his decisions and exposes the temple to exploitation. When the failure is revealed, he displaces responsibility onto others.

This dynamic mirrors leadership in many AI institutions. Public commitments to ethics are undercut by private incentives, whether reputational, financial, or geopolitical (Floridi, 2013). When governance is built on image rather than introspection, hypocrisy becomes structurally embedded. As the monk's story teaches, ethics must begin not with proclamations, but with the internal discipline to confront one's own contradictions.

6. Designing for Moral Visibility

Princess Amaradevi models a different kind of leadership. She neither scolds nor punishes. Instead, she creates a scenario where people reveal themselves through their actions. Her insight lies not in accusation but in design. She understands that truth, when conditions are right, does not need to be forced. It surfaces.

This is perhaps the most constructive lesson for AI governance. Ethical systems must be designed to reveal harm, not conceal it. Transparency, contestability, and traceability are not afterthoughts. They are structural features that allow truth to emerge (Jobin et al., 2019).

7. Toward a Gatilok-Inspired Model for AI Governance

The moral framework suggested by *Gatilok* is not a checklist but a way of seeing. It offers a grammar of ethics that speaks directly to the political economy of AI, where authority is often decoupled from wisdom, where speech substitutes for safeguards, and where power is too rarely asked to listen.

A Gatilok-inspired approach to AI governance might include the following principles:

- Ethical insight can arise from the margins, not just the center
- Systems must be interruptible and legible to those they affect
- Accountability is a structural necessity, not a gesture of goodwill
- Leadership begins with the capacity to confront one's own incentives

- Trust is not granted by language. It is earned through openness to restraint

These principles matter especially for societies receiving AI systems designed elsewhere, where power differences are real and consequences are uneven.

Conclusion: Moral Clarity Without Power

The orphan does not inherit the kingdom. The widow is not rescued by intervention. The monk is not punished by decree. The rooster survives not by strength but by discernment. Across these stories, the lesson is consistent: moral clarity may not be rewarded, but it remains transformative.

In the age of artificial intelligence, the temptation to equate technical capability with ethical authority is strong. The *Gatilok* tradition offers a counterpoint. It reminds us that wisdom often lives outside formal structures, that power must remain capable of listening, and that the design of systems must support, rather than suppress, the conditions for truth to surface.

Gatilok does not moralize technology. It does something deeper. It asks what kind of moral architecture we are building into our systems, and what kind of silence we are willing to live with.

References

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