

INSIGHTS

The Machine Has No Heart: Culturally Grounded Ethics for the Infosphere

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Abstract

The dominant paradigms of AI ethics, exemplified by principlist frameworks and technical compliance models, risk a profound category error, they project a form of moral subjectivity onto machines while neglecting the cultural subjectivity of the humans who engage with them. This paper argues that effective governance must perform a crucial pivot from asking “Is the AI ethical?” to asking “Is the relationship between this AI and this society ethical?” Drawing on sociotechnical theory and using Cambodia as a case study, it critiques the limits of universalist “blueprint” governance (e.g., the EU AI Act). It then proposes a model of embedded governance, informed by local institutional context, behavioral norms, and non-Western ethical systems like Buddhism. The conclusion is that ethical AI requires not more refined code for machines, but more adaptive, culturally resonant processes for the societies that host them.

Introduction: The Paradox of the Compassionate User

Consider a simple, modern interaction: a user gently says “please” and “thank you” to a voice assistant. This moment, minor and almost whimsical, encapsulates a central tension in 21st-century AI ethics. We instinctively anthropomorphize projecting feelings, intent, and a kind of social presence onto machines that have none. Simultaneously, we deploy these same feelingless systems to make decisions of immense moral weight: evaluating job applicants, allocating social benefits, and modeling climate futures. This is the paradox: We treat AI as a social actor where it has no sentience, while governing it as a technical tool where it has profound social consequences.

Philosopher Luciano Floridi provides a sophisticated framework for navigating this new reality. His information ethics, viewing the world as an infosphere, rightly expands our moral circle. His principlist approach beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice, offers a universal grammar for ethical design (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). But grammar is not a story. A story is told in a specific language, from a specific place, by people with specific histories. As this paper will argue, the critical flaw in current AI governance is its struggle to translate the universal grammar of ethics into local, living narratives. We have exquisite ethical code for the machine but lack an ethical model for the sociotechnical system the messy, dynamic network of people, laws, habits, and beliefs that the machine will inevitably transform.

Using Southeast Asia, and Cambodia in particular, as a lens, this paper contends that ethical AI requires culturally grounded governance. It proceeds in three parts: first, a critique of the “blueprint governance” model; second, an introduction to the sociotechnical perspective as the necessary corrective; and third, a proposal for what embedded governance, informed by concepts like “Artificial Wisdom,” might look like in practice.

The Blueprint and Its Limits: Universal Principles in a Local World

Floridi’s principlist approach, mirrored in frameworks like the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, represents a monumental achievement. It establishes a common ethical floor, a shared vocabulary for a global conversation. The EU AI Act takes this further, engineering these principles into binding, risk-based law. It is a blueprint of remarkable precision. Yet, as Mittelstadt (2019) warns, “principles alone cannot guarantee ethical AI.” A blueprint is not a building. A building exists in a specific landscape. The EU Act’s requirement for “transparency,” for instance, assumes a society with high digital literacy, a robust independent media, and deep public trust in institutional oversight. In a different context say, one with a legacy of information control or oral rather than document-based traditions the same technical disclosure might be meaningless, mistrusted, or even weaponized. This is the translation gap.

The work of Crawford (2021) in *Atlas of AI* reveals that AI is not abstract intelligence but a material-political system, built on extractive supply chains, energy-intensive infrastructure, and embedded in existing power relations. A “fair” algorithm auditing a loan applicant in Berlin operates within a vastly different political economy than one in Phnom Penh. The local institutions that must implement the blueprint such as those outlined in Cambodia’s Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2021) face unique capacities and challenges that the blueprint itself does not address. The risk, then, is what we might call ethical colonialism: the well-intentioned imposition of a governance model developed in one cultural and institutional context onto another, without regard for fit. It treats ethics as a product to be imported, rather than a process to be cultivated.

The Sociotechnical Reality: Where Machines Meet Meaning

To bridge this gap, we must change our unit of analysis. We must stop looking at the AI system in isolation and start examining the sociotechnical system. This perspective, rooted in the work of Suchman (2007) and Latour (2005), argues that technology’s meaning and impact are not

inherent in the device but emerge from its relations within a network of human and non-human actors. Suchman's concept of "situated actions" is pivotal. An AI created to deliver farming advice is not a neutral repository of data. Its actions are "situated" in a specific context: the soil quality of a Cambodian rice paddy, the farmer's trust in governmental advice, their access to a smartphone, their cultural understanding of nature and risk. The same AI, with the same code, creates a radically different "ethical reality" in Silicon Valley than in Siem Reap.

As Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) posits, the "system" is the entire network the AI, the farmer, the smartphone, the subsidy policy, the monsoon rains not just the silicon. This view is reinforced by work on algorithmic accountability. Ananny and Crawford (2018) argue that the ideal of "transparency" is often a mirage; seeing a system's code does not guarantee understanding its societal impact. True accountability requires understanding the social context of its use. Therefore, the primary ethical question shifts. It is no longer just "Is the algorithm biased?" but "What new power dynamics, what new dependencies, what new forms of ignorance or vulnerability, is this sociotechnical network creating in this place?" The machine has no feelings, but the network it joins is charged with them.

A Cambodian Case: Artificial Wisdom in the Buddhist Infosphere

This is where culture becomes not a peripheral concern, but the central substrate of ethical design. Cambodia's rapid digital development presents a vital test case. How can a society integrate a powerful, non-local technology in a way that strengthens, rather than erodes, its social and ethical fabric? The emerging Cambodian discourse, led by thinkers like Chhem (2024, 2025), offers a compelling alternative: "Artificial Wisdom." This concept deliberately moves beyond intelligence (processing information) to wisdom (applying knowledge with compassion and insight for the flourishing of all). It invites a dialogue between global AI and local ethical traditions, particularly Theravada Buddhism.

Buddhist philosophy provides a rich, non-Western ethical reservoir (Hongladarom, 2020). Its core tenets directly challenge and complement Floridian principles:

- Interdependence (Pratītyasamutpāda): Echoing sociotechnical theory, this principle holds that all phenomena arise in dependence on others. An AI cannot be ethically assessed in isolation, only within its web of dependencies.

- Compassion (Karuṇā): Beyond the principle of “beneficence,” karuṇā is an active, empathetic engagement to alleviate suffering. It asks not just “do no harm,” but “does this actively cultivate care?”
- Non-Self (Anattā): This challenges the hyper-individualistic notion of autonomy and data ownership underpinning much Western law. It suggests a more relational model of data as a shared, communal resource (Garfield, 2022).

This is not about replacing transparency with karma. It is about embedding global technical standards within a local ethical habitus. What would an algorithmic impact assessment look like if it evaluated a system’s potential to nurture or disrupt community cohesion (sangha)? How would a data governance policy change if it were guided by the virtue of “right speech” and mindfulness? The work of Varela et al. (1991) on embodied cognition supports this: knowing is not abstract computation; it is grounded in lived, cultural experience. An ethical AI for a Cambodian context must be designed with, and validated by, that embodied experience.

Conclusion: Towards Embedded Governance

We cannot hurt AI’s feelings. But we can, and do, hurt people, communities, and ecologies through the unthinking application of AI. The path forward is therefore not to anthropomorphize the machine, but to sociologize the governance. We must move from blueprint governance to embedded governance. This model has three pillars:

1. Sociotechnical Audits: Supplementing technical audits with ethnographic and sociological studies of the local network where the AI will operate (informed by Suchman, 2007; Latour, 2005).
2. Cultural Translation Forums: Creating permanent, inclusive institutions where global standards are actively translated, debated, and adapted by local stakeholders technologists, policymakers, farmers, monks, and citizens.
3. Ethical Pluralism: Actively seeking to inform governance with non-Western ethical frameworks, not as exotic add-ons, but as core conceptual resources. The Buddhist-inflected concept of “Artificial Wisdom” (Chhem, 2025) is a pioneering example.

In the end, Floridi is right: we are shaping a new infosphere. But the infosphere is not monolithic. It is a mosaic of local lifeworlds. Ethical AI will not be achieved by a single, perfect global blueprint. It will be built by countless communities learning to ask, in their own language

and from within their own values, the most important question: “What does it mean to live well with this technology?” The machine has no heart, so we must lend it ours in all their diverse, culturally rich, and wisdom-seeking forms.

Acronyms & Key Definitions

Acronyms

- AI: Artificial Intelligence
- EU AI Act: The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act
- ANT: Actor-Network-Theory

Key Definitions

- **Blueprint Governance:** A top-down approach to AI ethics that prioritizes the creation of universal principles and technical standards intended for global application.
- **Embedded Governance:** A bottom-up, adaptive approach to AI governance that integrates continuous sociological study of local contexts, cultural translation of standards, and ethical pluralism.
- **Infosphere (Floridi):** The whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities and their interactions.
- **Sociotechnical System:** A perspective that recognizes any technological tool as an inseparable part of a larger network involving people, organizations, and cultural norms.
- **Artificial Wisdom (Chhem):** A framework that moves beyond artificial intelligence to prioritize the compassionate, context-sensitive, and flourishing-oriented application of knowledge.

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