Moral Conflicts, Hindrances & Benefits to Responsible Future-Oriented Activities (FOAs)

Introduction

In this chapter I consider relationships between morals and responsibility in relation to future-oriented activities (FOAs). Specifically, and perhaps uniquely, I consider morality itself as a factor in one's capacity to study futures. The central point is that the (almost) invisible moral values of the futurist may inhibit their work. The question addressed is "How does one's morality influence one's capacity to consider the future and establish the boundaries of responsibility for that consideration? Our suggestion is that one cannot adequately consider the range of possibilities for the future, and hence which is most responsible, because of moral obliviousness. One is oblivious to the universe of moralities and therefore to the best possible outcome. Instead, I argue that responsibility implies that FOAs should be enacted within specific and explicit moral systems.

First the chapter discusses the nature of morality, moral routines and what is meant by moral obliviousness. This is followed by examples of moral conflicts which appear to be intrinsic to the pursuit of FOAs. I discuss how moralities, exercised as judgements or obligations, may hinder the fullest possible exploration of alternative futures. I also suggest moralities as benefiting FOAs in that a recognition of alternative moralities may assist in the exploration of alternative futures. I follow this with a section that explores a few examples of potential oblivious moral dogmas in the literature of futures studies.

The conclusion reached offers four forms or principles to make FOAs internally and externally responsible, built around the concept of moral perspectivism, rather than relativism; definitional responsibility, institutional responsibility, scientific responsibility and perspectival responsibility.

Morality as one's invisible propagandist.

Morality implies qualities of goodness and the conformity of an idea, practice, etc., to moral law, moral goodness or rightness. The term "morality" might be descriptive of certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion) or accepted by an individual for their own behaviour (Gert & Gert, 2020). I take the meaning of morality in this descriptive sense. Typically, the term refers to codes of conduct held by distinct groups in society, in which case there are generally multiple moralities and it is unlikely that there is a singular morality that applies to all. Gert and Gert (2020) suggest that another use of the term morality is normative - referring to a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people. In this chapter, with its focus on responsible practice, I support the argument that no code could meet the "acceptance by all rational people" condition and argue that such a position entails moral obliviousness (see later), as it appears unaware of the multiple moralities codifying practices.

Distinct from morality as qualities of goodness is *ethics,* which is a branch of knowledge, studies and practice that deals with systems of moral principles, and in some cases a study of how it is most rational to behave (e.g., act-consequentialism). Swierstra and Rip (2007) offer the idea that: "Whereas morality is characterized by unproblematic acceptance, ethics is marked by explicitness and controversy […] We perform ethics when we put up moral routines for discussion" (p5).

What Swierstra and Rip mean by *unproblematic acceptance* is the way that moral routines with historic significance become routine and unchanging despite changes to the conditions for which they were constructed. For example, moral routines which once were explicit solutions towards conflicted interests or rights, or also as general answers to moral questions such as: *What is a good life* as for the individual or the group. These morals then became routine in society to which people conform without

thinking about them, and even pursue these discrete values and norms unconsciously. We become aware of those moral routines solely when others disobey them, or either when those routines do not provide good enough answers for novel problem anymore, or when a moral dilemma develops through conflicts between those said routines.

I proceed with the idea that one's morals may influence one's capacity to study futures, and that this is important especially when the process of such studies is claimed to be responsible. I introduce here the term "moral obliviousness" derived from the intrinsic unconscious unproblematised acceptance of morality itself. Obliviousness refers to the effect of one's unawareness of the morality of one's own articulation of an opinion, judgement, or viewpoint. That is, an assertion being made without the ability to see that it takes for granted its baseline moralities - i.e., "unwittingly advocating for morals pertaining to a generally unquestioned consensus" (de Pingon 2021, p5). The idea with being morally oblivious is that morality is not a stance being taken, but an unconscious framework from which all decisions/perceptions will filter through. You may take an ethical stance, but not a moral one - at best you "are" a moral stance - until someone or something points it out to you and in doing so creating a moral dilemma that has been unperceivable from your standpoint up to then.

This notion of obliviousness differs from moral blindness, which refers to one's (temporary) inability to see the immoral aspects of one's behaviour in particular situations, sometimes in accordance with obedience. Moral obliviousness also differs from "bounded ethicality" (e.g. (Chugh et al., 2005) which is concerned with psychological processes of unethical or immoral behaviour. In both cases, these terms could be considered morally oblivious in their unwitting morally universalist assertion without acknowledging from which standpoint they are judging their object.

I suggest that one's morality influences both how one bounds responsibility and one's overall capacity to study futures. If we believe that futures thinking means that multiple possible futures are imagined and explored, while at the same time acknowledging that the investigator is acting within their moral routines, then the following issues arise. Firstly, that where moral obliviousness exists, how is it possible to imagine an adequate range of 'responsible' futures (i.e. future worlds, contexts, situations, scenarios and etc.) when the notion or meaning of responsibility is grounded in specific extant but unacknowledged moral codes? Secondly, given that different moral routines exist, what conflicts may arise from the choice of evaluating futures and making decisions from a point of view that excludes some moral perspectives? In the sense of moral obliviousness, this is not a matter of choosing between perspectives, which would be mindful, but of being oblivious to some and hence engaging in unwitting advocacy of others. I suggest that, as well as benefits from moral positions, there are intrinsic conflicts in futures-oriented activities (FOA) arising from extant moral routines and moral obliviousness. Below, I set out examples of conflicts, benefits and hindrances linked to moralities drawn from the literature on FOAs.

Intrinsic Moral Conflicts

Underlying our overall argument is a position that futures-oriented activities should include explorations of alternatives and possibilities which address hegemonic change. Creative activity, by definition, challenges stability. Maintaining stability of normative moral codes conflicts with the creation of other possible, plausible, potential or desirable moral codes. Futures oriented activity intrinsically invites moral conflicts.

Even within what might be considered a normative state, dominant values and moral codes may differ between actors, for example, between the futurist and the client. Slaughter and Bell both consider the issue in terms of professional futures practice, as a topic to be made explicit (Slaughter 1999, after Amara and Bell) and potentially conflicting (Bell 1993). A contemporary example of this is tensions

between economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social justice. Consider that a futurist / consultant may value social justice, while their corporate client values economic growth. To survive economically the consultant may be compromised into using extrapolation rather than more visionary approaches (Ketola, 2006). De Saille and Medvecky assert that in Europe the development of "Responsible Research and Innovation", which promoted a mutually responsible society has been channelled towards speeding up innovation to produce immediate economic growth (de Saille, 2015, p159), (de Saille & Medvecky, 2016).

Moral conflicts may be found in methods of future oriented activities. For example, methods are favoured by futurists that involve a diversity of stakeholders, allowing many voices and values to be shared. However, the greater the diversity in participants, the greater the potential division of moral codes. As Inayatullah reports, "the exploration of alternative futures and the clarification of the vision led to division" (Inayatullah, 2015, 289) – who also noted Galtung's transcendence method of reaching agreement (Galtung, 2004). Individuals' morals may conflict with the needs of the collective.

Perhaps most fundamentally for this chapter, the (almost) invisible moral values of the futurist may inhibit their work. Or, if they introduce into their work moral codes they don't believe in, this might conflict with their way of being. Such conflict is intrinsic to oneself and one's duty to clients or employers.

Moralities as Hindrances to FOAs

I suggest that moralities are inherent in futures-oriented activities, as with any human activity. These moralities may hinder or benefit FOAs. With respect to being hindrances, the central issue is that moralities, whether explicit or obscured, influence judgements and hinder the fullest possible exploration of alterative futures. Some futurists acknowledge the importance of making moral values explicit in their work, and of transcending their own moralities. For example, Slaughter (1999) reports the guidelines for a professional ethical code by the 1976 Dubrovnik 5th World Conference on Futures Studies including "The obligation to stress explicitly your value basis, the future realities you want to promote, and the underlying presuppositions your work is based upon" and "the obligation to develop with others' theories and test conclusions also in other perspectives than your own". The obligation to the latter (other perspectives) may be hindered by the former. An example is the ethical obligations proposed by Bell (1993), including the highly laudable "search for truth" and "treating all people with respect and fairness, recognising their human dignity". Arguably these obligations can be contradictory, where in some moralities one's truth may not rely on those social values. One (social obligation) hinders the pursuit, to its greatest degree, of the other (truth).

As future makers, scientists, in the context of Freedom of Science (Lübbe 1986, 82) enjoy a "morally unencumbered freedom from permanent pressure to moral self-reflection". Douglas (2003) argues that scientists are moral agents who need to apply their knowledge by being "responsible for thinking about the potential consequences" (p64) of their work at decision points. What might be a hindrance is necessary in Douglas' view. More broadly, being a moral agent, with moral anticipatory capacity, brings its hindrances to everyday practices. For instance, how one believes they can make a difference affects one's interest to pursue and act towards a future. Having moral views linked to fatality and apathy, or a belief that would morally condemn the search about the future as being sacrilegious become hindrances to FOAs (Glenn, 1997, 731). Our moralities produce our hopes and fears – what we desire, avoid, have concern for. I suggest that the affective nature of these increases our obliviousness or resistance to considering fearful or unhopeful futures. There are also reflexive aspects, for instance does a morality that values responsibility itself induce concerns and restrictions over what we can contemplate in future? Similarly, having a morality that respects authority may lead to self-restriction against necessary critique.

In the context of society, a single morality (set of morals) may be institutionalised or locked into society, so that there is no motivation or power to change an entrenched position (Collingridge 1980, 11), hindering innovation as a future oriented activity. Or contrary to this, recognising that moralities diverge from the present 'norm' over time, (also divergent from the past) presents a hindrance to societies' moral responsibilities to future generations and to futurists' actions in advocating such responsibilities.

Moralities as benefiting FOAs

Recognising that worldwide cultural diversity creates different systems of knowledge, ways of life and world-views, one should remain open to each potential from this variety. A recognition of others' value systems offers respect, whether it relates to past generations, the present or future generations. Understanding that the intricacy of alternatives is tightly connected with the various values arising from different moralities, then exploring these ultimately enhances one's potential future research by (Sardar, 2013, 43; and Masini, 1994, 15).

Understanding the breadth of possibility, and that rational dissensus between divergent perspectives is more productive than models emphasizing consensus (Swierstra and Rip, 2007, 17-19), can lead to better quality, more complete, FOAs.

Being able to enact sympathetic and tolerant experiments to challenge one's own morality through radically opposed imagined scenarios, reveals one's obliviousness to one's own moral system. Learning from this develops greater FOA ability by discovering one's undiscerned and unknown biases (de Pingon, 2021, 5). It is likely that moral agents have differing levels of moral ownership, which is a sense of responsibility over the ethical nature of one's actions (Hannah et al 2011, 674). Liu et al (2020) suggest that high moral ownership is negatively related to creativity. Creative future-making involves breaking existing patterns or rules. While this may hinder the creativity of an FOA (see above), there are ways to mitigate this by paying attention to moral responsibilities. Broadly, one might consider explicitly legitimising explorations of futures through different moral lenses as an essential part of the role of futurists and FOA actors. Thus, the role responsibility would be different from personal or general responsibilities. I suggest that relaxing moral codes in the processes of an FOA may be ethically possible where the endeavour overall is situated in a high ethical context. For example, Liu et al (2020) found that high ethical leadership was effective in supporting creativity by giving moral responsibility relief to team members for "rule breaking". One must be aware however of a distorted moral vision that can arise from a lack of moral autonomy (Arendt & Kohn, 2003).

The Potential Obliviating Moral Dogmas of FOAs

Extant publications in the field of Futures Studies indicate a range of moralities, too extensive to list here, but I offer some examples and ask whether the ethical stance they take assist or hinder the creative exploratory role of futures-oriented activities. By not containing a specific account of comparative moral reasoning, each stance obliviates differences and divergences from that stance. This is understandable as "preferred" futures, and what might be seen as a duty to make explicit one's ethics. The moralities implied are recognisable today as worthy. The provocation I offer is that obliviating alternatives reduce the capacity to imagine, explore and create alternative futures.

A *transcending ecological morality* (while also holding humanistic and utilitarian values) can be seen in Bell's attempt to a code of his own ethical system for FOAs where he concludes "to maintain and improve the wellbeing of humankind – alive and not yet born- as well as life sustaining capacities of the earth" (Bell, 1993, 6). An *obliviating humanitarian morality* is mooted in the professional role of futurists formulated by Slaughter (1999, p850), where he proposes building on the World Future Studies Federation (WFSF) to establish of a World Council of International Futures Organisations as a "service to humanity". Did he and others at WFSF question whether their values were indeed a service to humanity, or if the morality was derived from what they consider to be implicit morals and

consensus? A general *unconscious egalitarian morality* can be revealed through the Anticipatory Action Learning (AAL) method (Stevenson, 2006) reported in (Ketola, 2006, 33) which aims at converting ideas into acts through a participatory, democratic, and non-hostile process directed at changing towards a preferred future without questioning its goals, showing an underpinning unassessed *morality towards equality of opinion and peacefulness*. *Universalistic moralism* can be seen in the work of Elise Boulding (1988) advocating a global civic culture, though Boulding critiques notions of universalism as based in a particular tradition, and in doing so challenges oblivious moral dogmas. Boulding was an advocate of human rights. which is a universalistic concept, i.e., *universal human rights standards* (Collier & Fuller, 2005, p178). And lastly, the prevalence of a *moral presentism* could be interpreted from the concept of "interfere with the rights" of future generations, for example as in (Brown Weiss, 1990, p8)[1], where it reveals itself as a present system of values being assigned to these future generations without further consideration, as if they would have the same morals as of today.

The statements above may appear contentious. It might be imputed that these examples were not necessarily morally oblivious, but at the forefront of questioning their own moral consensus of their time. They reflect a normative stance in futures studies and FOAs (as in desired futures). There is no strong evidence that the moralities inscribed in them reframed contemporary morals or disrupted contemporary moral consensus. As a thought experiment one could ask what if any extreme contrary or controversial viewpoints were used in FOAs of those eras to explore alternative futures? For example, did they consider human rights futures through the morality of fascism? Or more currently, to confront imaginaries of egalitarian futures with those of the neo-reactionary movement (Land, 2023). Our suggestion is that using controversial moralities –beyond one's usual moral scope – helps to reveal one's moral obliviousness and explore futures through other moralities.

These four different subsections of the Conflicts of Moralities might lead to a conclusion that interpretations of responsible FOAs entails the application of moral relativism for FOAs. That is, justification of moral judgments is relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons (Gowans, 2021). However, in the conclusion below, I develop a different approach to the whole enterprise of establishing responsibility in FOAs under the light of morality. Instead, I will build responsibility around the concept of moral perspectivism.

Principles For "Responsible" Future-Oriented Activities

In the light of the effect of morality in FOAs in relation to responsibility, here are four principles to make FOAs internally and externally *responsible*. Rather than simply making FOAs relativistic or "morally-specific" (whether being oblivious to it or not), these principles seeks to make FOAs - Definitionally, Institutionally, Scientifically and lastly (in response to relativism), Perspectively Responsible.

Definitional Responsibility

Modern dictionary definitions of responsibility centre on obligation. Examples include having the capability of fulfilling an obligation or duty; the quality of being reliable or trustworthy, or the state of being accountable; having liability or accountability for something (Cf. spondeo *(Latin: to stand for/make a stand)*, or a duty, as a person in authority (a responsible person) (OED, 2023). Some might argue that a capability of rational conduct involves moral accountability. But, from a moral obliviousness perspective, all that this latter meaning indicates is that within a given source of power, one may be morally accountable for one's behaviour according to what "being moral" means to this

[1] Re-interpreted by Glen Glenn, J. C. (1997). Psychological and ethical considerations when teaching futures studies [Article]. *Futures*, *29*(8), 731-736. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0016-3287(97)00053-0 as "violating the rights" of future generations, for which "we" (unspecified) have a liability.

given entity of power. Therefore, by definition, Responsibility in most definitional cases has no intrinsic ties to morality, and when it does, only subjectively.

Moral responsibility is socially situated. In many societies, though not all, for an agent to be morally responsible means that they can be held responsible (by others, by society), i.e., they can be blamed for falling short, or praised for what is deemed as right or good behaviour. A different definition is offered by Strawson (2008). Instead of positing rationality as the criteria for moral responsibility, Strawson suggests a reversal to this way of framing it where if an agent is held by others to be responsible, the agent becomes morally responsible by that fact alone. For the purposes of this chapter, I take the central point that a morally responsible agent can be blamed for not meeting their obligations. Because of moral obliviousness, what this central point means is that within a given source of power, (e.g. an institution, group, culture etc), one may be morally accountable for one's behaviour according to what "being moral" means to this given entity of power. This argument leads to the principle that, to be responsible, those who undertake a FOA must be able to be blamed or credited for being a primary cause of a resulting situation or action.

Institutional responsibility

The idea of institutional responsibility here is the transparent, explicit and clearly stated morality or moral system to be applied in evaluation of particular futures practices. That is, a morally specific institutional code under which judgements of blame or credit can be made. Institutions of government, corporations, finance, and religion, amongst others, are included. If I took the case of UNESCO, by considering some key influences on its foundational moral values, one could establish its responsibility under a belief-system (Torcaso vs. Watkins, 1961) akin to Theosophy (Sender, 2019), Transhumanism (Byk, 2021), Ethical Culture (Kaplan, 2020) and Secular Humanism (IHEU 2018).

To be morally specific, terms such as “responsible futures” would need qualification, as they are not specific. Institutional moral systems should be more accurately described by the actual moral system they use, such as here "Theosophically responsible futures “, or "Transhumanistic / Humanistic responsible futures” – or any moral system encompassing their values. The specificity allows others to perceive the institutions inherent biases and perceptions of what is "good/right" and "bad/wrong". The approach aims at honesty and easiness for its constituents to analyse, study and discuss within themselves and outside, because moral assumptions and pretentions are unveiled. The principle emerging from this perspective is for institutions to have a transparent explicit moral stance on which they judge institutionally related FOAs.

Scientifical Responsibility

This principle aims at the efficient practice of the FOAs professional, as a mirror of the second principle (Institutions) but here applied to the researcher themselves rather than the institution. As such it holds the FOAs practitioner responsible for their work, and to be as morally cognizant of their own limitations and biases.

The principle reflects much of the logic developed throughout the chapter; that the futurist should be cognizant and struggle against all forms of intrinsic moral conflicts and moral hindrances in FOAs. Building one’s self-awareness about one’s perspectives and limitations needs an informed self-reflection. This could include imagining morally controversial scenarios, seeking diverse moral opinions, questioning one’s own sense of good and evil, having humility with regard to alternative moral views.

Perspectival Responsibility

This approach takes a different view of and methodology to enacting moral responsibility in FOAs. It should be contrasted with those the institutional and scientific forms above. The principle is to *always* explore the specific FOA under different moral systems. One way to approach this is through thought experiments of past, present of imagined future *moral dilemmas, as seen from different moral perspectives*. The process of understanding why established past or present moral dilemmas exist(ed) can reduce one's moral obliviousness, i.e., increasing one's understanding of one's own morality. This wider view can inform, within a given time frame and area, future potential moral evolutions, which the FOA can act upon, rather than simply imposing present normativity on the *not yet*.

If one considers this perspectival responsibility in FOAs involving various institutions, a humility towards moral biases could offer the potential co-operation that enabled multiple voices to express diverse moralities. Such action would lessen moral obliviousness in the practice of FOAs, as they would be perspectival and responsible not only towards other moralities, but also and towards FOAs themselves. And from this fourth principle, follows this chapter's conclusion below.

Conclusion

The idea of perspectival responsibility, with its focus on explorations and cognisance of multiple moralities and their dynamics, makes consideration of the moral system in which a specific FOA occurs more significant than the activity itself. Perspectivism advocates against the development of Responsibility in Future-Oriented Activities and towards a specific morality. Under perspectivism, FOAs should not call themselves simply "Responsible" and probably not "Moral" either. Rather, they should associate their activity with the morality itself that they advocate[2]. Otherwise, directly calling themselves "moral" supposes and enforces a universal which shows more than often a universalistic perspective rather than a universal truth in time and space shared by all beyond one's peers. Such a claim usually denotes one's moral obliviousness more than anything else – one only perceiving "the other" as "immoral" because of the current executive and legislative moral consensus around themselves blinding themselves of their own moral biases.

The uncritical assertion of a specific morality leads to alternative moralities being assumed wrong, or evil, or simply oblivious. Obliviating alternative moralities strengthens hegemony and is a powerful mechanism because perceptions of morality and immorality have considerable decisive and impactful power.

Instead, and in relation to the principle of institutional responsibility (above), to be responsible, the actors in an FOA should state what kind of morality the activity advocates within its institutional system of power, especially if it tries to apply it globally rather than only internally within the institution. Making an explicit claim (or disclaimer) about their morality offers transparency about biases and goals, rather than assuming their goals are universally shared, and which leads to a singular moral direction unaware of itself.

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[2] or via terms linked to such practiced morality, such as "Aristocratic, Christian, Frankist (antinomian), Universalist, Humanitarian, Egalitarian, Utilitarian, Nietzschean, etc.").

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