

LEADER 4 January 2017

Moral dilemma: should we reshape society because we can?

Traditional values will not serve us well when it comes to debating the ethics of novel technologies such as self-driving cars. We need a new moral code



Bubaone/Getty

SHOULD the wealthy live longer? Of course, they – or rather we – already do. People born in rich countries can look forward to longer lives than those born in poor ones. Now that gap is widening within societies, as well as between them.

If you need drugs to keep you alive, your access to medicine depends on which insurance you can afford, or perhaps on winning the “postcode lottery”. That trend is set to accelerate with the advent of medicine explicitly designed to extend life (see “A cure for ageing is near but you probably can’t afford it”). If it is costly, the rich will get to live longer than the poor; if it is cheap, the demographic challenges of greying populations will be exacerbated. Which option – if either – should we aim for?

This is by no means the only epic moral quandary we face as we enter 2017. In fact, they loom everywhere. Should a would-be autocrat be free to broadcast falsehoods directly to millions over social media? Who should design the logic underpinning life-and-death decisions made by self-driving cars (see “Give your car a conscience: Why driverless cars need morals”)? Should a government be able to eavesdrop on every electronic communication its citizens make?

What's notable about these questions is a word that's falling out of public debate: "should". In recent years, most of the running has been made by "can". Creating the ability to do something has become conflated with the right to do it. This is in many respects a good thing: *New Scientist* has long advocated controlled innovation and experimentation as a route to a better world for everybody.

But unbridled innovation leads to social upheaval. Politicians and regulators, dazzled by the pace of innovation and seduced by the megabucks that follow it, have in many areas allowed innovators to "move fast and break things", trusting that common sense and market forces will ensure nothing important gets too badly broken along the way. That trust would appear to have been misplaced. As this attitude has spread from digital technology to transport, healthcare, the environment and beyond, consensus has begun to break down about fundamental precepts of our societies: the equality of human lives, the value of work and wages, the nature of free speech, and so on.

Scientists are often accused of trying out things just because they can, but in fact experiments that raise moral concerns are first vetted by ethics committees. Medicine is governed by codes of conduct: first, do no harm. These systems aren't perfect – they can be opaque and overly risk-averse – but they are far more robust and accountable than the ethical void that has opened up in innovation.

There are signs this is changing. An open conversation is emerging about the new rules of the road in the age of self-driving cars. Google has an ethics board overseeing its AI activities – although it is far from clear what this actually does. And politicians have started to call for transparency about how our data is used to make algorithmic decisions about our lives.

The morality of these and many other technologies is in need of urgent discussion: policymakers need to stop dozing at the wheel; and innovators need to listen to ethicists, rather than funders and founders. To be clear, what we need is renewed moral discussion, not "traditional" moral values, which are often not equal to the challenges and opportunities we face today. That will not be easy: millions prefer tradition to new thinking, and turning mores into code will not be easy either. But we can do it if we put our minds to it – and we really should.

This article appeared in print under the headline "New moral codes needed"

Magazine issue 3107, published 7 January 2017

NewScientist | Jobs



Life Science Sales Specialist

[Apply for this job](#)



Senior Program, Scientific Review and Grants Administration

[Apply for this job](#)



Program Administrator, Scientific Review and Grants Administration

[Apply for this job](#)



Senior Program Administrator, Program Development

[Apply for this job](#)

More jobs ►