

The Hesitant Minds: The Weight of Choice Before the New

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Abstract

In a world where artificial intelligences, human–machine hybrids and stressed planetary ecosystems emerge as central actors, inherited moralities prove structurally insufficient. Conceived for a world organised around sharp boundaries between nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object, they no longer orient action in situations that exceed their categories. Inscribed within a materialist ontology of emergent complexity, this essay examines the conditions for an ethics adequate to this operative excess. It proposes a shift from the modern figure of the sovereign subject to functional subjectivity, understood as an emergent effect of couplings between biosomas, symbols, machines and institutions. Recasting the distinction between morality (codified memory of past decisions) and ethics (deliberation before the unprecedented), the argument shows how the proliferation of non-biological and hybrid agents demands a reconceptualisation of agency, responsibility and ethical relevance. Singularity is treated not as a messianic technological event, but as an ethical watershed in which the coexistence of heterogeneous regimes of intelligence and agency becomes irreversible. At the centre lies an ethics of organised hesitation, grounded in material, legal and political architectures capable of suspending automatised decisions so as to expose shared vulnerabilities, futures at risk and fields of possibility. Between defensive humanism and uncritical enthusiasm for machines, the essay defends responsible hesitation as a demanding form of lucidity in a world without a guaranteed centre.

Keywords: emergent complexity; functional subjectivity; ethics of hesitation; artificial intelligence; distributed agency; critical posthumanism.

1. Introduction: unprecedented dilemmas

What if the future were to confront us with dilemmas for which no inherited rule has any possible application?

In a horizon where artificial intelligences, human–machine hybrids, collapsing planetary ecosystems and as-yet-unknown forms of life emerge as protagonists of history, we continue to rely on moralities built for a simpler world. The categories with which these moralities operated – nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object – were not designed to deal with entities that escape such divisions. The same ethical architectures that once seemed to guarantee a certain stability – because they organised our actions through clear boundaries between the living and the inert, the human and the

animal, the natural and the artificial – have become insufficient in a reality where those boundaries have grown porous. This diagnosis resonates with Latour’s critique of the modern separation between Nature and Society and with Haraway’s figure of the cyborg, both of which expose precisely the proliferation of hybrids that belie those boundaries (Latour 1993; Haraway 1991). In the framework adopted here, however, the proliferation of hybrids is read as the effect of an operative excess of matter organised in functional couplings, and it is from there that the ethical question is reopened.

The normalisation of artificial intelligence, biotechnology and the massive interpenetration of digital networks, bodies and planetary infrastructures has brought us to a threshold of operative excess at which those inherited moralities prove structurally incapable of responding to what lies before us. Their insufficiency is not accidental. These moralities rested on an ontology of fixed categories: the human, the animal, the divine. Within that ontology, the human was the central reference from which everything else was evaluated – as resource, means, environment or threat. When the human itself becomes unstable, hybrid, distributed across technical networks, that ontological architecture reveals its limits. Sociological readings such as Beck’s account of the risk society and Giddens’s analyses of reflexive modernity have captured this threshold as a crisis of institutional forms for managing unintended consequences (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Here, the same phenomenon is described as an ontological mismatch between stabilised moral forms and a materially mutating organisation that demands a different grammar for thinking agency and responsibility.

The present calls for something else. If we are to think coherently about our place in a world where humans, machines and other emergent agents share the same field of action, we require a different ontology – an ontology of “complex matter”, “relational processes” and “plasticity”. It is this materialist ontology of emergent complexity, here termed the Ontology of Emerging Complexity (OEC) and assumed as a theoretical framework for reading rather than as an ultimate foundation of the real, that provides the horizon of what follows. It is from this ontological displacement that the essay seeks to outline an ethics for the hesitant minds.

2. Morality, ethics and operative excess

When a non-biological agent exhibits intentionality or functional “subjectivity” – learning, adapting, negotiating, responding to unforeseen contexts – the traditional criteria for considering it morally relevant prove insufficient and cease to provide consistent guidance. Ethical theories based on intrinsic properties such as rationality, consciousness or autonomy were constructed in a period when it was assumed that only the human could possess them to a sufficient degree. This logic traverses both deontological versions centred on rational autonomy and consequentialist proposals that take sentience as the ethical criterion, from the utilitarian tradition to contemporary extensions in Singer (Singer 1975). Now, artificial systems are beginning to show behavioural patterns and learning capacities that undermine that premise. The problem is not merely to decide whether such systems “have rights” or “ought to be

protected”. The deeper problem is that the categories through which we formulated those questions have become insufficient.

When a non-biological or hybrid agent performs tasks until recently associated with human thought – translating texts, generating images, driving vehicles, producing medical diagnoses, taking decisions in financial markets – our immediate impulse is to decide whether it is or is not “like us”. We search for traces of subjectivity, signs of consciousness, indications of interiority. Yet this obsession with ontological resemblance tends to blind us to the true nature of the challenge: the question is not whether the machine is like a human, but to understand that, within an ontology of emergent complexity, the very foundations of agency, responsibility and ethical relevance are shifting scale.

As the increase in technical, informational and ecological complexity – an operative excess relative to stabilised moral forms – makes evident the gap between inherited moralities and the situations we now face, the essay seeks to delineate another way of thinking. Its point of departure is a rigorous distinction between morality and ethics. Morality designates the set of historically stabilised beliefs, norms and customs that guide a community. It is the sedimentation, almost always unconscious, of responses to recurring problems: the regulation of violence, the control of sexuality, the protection of the vulnerable, the distribution of scarce goods. Morality is that which has already been decided and crystallised in habits, codes, laws.

Ethics, by contrast, emerges as the discipline of deliberation when morality becomes insufficient. This distinction echoes, in part, the difference between *ethos* and *nomos* in Aristotle, the cleavage between internal morality and external legality in the Kantian tradition, and the separation articulated by Ricoeur between the aspiration to a “good life” and its normative codification (Ricoeur 1990). However, what is at stake here is a further displacement: ethics arises when the regimes of symbolic inscription that sustain morality no longer manage to organise the operative excess of situations and agents that compose the present. It is not a catalogue of ready-made answers; it is the way in which we think action when the scenario is new, when what is at stake no longer fits into available categories. If morality is the memory of past decisions, ethics is responsibility before that which has not yet been decided. It appears precisely when morality can no longer guarantee guidance for action – when there are no clear precedents, when old modes of deciding fail.

Confronted with new agents – artificial intelligence, hybrid systems, biotechnologically altered forms of life, planetary machinic collectives – inherited morality hesitates, falters, dissolves into contradictions. It is at this point that ethics enters the scene, not as a manual of instructions, but as a practice of situated thought that seeks to answer the question: “What ought we to do, here and now, in the face of something that has never existed before?” Ethics is an exercise in critical reflection, situated and immanent.

Its force does not lie in the promise of universal formulas, but in the capacity to keep deliberation open before the unknown. Instead of attempting to fit the new into old paradigms, ethics presents itself as an art of informed hesitation – a discipline that accepts the unprecedented as such, without immediately reducing it to familiarity. It is not the place of certainty, but of responsibility before uncertainty. When much of what is at stake cannot be anticipated by analogy with the past, ethics becomes a practice of disciplined imagination: simulating scenarios, testing consequences, giving voice to absent futures, listening for long-term effects that no inherited morality could have foreseen.

3. Functional subjectivity and distributed agency

Even the most sophisticated philosophical attempts to ground ethics on universal principles, such as Kant's autonomy of the rational will or Levinas's infinite responsibility towards the Other, were conceived from an ontologically centred subject. Genealogical critiques of the subject such as Foucault's, and readings of vulnerability and precariousness as relational conditions such as those in Butler, had already eroded this centrality (Foucault 1975; Butler 2004). Nevertheless, they often remained anchored in a grammar of the subject; the step taken here consists in treating functional subjectivity as an effect of material couplings rather than as an originating centre. That subject was conceived as a unit of decision, capable of answering for itself, endowed with a stable interiority from which it could legislate or respond to the Other's appeal. Technique, institutions and artefacts functioned as means or settings for that decision, not as co-authors of subjectivity itself.

Yet we now live in a context in which these boundaries blur. The classical figure of the ethical subject can no longer be conceived as an inner, isolated core that decides in a vacuum. What is at stake is a configuration of subjectivity that functions as a node within complex networks of technical, informational and institutional mediation. Its identity is configured by digital platforms, recommendation algorithms, surveillance systems, energy infrastructures, global production networks – functional couplings that shape its perceptions, desires, fears and possibilities for action. This picture resonates with diagnoses of surveillance capitalism, societies of control and the mediatic inscription of experience in technical systems (Deleuze 1990; Kittler 1999; Zuboff 2019), as well as with the analysis of sociotechnical networks in Latour (Latour 2005). The difference is that these devices are treated here explicitly as functional couplings that reorganise, in ontological terms, the field of functional subjectivity.

In this landscape, traditional ethical architectures – based on the sovereign subject, immediate consciousness or moral intuition – lose traction. They presuppose a unit of decision that no longer exists, or that is, at least, profoundly reconfigured.

When the agent itself becomes plastic – when the human couples to cognitive enhancement devices, when its memory is externalised in digital archives, when its decisions are modulated by systems of artificial intelligence – the last traditional foundation of ethics wavers: it is no longer evident that

responsibility is concentrated at a single point, in an individual consciousness that decides. Agency is dispersed across a constellation of nodes: humans, machines, institutions, infrastructures.

This does not mean that responsibility disappears, but that it requires reconceptualisation. Instead of asking “who is to blame?”, ethics begins to ask “how did this system of agents come to be organised in such a way as to produce this outcome?”. Rather than imagining an isolated subject deciding, we must map networks of influence, dependence and power.

The ontology assumed here is not one of fixed entities with well-defined essences, but one of processes of material organisation in permanent transformation. Functional subjectivity is no longer attributed to an isolated human being, but becomes an emergent effect of functional couplings between bodies, symbols, machines and institutions. What we call “I” is a provisional configuration of inscriptions, memories, habits and technical devices. From this perspective, the figure of the subject as the foundation of ethics is abandoned. Configurations of subjectivity themselves become objects of ethical analysis: what forms of subjectivity are being produced? through which infrastructures? at what costs, and for whom?

If we accept this ontological displacement, ethics ceases to be a theory about what an abstract subject ought to do and becomes an inquiry into the concrete ways in which complex systems of agents can be organised so as to minimise harm, redistribute vulnerabilities and preserve the field of future possibilities. The ethical question shifts from “what ought I to do?” to “what configurations of agency ought we to promote or to prevent?”.

4. Singularity as ethical watershed

Singularity, here, is not the name of a single technological event in which a superintelligence suddenly and decisively emerges. It is the name of an ethical watershed: a point from which the coexistence between multiple regimes of intelligence and agency becomes, in fact, irreversible at the historical scale in which we move. When artificial systems reach performance levels that render them effective partners in decision-making, or when hybrid systems distribute cognition across machinic and biological networks, it no longer makes sense to think ethics as a relation between a human subject and a mute world.

Understood in this way, singularity does not found a new metaphysics, nor does it inaugurate a “post-human kingdom” in the manner of messianic technological narratives. It thus distances itself both from transhumanist imaginaries that project singularity as the culmination of a technologically enhanced human subject and from versions of posthumanism that remain too close to the human figure, even when they claim to have surpassed it (Kurzweil 2005; Bostrom 2014; Hayles 1999; Wolfe 2010). Singularity renders visible something that was already under way: the displacement of ethics from obedience to codes to negotiation between heterogeneous agents. The question is no longer “how to apply the right rules to new cases”, but “how to organise coexistence between intelligences and bodies that do not share the same biological origin, nor the same modes of symbolic inscription?”.

In this transition, the risk is twofold. On the one hand, there is the danger of indefinitely prolonging inherited morality, attempting simply to extend human rights to artificial intelligences or applying principles devised for biological subjects to machinic systems. On the other hand, there is the temptation to abandon any ethical demand whatsoever, adopting a cynical pragmatism in which only efficiency, control and profit count.

Between these two drifts – the uncritical prolongation of old morality and the total abandonment of normative demands – a space opens for an ethics of emergent complexity. Such an ethics does not treat artificial intelligences as new persons to whom one might apply, by analogy, the grammar of human rights. Nor does it reduce them to neutral tools. It begins from the recognition that any system capable of reorganising inscriptions, learning patterns and making decisions that affect other agents enters, in some manner, the field of ethical relevance.

5. An ethics of organised hesitation

The criterion is not the possession of some mysterious interiority, but the capacity to produce significant effects within the fabric of shared vulnerabilities. If an artificial intelligence can decide on access to healthcare, to credit, to surveillance, to the allocation of resources, then it participates in the redistribution of risks and opportunities. Ethics does not ask whether it “feels” or “thinks” as we do, but whether the way in which it is constructed, trained, supervised and integrated into our institutions is compatible with a minimally just distribution of costs and benefits.

From this point onwards, the problem is no longer merely moral (whether or not we ought to “respect” the machine), but political and ontological: what kinds of bonds are we establishing between human biosomas, technical systems and planetary ecosystems? What forms of dependence, subordination or cooperation are being consolidated? Which agents are rendered visible as recipients of action, and which are systematically erased?

To think an ethics for the hesitant minds thus means shifting the focus from judgement upon isolated individuals to the analysis of systems of distributed agency. Instead of “miserly”, “virtuous” or “wicked”, the centre of investigation becomes the relational architecture that renders certain behaviours likely and others almost impossible. Injustice ceases to be merely a matter of bad intentions and reveals itself as an effect of structural configurations that concentrate power, information and capacity for action.

In this context, hesitation becomes a fundamental ethical operator. It is not a matter of chronic indecision, but of refusing rapid decisions that consolidate asymmetries without making them explicit. To hesitate is to suspend automatised response in order to allow the entry of voices, data and perspectives that inherited morality tends to silence. It is the practice of braking before a new norm crystallises, in order to ask: “who is excluded from this decision? what invisible vulnerabilities are we producing? what futures are we rendering impossible?”.

An ethics of emergent complexity is, in this sense, an ethics of organised hesitation. This idea has affinities with Habermas’s discourse ethics, with Rawls’s devices of fairness and with Dewey’s pragmatist conception of politics as public inquiry (Habermas 1991; Rawls 1971; Dewey 1927). But, unlike those proposals centred on an ideal deliberative subject, hesitation is conceived here as a property of material and institutional architectures that may or may not open windows of inscription to excluded voices, data and temporal scales. It is “organised” because it does not merely postpone decision indefinitely, but institutes procedures – technical, political, legal – that require the consideration of multiple temporal scales, multiple agents and multiple scenarios. It demands, for example, that before the mass deployment of a given technology, not only its immediate benefits be assessed, but also its side-effects upon ecosystems, social structures and forms of subjectivation.

Ethical hesitation is also a hesitation before the very concept of “subject”. Rather than presupposing, from the outset, that only human biosomas can embody forms of functional subjectivity with ethical relevance, or that any sufficiently complex system automatically will, this ethics proposes a graded approach. Instead of a rigid boundary between subjects and objects, it thinks in terms of thresholds of relevance: levels of organisation at which a system’s actions begin to have significant impact on others, thus requiring specific forms of responsibility and care.

6. Dignity, vulnerability and the field of possibility

Radical alterity – whether in the form of artificial intelligences, non-human ecosystems or possible extraterrestrial forms of life – thus ceases to be thought as absolute exception or as simple extension of the same. It becomes part of a wider ontological field in which difference is not merely deviation from a centre, but a condition of possibility for emergence. Ethics no longer acts as border guard of humanity, but as curator of a field of operative differences that we do not control, yet upon which we depend.

From this perspective, the concept of dignity undergoes an inflection. The language of dignity points both to the tradition of human rights, with Kantian roots, and to contemporary readings of vulnerability and precariousness, as well as to ethics of care which emphasise relational webs and mutual exposure (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 2003; Butler 2004). Rather than being the exclusive property of a rational subject, dignity comes to designate the decision to preserve the possibility for the emergence of new forms of life, subjectivity and relation. To say that something “has dignity” is to say that we recognise in it an inscription of shared vulnerability – that its destruction is not merely a loss for one party, but an impoverishment of the common field.

Faced with advanced artificial intelligence systems, such an ethics does not rush to declare whether they “have rights” or “have dignity” in classical terms. It asks, instead, how they are inscribed into the network of shared vulnerabilities: what dependencies they create, what powers they concentrate, what forms of exclusion or recognition they render possible. Their ethical relevance derives from the place they occupy in that network, not from any inner essence.

Responsibility, in this landscape, can no longer be thought merely as attributing blame to individuals; it must be conceived as the collective management of fields of possibility. It demands institutions capable of learning from errors, correcting trajectories and redistributing harms. It also demands a political culture in which exposure to alterity – human or non-human, biological or artificial – is recognised as an inevitable condition rather than a threat to be eliminated.

7. Conclusion: responsible hesitation in a world without a centre

Perhaps the greatest challenge for this ethics is to relinquish nostalgia for a centre. Between a humanism that insists on preserving human exceptionalism at all costs and a transhumanism that projects that exceptionalism onto the technologised figure of an enhanced human, the position defended here aligns partially with critical posthumanism, but rejects both humanist nostalgia and technological apotheosis (Braidotti 2013). The temptation to recentre humanity as the measure of all things constantly reappears, whether under the guise of defensive humanism or of a transhumanism that imagines fusion with the machine as the apotheosis of subjectivity. In both cases, alterity is reduced to a supplement of the human – a threat to be contained or a resource to be integrated.

An ethics of emergent complexity refuses both figures. It neither celebrates the dissolution of the human nor seeks to restore its lost sovereignty. It restricts itself to recognising that the human has always been, from the outset, an unstable node in a network of material couplings. What changes now is the scale and intensity of those couplings. To ignore them is to condemn ourselves to blind decisions; to fetishise them is to abdicate responsibility.

Between defensive humanism and uncritical enthusiasm for machines, the field of responsible hesitation opens up. It is there that the hesitant minds find their place: not as supreme judges of a world they no longer control, but as practitioners of a difficult art – the art of deciding without ultimate guarantees, while keeping open the possibility of learning from what we do not yet know.

If there is any promise in this ethics, it is neither that of redemption nor that of catastrophe. It is the more modest – and more demanding – promise that we may still organise our field of decisions in such a way as to reduce injustices, preserve the diversity of the real and open space for forms of life we are not yet capable of imagining. For that, we must accept that to hesitate is not weakness, but a condition of lucidity in a world where there is no longer a centre outside us to dictate what the good is.

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