# Just Transitions

## Talking ethics with Dr Matt Beard

When Performance Frontiers spoke recently to philosopher and ethicist Dr Matt Beard about the latest concerns in ethics, the interview covered many miles and possibilities. The breadth of our discussion is unsurprising, seeing as though courageous conversations are what drives Matt to get up every morning and head to his job at The Ethics Centre.

A while ago, he moved away from a rarefied academic environment to pursue a deeper engagement with public audiences. The shift also allowed him to help enrich The Ethics Centre's own knowledge base and develop a stronger network of relationships with other thought leaders. Matt is clear that he wants to open-up the "ivory tower "mystique that surrounds philosophy and ethics and reach more people. It's also, perhaps, the best way Matt can support mankind's moral progress and influence what he often refers to as *the arc of history*.

> *There's still an enormous amount of people in Australia who wouldn't really know what you meant if you used the word ethics... which means there's still a lot of work to be done, and it's work worth doing.*

# The Ethics of Expertise

One of the things on Matt's mind right now, is the vexing issue of who we turn to for expertise on a subject, especially one that encompasses social and cultural issues. Even with the best intentions, it's impossible, he says, to have all the information we need. "We cannot be subject matter experts on every single issue." And so, our tendency is to turn to our smart best friend. Unfortunately, these days that smart BFF goes by the name of social media, and it's not always smart, often disingenuous, and completely polarised.

Our reliance on an unreliable source for making meaning and important decisions in our life begs a deeper question. Matt wonders if we have grasped yet that we're not just users of technology, but that these technologies are in fact mediating all "our personal and epistemic interactions." We're creating technologies that curate and shape our lives.

# Principles for Good Technology

> *The fact that we can do something does not mean that we should.*

To share with others the weight of this realisation is why Matt and the Director of The Ethics Centre, Dr Simon Longstaff, have co-written a manifesto entitled the Principles for Good Technology. The number one maxim is **OUGHT BEFORE CAN** - the fact that we can do something does not mean that we should. History is full of examples where possibility has trumped ethicality, but isn't it time we stopped and asked ought we?

## The other Principles for Good Technology make just as much sense.

### NON-INSTRUMENTALISM

Never design technology in which people are merely a part of the machine.

### SELF-DETERMINATION

Maximise the freedom of those affected by your design.

### RESPONSIBILITY

Anticipate and design for all possible uses.

### NET BENEFIT

Maximise good, minimise bad.

### FAIRNESS

Treat like cases in a like manner: different cases differently.

### ACCESSIBILITY

Design to include the most vulnerable user.

### PURPOSE

Design with honesty, clarity, and fitness of purpose.

But digital ethics are only a slice of a bigger picture. So, when our conversation turned the corner to business leadership, We asked Matt what he believed leaders of the future needed to be concerned about.

What was the Next Frontier for ethical leadership?

Would AI really vanquish millions of jobs?

## The Next Frontiers in Ethics

Hesitancy floods into Matt's voice regarding the numerical forecasts of looming unemployment due to Automation and AI. Matt does, however, agree that the workplace is set to change in the next ten years. But while some jobs will be lost, others will be created. And our focus as leaders in this changing landscape, he suggests, should be on **just transitions** not just for the energy sector, but also with regard to automation. "A just transition as described by the Paris Agreement in 2015 ensures environmental sustainability as well as decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication."[i]

Matt goes on to caution that not every person affected by changing job opportunities will be in a position to reskill, so it's critical that we look out for those most vulnerable.

"The task of leaders [in the future] is going to be, not just how do we use technology to improve our ability to do what we do, but how do we use everything else at our disposal - advocating to government, considering social policies we might champion to mitigate the effects of that. Everyone wants agile teams, everyone wants disruptors, everyone wants to have innovation labs. It falls to leaders and people in HR to think proactively and productively about what happens to the people who are disrupted and what is their experience of this process. Because I think they are an afterthought too often. It's irresponsible to go about innovation in that way."

Negotiating this whole transition may come down to asking a simple question. Why did you hire a human? If you require some human quality in the role, then use AI to support that humanness, not replace it. But, if by asking that question you realise that you don't need a human for the task, then maybe you should also recognise that the work you're offering is not meaningful. If that's the case then, it's pertinent for leaders and employers to ask themselves, "what is[my] relationship with [my] employees really based on if ultimately they are replaceable?"

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## What Should We Be Talking About Now?

This seemed like a perfect segue into one last question. We wanted to know what conversation Matt would like to start with the world right now.

With his trademark articulate sincerity, he shared the two questions foremost in his mind.

**"How do we engender a sense of solidarity between people who are different?**

**And how do we instil the sense that an injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere?"**

For that, Matt suggests, we need to reorient our moral imagination, so that we start to understand in a genuine sense of what it would be like and what it would feel like to be subjected to (any number of) injustices. That means we need to stop thinking about "hypothetical other" people who we can ignore, or abandon, or sacrifice, and recognise them as having "inner lives of their own, and incomplete projects, and unfulfilled relationships, and fulfilling relationships - all those kind of things that make people sticky and thorny and interesting and complicated."

That sure sounds like a call to action for rehabilitating human empathy. But why has it gone? And where can we find it?

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*If you're interested in talking ethics with Dr Matt Beard, say hello here.*