

Comment on Floridi's *The Ethics of Information*

David Chapman, Senior Lecturer, The Open University

[Submitted version of: "Comment on Floridi's *The Ethics of Information*", *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Computers*, Vol. 15 No. 2 pp 13 – 15 The American Philosophical Association Spring 2016]

Concern about nature of national identity is very much to the fore in the United Kingdom at present, with debates about the membership of the European Union, the rise of nationalism across the whole of Europe, and an independence referendum in Scotland. Identity is inherently an informational issue, so after reading *The Ethics of Information* I found myself wondering whether the framework that it puts forward, Information Ethics (IE), offers any insights into the moral dilemmas around statehood.

For example, in a satirical radio programme entitled "How to Define Oneself in Terms of Regional, Cultural and Geopolitical Identity Without Tears" (BBC, 2014) the comedian Jeremy Hardy said (talking about Israel at this point):

"[O]ne of the frequent demands of [Israel's] government is that others recognise its right to exist. I'm not sure any state has rights. Whether a person has rights is a moral question... but at least ethical judgements apply more sensibly to human beings than to geopolitical entities. We'd all say a person has a right to a home. We wouldn't say the home has rights. No-one thinks a house has a right to exist..."

Information Ethics (IE) as presented by Luciano Floridi explicitly disagrees with Jeremy Hardy. Both houses and states, as Informational Entities, do have rights.

In IE (Floridi 2013, p109):

all entities are informational entities, some informational entities are agents, some agents are artificial, some artificial agents are moral, and moral artificial agents are accountable but not necessarily responsible.

Furthermore:

all entities *qua* informational entities have an intrinsic moral value, although possibly quite minimal and overridable, and hence that they qualify as moral patients subject to some (possibly equally minimal) degree of moral respect.

In the language of IE, both states and houses qualify as moral patients (receivers of moral actions) and as such are entitled to some degree of moral respect. A state (but not a house) is also a moral agent (an entity which can do things with ethical significance) which is accountable though not necessarily responsible. The motivation for IE lies in the need to address ethical issues emerging as a result of technological advances, especially (but not exclusively) computing and ICT, but IE is a new universal macroethic applicable to everything – including states and houses. Floridi's contention is that rather than addressing the ethical dilemmas arising from new technologies piecemeal with existing ethics, a new universal macroethic is needed.

The ethics of information is the second in Floridi's planned series of five books on the philosophy of information and this volume comprehensively develops and explores Information Ethics. Information Ethics is based on perceiving the whole of reality in terms of informational entities with certain rights and responsibilities. The fundamental good in IE is existence, being, as an informational entity, so morality is assessed in terms of creation, destruction or harm to informational entities. The book is a formidable piece of work, and the only thing that this brief comment can do is to pick out a few features that caught my attention for one reason or another.

The idea of a house having rights may be surprising, but when Floridi says that "all entities are informational entities", it is important to appreciate the significance of this claim. Quite how universal IE is cannot be overstated: people, animals, plants, books, paintings, even stones are informational entities and within the scope of Information Ethics. Such an all-encompassing ethic is presented by Floridi as the logical conclusion of a progression which has previously got as far as the environment in environmental ethics, but in IE finally extends to all informational entities in what he refers to as e-nvironmental ethics (Floridi uses a lot of neologisms).

Informational entities are entities that exist in what he calls the infosphere (another of his neologisms), and the infosphere is created through the method of (levels of) abstraction. Floridi insists on understanding the nature of IE ontologically, rather than epistemologically, but this is something I feel needs more discussion.

Floridi says that we should "shift our perspective on information from one that is exclusively epistemological and semantic (information about something or for something) to one which is *also* ontological (information as something)" (Floridi 2013, p28). If we start talking of information as something, however, we have to be very careful not to be lulled into thinking of it as some alternative 'substance' and expecting it to behave in a way analogous to other substances like matter or energy. Floridi has argued elsewhere (Floridi 2011, p91) for the "genetic neutrality" of information, meaning that information does not need an informee. He illustrates the idea by reference to the Rosetta Stone, arguing that writing on the stone was known to be information even before it could be understood. However the writing was believed to be information because it was assumed that there was a time when it could read by someone, even if only by the writer. An informee was needed when the information was created, and anyway by the action of trying to decode the writing the audience projects meaning on to the symbols. An alternative perspective on information is therefore that it only exists within a network or within a communication. Information is 'meaningful data' (a definition supported by Floridi when he uses the General Definition of Information, GDI, in Floridi 2011), but meaning is inherently semiotic: it has to be meaning for someone or something in a context. (This is not necessarily a person. It could be meaning for an artificial agent.) It may be significant that a scan of the references in both *The Ethics of Information* and *The Philosophy of Information* reveal an impressive range of sources including technical papers from Computing journals (such Communications of the ACM) but few from journals in the field of communications engineering, other than the foundational work of Claude Shannon. Similarly, he draws from the work of cybernetics in the writing of Norbert Wiener, but does not consider the work of Gregory Bateson who emphasised information as about difference and relationships. See for example Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) which also contains a detailed exploration of the cybernetics of self with relevance to Floridi's discussion of *The informational nature of selves* in Chapter 11.

The perception of information as substance appears in the Chapter 1 discussion of “The zettabyte era”, in which Floridi presents superlatives about the amount of data/information around today. He includes, for example, a quote saying that “in 2011, the amount of information created and replicated will surpass 1.8 zettabytes” (Gantz and Reisel 2011, quoted in Floridi 2013 p5). Although there are extraordinary things happening with the volume of text, sounds and images appearing in digital media on or off line, we need to be careful about assuming that bits of information can be counted as though you were counting coins. Money provides a good example, because a government could print more notes and mint coins and then say that there is more money in the country, but we know from the experience of the Weimar Republic (among others) that in reality inflation would devalue the currency with the result that there would not in any meaningful sense be more money around. This is because money is information, and the value of the money comes not from the number of notes or coins in circulation, but from much more complicated networks of the nation’s (and the world’s) economy. In his own writing on the zettabyte era (as opposed to the Gantz and Reisel quote), Floridi refers to data rather than information, so it may be that he is talking about the equivalent of the notes and coins rather than the money. If that is the case, however, it rather spoils with the point of the discussion, which is about information.

This does not mean that information is not ontological, but that our understanding of its ontological nature has to include communication and semiotics, and this has an impact on the nature and application of IE. For example, one of Floridi’s claims about the merits of IE is that, unlike standard ethics, it can be used to address the moral claims of a dead body. He demonstrates human respect for a dead body by the story in *The Iliad* of Achilles’ treatment of Hector’s body. Another story that sheds light on the status of a corpse is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World* (Garcia Marquez, no date) in which the corpse of an unknown man washed up on a beach transforms a village through the imagination of the villagers. In both stories the information associated with the corpse exists in the network of other actors in the narrative. In the case of the *Iliad*, this is the meaning that was generated in the life of Hector. In *The Handsomest Drowned Man* there is no pre-existing knowledge so the information is created only when the dead body is discovered.

Whatever the ontological nature of information, the value of IE as a universal macroethic in addressing issues of the age is impressive, and to finish I would like to give a flavour of what can be done with IE by mentioning three examples. The first, to do with privacy, is about the rights of moral patients; the second, to do with artificial agents, is about moral accountability and responsibility; and the third, to do with constructionism, is about the proactive responsibilities of moral agents.

IE is not merely descriptive, but also normative and offering a prescription for behaviour that is morally right or wrong. Evil in IE is the damage to informational entities through what Floridi calls metaphysical entropy, which he emphasizes is different from, though analogous to, thermodynamic entropy. I was struck by the approach to informational privacy, which argues that personal information is a constitutive part of someone’s personal identity and individuality so that trading in some kinds of personal information should be seen as equivalent to trading in human organs. This is an example of how ontologising information helps, because it emphasises the reality of personal information which might otherwise be perceived to be of less importance than physical parts of the body.

In addition to addressing the responsibilities towards informational entities as moral patients, the book covers the moral responsibilities of informational agents. As technological agents become more advanced and more ubiquitous, it becomes increasingly important to have a framework for dealing with situations in which an artificial agent causes evil. Floridi argues that artificial agents should be considered as moral agents, and can be considered to be morally accountable for their actions. There is an important distinction, though, between accountability and responsibility, and the responsibility still falls on humans. In keeping with the universality of IE, artificial agents are not restricted to technological agents but can also be social agents such as companies, states, or hybrid systems formed by humans and machines, or technologically augmented humans.

The opposite of entropy is construction (poiesis). To be good agents in the infosphere, therefore, we should be combatting metaphysical entropy but also fostering poiesis. Floridi argues that constructionism, the urge to create physical and conceptual objects is one of homo sapiens' secondary needs (ie coming after the primary needs for food, shelter, security and reproduction are met) and he coins another neologism: homo poieticus.

A 1993 opinion piece in *Physics Today* presented a list of things a physicist 'really needs to know', and one that stuck in my mind was: "Go for the big problems. No one cares about publishable petty results" (Stern, 1993). Perhaps it is in the nature of the field that philosophers will be tackling fundamental problems, but Luciano Floridi has certainly gone for the big ones: reontologising the whole of reality and the creation of a new universal macroethic addressing the nature of good and evil. Personally I applaud the work. As I write this review the news reports drone attacks in Iraq, yet more stories of online harassment, continuing concerns about privacy, debates about the power of internet corporations and more: the list is endless. An ethical framework that helps us navigate through this treacherous and unknown territory is urgently required.

Bibliography

Bateson, Gregory (1972). "Steps to an Ecology of Mind." Intertext Books, London

BBC (2014) "How to Define Oneself in Terms of Regional, Cultural and Geopolitical Identity Without Tears", radio programme, BBC Radio 4, London, 24 September

Floridi, Luciano (2011) "The Philosophy of Information", OUP, Oxford

Floridi, Luciano (2013) "The Ethics of Information", OUP, Oxford

Gantz, John and Reisel, David (2011) "Extracting Value from Chaos" White paper, Sponsored by EMC-IDC <http://www.emc.com/collateral/analyst-reports/idc-extracting-value-from-chaos-ar.pdf>
Accessed 1/10/2014

Garcia Marquez, Gabriel (no date) "The Handsomest Drowned Man In The World"
<http://www.utdallas.edu/~aargyros/hansomest.htm> accessed 28 September 2014

Stern, David P. (1993) "All I really need to know", *Physics Today* Vol. 46 Issue 5, p63