Failure to Thrive: Value Scenarios Within the Framework of Well-being and Flourishing

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Abstract

In this essay, I suggest that Richard Kraut's ethics of well-being may provide a useful framework for understanding value. I explore how this framework can expand value implications in value scenarios. In exploring unintended uses of technology, it may be helpful to ask how a new technology can cause a failure to thrive in someone's exercise of their cognitive, affective, sensory, physical, sexual, and social powers. Focusing on areas where technology could have an impact on someone's well being (causing it to flourish or to fail to thrive) could enable designers to consider which technologies are problematical or have certain propensities of use that need to be designed out.

Keywords

Flourishing, Value Sensitive Design, Abuse and Misuse of Technology, Design Noir, Value Scenarios

Situating Value in the Framework of Well-Being and Flourishing

Whenever we defend the claim that something is valuable, we should do so by locating that valuable item in the framework of well-being.

Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why* [1 p. 210]

What is the framework of well-being? According to Kraut, well-being is bound up with the notion of *flourishing*, as this term is commonly used to determine how well a living thing is doing. For given optimum conditions, a living thing will flourish. What is good for a living being is what enables that being to thrive. As Kraut writes, "For most living things, to flourish is simply to be healthy: to be an organism that is unimpeded in its growth and normal functioning" [1 p. 5]. Thus, well-being is bound up with the nature and the natural development of living things.

Since human beings, unlike plants and other animals, are more than physical creatures, well-being for human beings extends to the affective, social, and cognitive aspects of human life. Something has value to human beings because it is good for someone, and what is good for someone are those things that foster the maturation and exercise of a person's natural powers. Kraut writes, "Using the powers of common sense, we can say at least this much: a flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers). Those, in broadest outline and roughly speaking, are the components of human well-being." [2, p. 6].

It is easy to confuse Kraut's ideas with egoistic and utilitarian ethics. Much of his writing is a careful extraction from these views of what it means for something to be good for someone's well-being. A problem with utilitarianism is that what is of value for someone is quantified, and evaluation is based on increasing this value, or good, to the fullest degree. Rarely is anything in unlimited quantity good for a living thing. What is of value is constrained within the limits of well-being.

In addition, what is good for someone is not based on conation, i.e., wanting, planning, or aiming for a goal. Something of military value, economic value, and added value may or may not be good for someone. In other words, what is good for some living thing is not necessarily good from the perspective of that thing. What is good for a living being is that which makes that being better off. For a person, it is something "that makes his life go better" [2, p. 3]. Thus, what is good for someone does not change with a person's desires and goals. It is more stable and empirical, as it is based on the nature of human being.

Value Scenarios and the Failure to Thrive
Given value as that which is situated in the well-being of living things, it would follow that technology has value for someone if that technology enables a person to flourish. In other words, if technology encourages people to enjoy, possess, and exercise their cognitive, social, affective, sensory, and physical (including sexual) natures, then that technology has value.

How Kraut's concept of value can be used to inform the design of technology can be illustrated by letting this notion inform our understanding of the value implications in value scenarios [3]. Value scenarios draw out potential uses and misuses of technology by examining five key elements: stakeholders, pervasiveness, time, systemic effects, and value implications.

Nathan et al., [3] provide two example value scenarios. The first looks at a hypothetical mapping software package, *SafetyNet*, that alerts travelers when they approach dangerous neighborhoods. The second provides a futuristic scenario of a product based on Hiroshi Ishiguro's *geminoid*, an android double that

mimics the movements of a human controller located somewhere--possibly at a great distance--behind the scenes.

Using Kraut's framing of value within human well-being, let's extend these illustrations along the lines of value implication by asking how these technologies have the potential of impacting a person's well-being, giving particular care to notice what ways the technology can result in a person's failure to thrive.

Geminoid Jack
Some technologies lend themselves to more problematical uses than others, and such appears to be the case with *geminoids*. The value scenario, revolving around a sick boy named Jack, who uses his *geminiod* mostly as a prosthetic device for safely attending classes at school, shows how what appears at first to be a helpful device enabling people with certain disabilities to thrive has upon closer inspection some very objectionable effects on people's well-being. The value scenario the authors provide reveals a potential for diminishing physical fitness and for causing social tensions between those who can afford the technology and those who cannot.

How could this scenario be extended by considering other aspects of human well-being, such as the sensual, affective, social, and cognitive? It is very possible that the pervasive use of *geminiods* would dampen students' enjoyment of nature and the full exercise of their senses. Even if *geminiods* had attachments allowing the mediation of smells and tactile sensations, as well as sights and sounds, this mediation offers drawbacks. As Ihde [4], a philosopher of technology, notes, ". . . there is a simultaneous concealing transformation of the world, which is given through a technological mediation. Technologies transform experience, however subtly, and that is the root of their non-neutrality" [p. 49]. In his discussion of glasses, he notes that most people would prefer the unimpeded use of their senses--direct sensorial contact with world.

Let's imagine for a moment Jack's brushing up against a girl he rather likes. Will the bandwidth of a *geminoid's* mediated touch give rise to the same wonderful thrill of pleasure children in "flesh mode" would enjoy in this situation? Would Jack feel the same awakening in his being to some of the inexpressible experiences being in love provides? This introduces a further consideration of the ways *geminoids* might affect children's sexual development. In the Jack scenario. *geminoids* are blemish free and exhibit sculptured bodies. Children surrounded by perfect physical human specimens during this period in their maturation process could end up feeling that those dwelling in "flesh mode" are sexually unattractive and unworthy of love. Children who grow up in a world populated only by *geminods* might find little enjoyment in sex other than that offered by hyper-real pornography.

Not bonding in the flesh could also lead to feelings of loneliness and emptiness. We are wired to touch and to be touched, to experience the physical warmth of being close to people, especially friends. Could *geminoids* have a negative influence on a young person's affective and social well-being at an age when depression and suicidal feelings are more prevalent?

In addition, the subtle nuances in reading real faces and bodies could be lost in the mediation of emotion and gestures afforded by *geminioids*, reducing a youth's social skills. Will those who grew up suited in

geminoids end up socially maladapted? Cognitively, these experiential loses could also undermine a person's understanding and appreciation of human maturation and life cycle.

SafetyNet
Along the dimension of value implication, the scenarios offered in response to the use of this technology focus mainly on negative social repercussions. In particular, the authors note the potential impact *SafetyNet* could have on the inhabitants of communities that are labeled by the software as poor and predominantly of a specific ethnicity. One can extend the scenario along this line by imagining taxis, relatives, ambulances, and even the police refusing to enter certain critical zones. It is easy to consider the demoralizing effects feeling blackballed by the rest of society could have on the people living in these areas.

In imagining extensions of this technology in terms of its impact on other aspects of human well-being, I found myself finding unexplored potentials of flourishing. For instance, social well-being and political empowerment could be enhanced by using the software to rally political support for much needed changes in the community. *SafetyNet* might be just the thing to help communities articulate their concerns and feelings of inequable treatment. In addition, using this software could enable people to constantly monitor their community's condition. The information gathered could be used to gauge the impact certain local policies have on their communities. Using *SafteyNet* in this way would certainly strengthen people's feelings of autonomy and community. Learning to control one's environment by learning to use information constructively is also cognitively enhancing.

3. Evaluation technology and designing out for the well-being of someone
One strength of value scenarios is the intentional focus on the more unsavory potentials a new technology offers. In this regard Nathan et al., draw on design noir [5], which sees "beneath the glossy surface of official design . . . a dark and strange world driven by real human needs." [p. 6]

Value grounded in well-being helps us understand that not all needs and desires are good for people. Similarly, not all misuses of technology negatively affect people's well-being. Some are expressions of creativity, empowerment, and autonomy. Value scenarios that ground value in Kraut's concept of human well-being may enable us to judge these technologies more fully in terms of human flourishing, thus helping us determine which potential misuses need to be designed out and which beneficial uses need enhancing.

References
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