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AFFORDING THE VALUE OF TECHNOLOGY: NORMALCY AND MORAL  
FRAMEWORKS

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts

in the Department of Philosophy and Religion

The University of Mississippi

By

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## ABSTRACT

It is often held that technology is value neutral. That is, technology is merely a means to an end and has no intrinsic moral worth. However, as some theorists have demonstrated, this view of technology may be mistaken. One theorist, Michael Klenk, offers what he calls an “affordance theory of embodied values” as one principled way of understanding how technological artifacts embody moral values. Under this view, artifacts embody affordances, or possibilities for action. These affordances are then judged in order to assess the moral status of the artifact which embeds them. In this paper, I develop one problem with this view: the problem of salient affordances. In short, artifacts embody far too many affordances to reasonably judge. Thus, guidelines must be given to highlight which affordances are most salient. I then explore two limitations to Klenk’s approach for solving the problem of salient affordances which rely on standards of normalcy. First, normalcy makes embedded values too relativistic since normalcy is dependent upon time and place, and second, there exist cases, such as nuclear weapons, in which non-normal affordances are arguably more important to understanding the embedded value in an artifact. Lastly, I develop an alternative to Klenk’s view in which I argue that moral frameworks are a better standard for determining which affordances are relevant to an embodied value.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

On November 6, 2022, Palmer Luckey, creator of the “Oculus Rift” virtual reality headset, detailed in a blog post a new prototype for a virtual reality headset. This headset was designed by Luckey to kill the user if the user dies in-game. Equipped with three explosive charges, the headset detects a certain shade of red and explodes the moment the user gets a game-over. Luckey describes improvements for the headset as follows:

This isn't a perfect system, of course. I have plans for an anti-tamper mechanism that... will make it impossible to remove or destroy the headset.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, a virtual reality headset of this kind would never make it to market. However, most people are likely to find Luckey's new virtual reality headset morally repugnant. The headset was designed to do one thing: kill innocent users when they fail to appropriately complete a video game. This headset (and our reaction to it) seems to illustrate a central question in the ethics of technology – whether technology can embody moral values.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Luckey's headset, we would likely wish to answer in the affirmative. Luckey's headset offers

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer Luckey, “If you die in the game, you die in real life.,” *The Blog of Palmer Luckey*, November 6, 2022, <http://palmerluckey.com/if-you-die-in-the-game-you-die-in-real-life/>.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this discussion, see Andrew Feenberg, “What is Philosophy of Technology?,” in *International Handbook of Research and Development in Technology Education* (Brill, 2009), 164; Joseph C. Pitt, “‘Guns Don't Kill, People Kill’; Values in and/or Around Technologies,” in *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, ed. Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 90; Christian F.R. Illies and Anthonie Meijers, “Artefacts, Agency, and Action Schemes,” in *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, ed. Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 161.

*prima facie* reasons for believing that at least some artifacts embody moral values independent of their use. Luckey's headset embodies a negative moral value in virtue of its physical/functional structure – what it is, what it can do, and what it allows the user to do.

While the question of whether technology *does* embody moral values is an important one, this essay will focus on *how* technology embodies moral values. In particular, I will focus on Michael Klenk's affordance theory of embodied values.<sup>3</sup> Roughly, the view is this – artifacts provide us certain ways that we might interact with them. These *affordances* (or, the possible ways that we interact with artifacts) can be morally praiseworthy or condemnable. Since affordances are rooted in artifacts, we can judge whether an artifact is good or bad by judging the moral character of the affordances it offers.

This theory faces a challenge, however, as artifacts afford a variety of possible behaviors. For example, a gun can theoretically be used to hammer in nails, to swat at flies, and scratch one's back. This is a central fact. Any adequate theory of affordances must give an account of which affordances are relevant and salient. Klenk, for instance, argues that we ought to focus on the affordances that are 'normally solicited'. In this way, Klenk maintains, an AK47 would embody a negative moral value since it is normally used for killing (and killing is considered morally reprehensible).

In this essay, while defending an affordance based approach, I will propose an alternative to Klenk's account of salience. Klenk's account gives rise to two important concerns: a) the normalcy standard makes embedded values overly relativistic, and b) Klenk's normalcy standard neglects the fact that 'abnormal' use can be important to identifying an embodied value. In

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Klenk, "How do Technological Artifacts Embody Moral Values?," *Philosophy & Technology* 34, no. 3 (2021): 534.

response to these worries, I will argue that moral frameworks should be used to identify the most relevant affordances to an artifact's embedded value. I want to suggest that this approach avoids objectionable relativism and allows us to base our judgements about an artifact upon a morally relevant set of affordances, including affordances that are morally relevant but not 'normally' solicited.

The organization of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I outline the discussion surrounding embodied values. I then argue that views which claim that technology does *not* embody moral values are untenable, and we ought to hold that artifacts can and do embody moral values. In Section 3, I outline Klenk's affordance theory of embodied values. In Section 4, I develop the problem of relevant or salient affordances and then discuss Klenk's normalcy approach. In Section 5, I explore two limitations to the normalcy approach. First, that normalcy makes embedded values too relativistic since normalcy is dependent upon time and place, and second, that there exist cases, such as nuclear weapons, in which non-normal affordances are arguably more important to understanding the embedded value in an artifact. In Section 6, I develop an alternative to Klenk's view (which I call the Moral Framework First view) in which I argue that moral frameworks are a better standard for determining which affordances are most relevant to an embodied value. In Section 7, I offer examples of how identification of embedded values using MFF works in practice.



## II. DOES TECHNOLOGY EMBODY VALUES?

To understand why we might wish to endorse Klenk's theory (or a similar view) in the first place, one needs to get a basic understanding of why we might wish to say that technological artifacts possess intrinsic moral value.

The "standard" position that most people are likely to find themselves endorsing is that technology is value neutral. This position might take a few slightly different forms. One example is what Andrew Feenberg calls "instrumentalism." Instrumentalism holds that "technology is simply a tool or instrument of the human species through which we satisfy our needs."<sup>4</sup> Surely this is a familiar position. Baked into this theory is the idea that technology acts as a neutral means to an end. Ends are decided by humans, while technology merely exists as one avenue by which one might achieve their goals. Referring to the examples provided above, this view would hold that there is nothing *wrong* with Luckey's deadly VR headset on its own. Similarly, the AK-47 is not 'bad' itself, but can be used to achieve a morally blameworthy end. Individuals who choose to use the technology in morally condemnable ways are the only things we may properly wish to call "bad."

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Feenberg, "What is Philosophy of Technology?" in *International Handbook of Research and Development in Technology Education* (Brill, 2009), 6.

The position that technology has no intrinsic value might also be expressed by claiming that technology does not play any significant or relevant role in moral judgement.<sup>5</sup> We can call this view the “Neutral Relevance Argument.” Proponents of the Neutral Relevance Argument might argue that, ultimately, human beings are the kinds of things that have agency and intentions while technology is not. Because of this, when evaluating whether a person ought to be punished (or praised) for what she did, technology is irrelevant. While similar to the instrumentalist position presented above, this view is distinct in that it denies technology any role in moral evaluations. Only things which exhibit *agency* are things worthy of being considered in moral evaluations, and since technology does not have agency, it is exempt from “moral judgement questions.”

Notice that this view portrays technology as something that cannot influence behavior. In other words, technology does not play any meaningful role in how or why people act. In regards to Luckey’s VR headset, this position would, like the instrumentalist view, place the headset outside of the realm of moral inquiry. If one happened to kill themselves with the headset, the headset would be entirely irrelevant in assessing the moral character of the situation. That is, the situation would be evaluated as a mere suicide rather than a suicide by VR headset.

A third option, most notably defended by Joseph Pitt, is what he calls the Value Neutrality Thesis which is defined as:

(VNT): Technological artifacts do not have, have embedded in them, or contain values.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Christian F.R. Illies and Anthonie Meijers, “Artefacts, Agency, and Action Schemes,” in *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, ed. Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 161.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Pitt, “‘Guns Don’t Kill, People Kill’: Values in and/or Around Technologies,” in *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, ed. Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 90.

In other words, it is not the case that – nor is it possible that – technology embodies moral values. Pitt argues for this thesis on mostly pragmatist grounds. Under Pitt’s view, values are the kinds of things that motivate people to achieve “preferred states of affairs.”<sup>7</sup> Naturally, this means that values are the kinds of things that humans have; technology is not motivated to act, nor does it endorse any sort of state of affairs.

Further, Pitt argues, even if values were the types of things objects have, they do not appear to be empirically available to us.<sup>8</sup> When we examine a piece of technology, there do not seem to be any “value properties” represented to us visually (or otherwise). This is true both of the technology and the design documents corresponding to a piece of technology. If we cannot detect any value properties empirically, according to VNT, then there does not seem to be any reason to believe that they exist. As Pitt puts it, “how do we differentiate the height of the overpass from the depth of the roadbed in a principled fashion as a human value and not arbitrarily?”<sup>9</sup>

As the affordance theorist denies the central thesis of VNT, that technology does not embody values on its own, I will suggest that Pitt’s arguments for VNT are not as decisive as they might first appear. It should also be noted that the challenges posed against VNT can reasonably be extended to instrumentalism and the neutral relevance argument.

First, despite Pitt’s claim to the contrary, VNT is question begging. In “Is Technology Value-Neutral?,” Boaz Miller notes that in defining values as endorsements for certain states of

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<sup>7</sup> Pitt, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Pitt, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Pitt, 95.

affairs, Pitt begs the question by making values the kinds of things that technology cannot have by definition.<sup>10</sup> Miller, in contrast, defines a value as:

... anything that serves as a basis for discriminating between different states of affairs and ranking some of them higher than others with respect to how much they are desired or cared about or how the personal, social, natural, or cosmic order ought to be.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, values may or may not be the kinds of things that are embedded in objects.

That is to say, this view allows Miller to stay neutral on the metaphysical status of values.

Second, VNT incorrectly assumes that all values are motivational. Miller notes that there does not seem to be any reason to equate values with a kind of motivation or endorsement. People often value things, such as sports or skillful archery, without ever having any desire to engage in the activity. In Miller's words, "adhering to a value is consistent with mere passive appreciation without any motivation to act."<sup>12</sup>

Third, it seems that designers do, at least sometimes, deliberately seek to embed values in technological artifacts. As Miller notes, in some cases, design documents will explicitly state the values that are meant to be embedded in the artifact. Flanagan, Howe, and Nissenbaum give the example of a patient record system in a hospital.<sup>13</sup> As patient records are typically confidential, system designers would understand that privacy is of high importance when designing the hospital system. As such, the designers would likely explicitly state their privacy concerns in

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<sup>10</sup> Boaz Miller, "Is Technology Value-Neutral?," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 46, no. 1 (2021): 59.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Flanagan, Daniel C. Howe, and Helen Nissenbaum, "Embodying Values in Technology: Theory and Practice," in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, ed. J. van den Hoven and J. Weckert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 325.

design documents – that is, the design documents would explicitly demonstrate that this piece of technology is one that embodies privacy.

Fourth, and most notably, Miller notes that there appear to be technological artifacts which, at least *prima facie*, appear to exhibit morally questionable features. For example, certain movies might embody capitalist ideals by way of their glorification of consumerism and wealth, and certain video games might embody sexist stereotypes by way of their portrayal of women. An extreme but paradigmatic case of the latter can be seen when one considers the 2006 rape simulation video game *RapeLay*. In this game, the player controls a man who stalks three women through a subway station.<sup>14</sup> Through the course of the game, the player can grope, molest, and eventually rape all three of the women. The victims, one of which is in high school, seem to enjoy the sex even though it is forced.

Now it would surely appear that *RapeLay* is, among other things, morally appalling. However, Pitt cannot make that claim. On Pitt's view, we would need to claim that *RapeLay* embodied no moral values. That is, assigning any morally charged predicates to *RapeLay* would be a mistake. But that does not seem correct. I take it that most people would learn of *RapeLay* and be disgusted. They may even demand that such a game be banned from being produced and distributed to consumers. This seems sensible, and I take it that cases such as *RapeLay* and Luckey's VR headset provide good reason to believe that artifacts can and do embody moral values beyond their use cases.

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, "RapeLay and the Return of the Sex Wars in Japan," *Porn Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 105.

Other theorists, such as Ibo van de Poel and Peter Kroes also give compelling counterarguments to Pitt's thesis. Most notably, van de Poel and Kroes argue that sea dikes, for example, embody safety simply because they were designed for safety. They write:

The technical function of a sea dike is to prevent the hinterland from flooding... Protecting the hinterland from flooding is instrumental to a moral value like the safety of the inhabitants of the hinterland, which we consider to be a final value. The point is not that sea dikes can be used to achieve safety but that achieving safety is part of their function. This is witnessed by the fact that design requirements, and in fact legal norms, and design approaches are based on the value of safety... Dikes are thus designed for safety.<sup>15</sup>

This example demonstrates that, as functional objects, artifacts may be designed such that their function is inseparable from the value that they embody. In contrast, a knife's function is to cut. Cutting is instrumental to making food, and making food is instrumental to some final value of good health. In this way, knives are instrumental to good health, but their function is not directly tied to the maintenance of good health.

Thus, from what has been considered above, I take it that we have good reason to reject the view that technology does not embody moral values. Considerations such as the creation of 'safe' artifacts, as well as the existence of morally problematic artifacts should illuminate the central issues that the affordance theorist aims to explain.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibo van de Poel and Peter Kroes, "Can Technology Embody Values?," in *The Moral Status of Technical Artefacts*, ed. Peter Kroes and Peter-Paul Verbeek (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 114.

### III. AFFORDANCE THEORY OF EMBEDDED VALUES

Klenk summarizes his affordance theory of embodied values as the following:

1. Artefacts embody affordances.
2. Affordances are response-dependent properties.
3. So, artefacts embody response-dependent properties. (from 1, 2)
4. Response-dependent properties are values.
5. Therefore, artefacts embody values. (from 3, 4)<sup>16</sup>

Affordances, a term coined by James Gibson in 1979, refer to possibilities for action. As Gibson puts it, “the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.”<sup>17</sup> Affordances were first theorized as a new tool to understand animal perception; animals do not perceive objects as such and passively interpret how they can interact with objects. Rather, they perceive the possibilities for action directly. For example, when a monkey perceives a tree, it is *directly* perceiving affordances such as its ‘climb-ability.’ In the case of humans, we directly perceive a chair’s ‘sit-ability,’ which is a real affordance in the object. Notably, the affordances of an object both depend upon the physical/functional structure of the object and the physical capacities of the subject interacting with the object.

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<sup>16</sup> Klenk, “How do Technological Artefacts Embody Moral Values?,” 535.

<sup>17</sup> James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 119.

Klenk differs from Gibson by reframing affordances as response-dependent properties, allowing Klenk to conceive of affordances as objective features of objects while maintaining the fact that affordances are context sensitive. To illustrate response-dependent properties, Klenk gives the example of something being red:

“When something red is defined by looking red to normal observers in normal circumstances, then that means that in normal circumstances, normal observers will experience the object as red. It does not entail, however, that the thing looking red is what makes the thing red.”

As response-dependent properties, affordances function as conditional statements. The kill-ability of a gun may be understood as “if organism O interacted with artifact x at time t under background conditions C and engaged in behavior A, where A involves x, then x would bear A as an affordance.” It is this understanding of affordances that allows for them to be objective properties. That is, they do not depend upon the presence of humans to exist. In other words, since an affordance would read something like “*if* a human interacted with artifact x...,” then a human need not actually be present for the affordance to exist. If affordances were dependent upon perception of humans, then we may have reason to doubt their objectivity.

Rather than arguing that response-dependent properties are values, Klenk argues that, at least some, response-dependent properties are *valuable*. There are *prima facie* reasons to value things that contribute to or enable desirable behavior or outcomes. For instance, an apple’s tastiness might be instrumentally valuable to good health, but it may be finally valuable as well.

Klenk writes,

An artefact may be part of the enabling conditions... for certain actions or events, given a set of contextual factors (including the subject’s properties). This enabling can be on instrumental and final value. A lazy chair’s inviting cushions make it instrumentally valuable to happiness. At the same time, the enabling of comfort may be a final value...



Thus, to identify the value of an artefact, we have to ask what actions or events it affords and what their value is.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the value of an artifact, under this view comes from the kinds of affordances a given object possesses. If an artifact makes positive behavior more likely (e.g., an x-ray machine allows one to diagnose patients better), then that artifact is of positive value. Conversely, if an artifact makes negative behavior (or outcomes) more likely (e.g., a nuclear bomb allows for more efficient killing), then the artifact is of negative value.

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Klenk, "How Do Technological Artefacts Embody Moral Values?," 539.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF RELEVANT AFFORDANCES

On Klenk's theory, artifacts offer a wide range of possible affordances, and it is not immediately clear which affordances are the most relevant to identifying an embedded value. At the same time, the moral evaluation of an artifact depends upon identifying those affordances that are relevant to such an assessment. Klenk himself alludes to this problem when he speaks of the kill-ability of a spoon.<sup>19</sup> Theoretically, a spoon *could* be used to kill, but is this relevant in determining the moral value of a spoon? Presumably not. To extend this problem further, a spoon also affords grasping, lifting, throwing, blocking small projectiles, shoveling, and stabbing, among many other things.

Klenk suggests that we employ a 'normalcy' standard to identify the morally relevant affordances offered by an artifact. Therefore, a spoon's "kill-ability" is irrelevant because people do not normally use spoons to kill people. If they did, this affordance would become relevant. Notably, this means that, for Klenk, the moral value of an artifact depends upon a specifiable set of affordances and nothing else.

What are "normal conditions?" Klenk suggests that a tacit understanding may suffice. This tacit understanding is framed using three questions:

1. How many people will have the ability to do p, given artifact x?

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<sup>19</sup> Klenk, 541.

2. How likely will it be that in normal circumstances, these people will succeed at doing p?
3. How normal are the circumstances in which this happens?<sup>20</sup>

The first two questions seem to present “normalcy” as a matter of statistical regularity. That is to say, something is more normal when more people do or can do it. The first question specifies the ‘normal’ character of the people using the artifact. The second question connects the likely outcome of an artifact’s use to the artifact itself. The third question, however, seems to highlight normalcy as a matter of background probability. In other words, circumstances become more normal depending on how probable it is for them to occur. For the sake of this discussion, I will take normalcy to mean normal in the sense alluded to by the first two questions. That is, I will take something to be more normal when more people successfully do it.

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<sup>20</sup> Klenk, 541.

## V. THE LIMITS OF ‘NORMAL’ AFFORDANCES

Affordance theory offers a useful way to locate value in our account of an artifact. It, however, presents a practical challenge by recognizing too many possible affordances. As a result, we must offer an account of how to determine which affordances are relevant to assessing the moral status of an object or technology. Klenk has proposed using a normalcy criterion to select relevant or salient affordances, but this approach has two important limitations.

First, despite suggesting that the affordance approach can give us an objective account of the values that are embedded in a given artifact or technology, it turns out that the normalcy standard is objectionably relativistic. Geographic, cultural, and historical factors all exert meaningful influence on what counts as normal. Since embedded values depend upon normally solicited affordances, when ‘normal’ changes, so do the embedded value(s). This would suggest that the value of an artifact can change drastically depending upon where you are in the world (or when in time you happen to be). For example, the value embedded in artifact x might differ depending on if the artifact is in Beijing or Toronto because the standards of normalcy are not the same between cities. At best, Klenk’s theory only seems to be able to provide an account of embedded value relative to a particular point in culture and history.

Consider a nuclear weapon. When I judge that nuclear weapons are “bad,” I am not claiming that nuclear weapons are merely bad right now. Rather, I am presumably claiming that nuclear weapons are objectively bad for humanity (and perhaps the planet). The use of a nuclear

weapon would be bad for humans regardless of where (or when) you reside on the planet. The value here does not seem to depend in any meaningful way upon normalcy.

Further, in at least some cases, the affordances tracked using a normalcy criterion may not be the morally salient affordances (the affordances that really matter to making moral assessments of technology). Ironically, under a standard of normalcy, we might be led to believe that nuclear warheads embody a positive value. After all, few people have access to them, and it is incredibly abnormal for nuclear warheads to be used. In fact, for the people alive today and the warheads that currently exist, a more plausible account of what is normal would see that nuclear weapons act as deterrents to war. Since affording the ability to prevent (nuclear) war would appear to be good, nuclear warheads would embody a positive moral value (perhaps some value relating to the protection of life).

But this seems mistaken. The most morally salient feature of such devices – their capacity for harm – is ignored. Arguably, it would seem that a world in which nuclear weapons had never been invented would be better (morally speaking) than one in which nuclear weapons exist in abundance. This suggests that a normalcy standard is leaving something out; it is not picking up on all the morally relevant features of affordances.

## VI. MORAL FRAMEWORK FIRST

On the assumption that artifacts and technologies can and do embed moral values, we need an account of how to assess which artifacts embed which values. So far, I have suggested that an affordance approach provides a plausible solution to this problem. Such an approach requires that we at least sketch an account to identify which affordances matter to such an assessment. Klenk's normalcy approach is a good starting point but is limited by the relativity of what counts as normal and by the fact that, for at least some cases, a normal affordance view yields intuitively incorrect judgment.

The problem is that we need a principled way to identify which affordances are morally relevant. To remedy the limits of Klenk's approach, I propose that we employ existing moral frameworks to act as the primary discriminatory tool in identifying the relevant subset of affordances which determine the embedded value of an artifact.<sup>21</sup> One of the many functions of moral frameworks is that they posit features of actions which illuminate an action or situation's moral character.

If we attend to ordinary moral judgments, we often start with a sense of what matters from a moral standpoint. For instance, the mere act of grasping a cup or getting dressed is hardly worth moral evaluation under any moral framework. However, for a Kantian for example, any act exhibiting features of being a duty (e.g, that bears upon the respecting of humanity) is a morally

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<sup>21</sup> A similar approach to this has been taken by Mark Timmons in "Decision Procedures, Moral Criteria, and the Problem of Relevant Descriptions in Kant's Ethics," in which Timmons argues that certain formulations of the categorical imperative act as theories of moral relevance rather than as decision procedures.

relevant action. The same is true for a consequentialist outlook; actions that bear upon pleasure/suffering or desire (or preference) satisfaction stand out as morally relevant. This does not tell us what the value of the action is, it merely tells us that the action is one worthy of moral assessment. The same is true of affordances. Whenever an artifact or technology affords actions that exhibit features that a moral framework would deem to be morally relevant, then that set of affordances is relevant for the moral evaluation of an artifact *for that framework*.

To illustrate this idea further, consider an example regarding the moral relevance of animals. In “Against the Moral Standing of Animals,” Peter Carruthers endorses a form of contractarianism which argues that animals do not have moral standing.<sup>22</sup> Roughly, the view is this. Moral rules are agreed upon by rational agents for rational agents behind a veil of ignorance. Since animals are not rational agents, they cannot assent to the moral rules decided upon behind the veil of ignorance. Thus, animals have no direct moral standing.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Peter Singer famously argues in favor of a utilitarian approach to animal rights in which he argues that animals are worthy of moral consideration since they, like humans, can suffer.<sup>24</sup> The difference in these moral frameworks is presumably apparent: they both deal with the moral status of animals. However, it should be noted just how these two moral frameworks are picking out which human actions are worthy of moral assessment. In the case of Carruthers’ contractarianism, when an action is directed at some animal (and that action does not reveal anything about the actor’s moral character), that action is morally irrelevant – it is not an action

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Carruthers, *Against the Moral Standing of Animals*, ed. Christopher W. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 278.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that Carruthers does argue that actions directed at animals are worthy of moral judgement only when it can be shown that the action reveals something negative about the actor’s moral character (e.g., harming a cat shows one’s cruelty).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (New York: New York Review, 1975), 1.

that is worthy of moral assessment. For Singer's utilitarianism, however, any action directed at an animal *is* morally relevant. Whenever an action affects suffering in any way, it is a morally relevant action under Singer's framework. Therefore, these two moral frameworks are picking out different morally relevant actions. Since these frameworks are picking out different features of actions for moral relevance, they will similarly deem different affordances relevant. For Singer, any affordance that enables behavior directed at animals will be highly relevant. For Carruthers, the opposite is true – any affordance that is directed at animals will be less relevant.<sup>25</sup>

Call this approach Moral Framework First, or MFF. Under MFF, we are better equipped to deal with the problems that face Klenk's normalcy approach. Under MFF, embedded values supervene on those affordances that are most relevant to a moral framework, so the embedded value stays constant over time and across space. An embedded value will only ever change when either the moral theory changes which actions are morally relevant or when the moral theory changes the judgment of the relevant affordances. Further, we are better equipped to explain how nuclear warheads embody a negative moral value. Since they afford killing to an extreme degree, and the act of killing is typically relevant under most moral frameworks, the kill-ability of nuclear weapons is an affordance that an embedded value will likely supervene upon. Further, it

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<sup>25</sup> It may be argued here that deployment of a utilitarian framework will not free us from our relativistic concerns noted earlier in this paper. That is to say, whether an artifact is judged as 'good' or 'bad' under a utilitarian framework will *also* depend on cultural and historical factors. In the case of the nuclear bomb example presented above, a utilitarian framework might rule that the use of nuclear weapons in 1945 was 'good,' while the use of nuclear weapons today is 'bad.'

My response to this concern is two-fold. First, we can answer this concern by simply saying that, under this view, the moral judgement of artifacts only becomes as relativistic as the moral framework allows. If it turns out that utilitarianism faces the problem of being relativistic, then that is a problem which faces utilitarianism, not my view. Thus, this problem becomes one which the utilitarian must solve (which would be a much larger project). Second, and more importantly, what changes in the case of utilitarianist moral judgements is not which affordances are relevant. Rather, it is the judgement *of* those affordances which differs. In the case of nuclear weapons, the affordances most relevant in judging the artifact are the same today as they were in 1945. The difference lies in *how* those affordances were judged. In short, if an affordance bears the marker of affecting overall human satisfaction, then it will *always* bear that marker. The judgement of that affordance may change without changing the fact that it is relevant for judgement. Thank you to Bambi Robinson for this thoughtful concern.



should be noted that MFF benefits from the fact that it makes explicit reference to moral frameworks while Klenk's view does not. Even in the process of judging affordances, Klenk never directly refers to moral frameworks. Instead, Klenk loosely speaks of moral judgements when he writes:

So, initially, I would say that the fact that the AK47 in space still affords to kill... it has whatever value we bestow on the enabling of killing...<sup>26</sup>

Using MFF, we can make explicit use of moral frameworks both for identifying the most relevant affordances that an embedded value supervenes upon, and consistently judging those affordances. The objectional relativity of normalcy and the tendency of normalcy theory to make bad calls about rare but morally significant artifacts (e.g., nuclear weapons) are both avoided by doing what comes naturally in moral judgement: looking to our moral framework first.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Klenk, "How Do Technological Artefacts Embody Moral Values?," 541.

<sup>27</sup> Note as well that this proposal is not meant to suggest that normalcy plays no role in finding the subset of relevant affordances. As noted above, a spoon embodies some "kill-ability" since it could, in theory, be used as a weapon. Under MFF, we might be led to believe that a spoon's "kill-ability" should be relevant when identifying its embedded value since killing is typically a morally relevant action. The issue here is that I am not recommending that moral frameworks act as the only way to determine which affordances an embedded value should supervene on. Rather, I argue that moral frameworks should be the primary tool, and thus do the bulk of the work. Once the affordances most relevant to a moral theory have been noted, we may wish to narrow down the subset even further using other criteria. For example, Fabio Tollen notes that affordances might be graded depending on "force," or how phenomenologically inviting an affordance seems to us. By this standard, an affordance becomes more relevant depending upon how inviting the affordance is. Since an AK47 is designed to be extremely lethal while a small handgun is not, an AK47's "kill-ability" is much more inviting to subjects – that is to say, there is a much larger phenomenological draw to act upon the "kill-ability" of an AK47 over a small handgun. After a moral framework has done most of the work in identifying relevant affordances for identifying an embodied value, we might then wish to judge those artifacts according to their "phenomenological force" to narrow the set down even further. Moral frameworks, in contrast with a standard of normalcy, are merely proposed to do the bulk of the work in identifying which affordances are most relevant to the identifying the moral value embedded in an object.

## VII. THE IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURE

Before concluding this essay, it would serve well to see what the procedure for identifying an embedded value might look like using MFF. For this discussion, we will begin by taking a general form of virtue ethics as our starting point. Briefly, virtue ethics is a normative ethical theory that emphasizes the cultivation of one's moral character.<sup>28</sup> This cultivation is often achieved through habitual acts in accordance with virtues – that is, one's moral character is cultivated when they act in ways that reflect honesty, compassion, courage, etc. Conversely, one's moral character is harmed when they act in accordance with vices. Vices include character traits such as arrogance, malice, hatefulness, and carelessness. Note, however, the importance of habituation in accordance with virtues under this framework. Virtue ethics typically emphasizes the importance of the moral character of the *agent*, but agents do not exist in isolation.

Externalities such as friends, parents, social environments, and, most notably, objects will have an impact on an agent's willingness and ability to act in accordance with virtue. Thus, when judging an artifact, the morally relevant affordances will be those affordances which contribute to the habituation of virtues and vices. When an artifact affords (or enables) virtuous behavior, we may call it 'good.' When an artifact affords (or enables) vicious behavior, we may call it 'bad.'

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<sup>28</sup> This characterization of the affordance selection process is a rough and brief one. A larger, more detailed project would likely demonstrate the impact that artifact usage has on one's moral habituation in more detail, among many other things.

So, let us take a ladder for example. We might begin by asking ourselves, “does this artifact possess any affordances which enable actions that bear the mark of being either virtuous or vicious?” A close examination of the ladder would appear to reveal no sorts of affordances that fit this description. A ladder obviously affords climbing, but it also possesses affordances such as grasp-ability, carry-ability, jumping-off-of-ability, and kick-ability (if one is so inclined). But since none of these acts exhibit features of being virtuous or vicious, we can disregard them as they are irrelevant. Thus, since ladders do not appear to afford any morally relevant behavior, we can reasonably conclude that ladders do not embody any moral values under a virtue ethics framework.

Now let us return to the example of *RapeLay* using the same framework. We once again ask ourselves, “does *RapeLay* possess any affordances which enable actions that bear the mark of being either virtuous or vicious?” For *RapeLay*, we would almost certainly be required to answer in the affirmative. *RapeLay* possess some affordance which enables vicious behavior. That is to say, *RapeLay*’s design and structure is such that it enables its users to engage in virtual rape, molestation, and stalking. Further, *RapeLay* does not seem to exhibit any affordances which enable virtuous behavior. Thus, since we can demonstrate that *RapeLay* enables vicious behavior, we can conclude that *RapeLay* embodies a negative moral value under a virtue ethics framework.

The identification of an embedded value using MFF ought to be clear by this point. We could go on to say that an artifact such as a virtual pet would likely embody a positive moral value under a virtue ethics framework since it promotes the habituation of virtues like care and empathy. Regardless, the method is this. We begin with a moral framework and ask ourselves which affordances, if any, enable morally relevant behavior. Once those affordances have been

identified, we employ the moral framework once more to judge the value of the enabled behavior. Again, different frameworks will arrive at different embodied values. This is by design. It explains why people might have differing opinions about an embedded value of an artifact – they are applying different frameworks in the identification process (or they have disagreements about how a moral theory functions). If this still appears to be too relativistic, this theory is no more relativistic than the entirety of normative ethics. In other words, if we wish to find *the* embedded value of an artifact, we must first settle the question as to what *the* correct normative framework is. However, this is the entire purpose of normative ethics.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

I began this paper by briefly outlining Klenk's affordance theory of value embedding. By demonstrating that an artifact's affordances are valuable, Klenk is able to argue that artifacts themselves embody moral values. I then noted a major problem with Klenk's theory: artifacts embody far too many affordances to practically pay attention to. I explained how Klenk's solution to the overabundance of affordances is to pay attention to those affordances which are most normally solicited. I then explained two worries about Klenk's approach: normalcy makes embedded values too relativistic, and normalcy fails to capture all morally relevant affordances. I then recommended that Klenk's affordance theory be slightly altered by using moral frameworks as the primary tool in determining the most relevant affordances to an embedded moral value. This improves the affordance theory as it allows for embedded values to stay constant over time and space and it better explains our intuitions regarding abnormal use of artifacts such as nuclear weapons.

More work should be done on further strengthening Klenk's view. As it stands currently, it is unclear why, under the Klenk's view, artifacts are ontologically unique objects worthy of moral judgment. Further, more work ought to be done in explaining the metaphysical underpinnings of the "embodiment" relation between artifacts and values.

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