Ethereal Ethics

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In certain respects, ethics can be regarded like the air that we breathe: they surround us, whether recognised or not, influencing our decisions, relationships, and institutions. In an upcoming book chapter (Huggett, forthcoming a), I perhaps rather boldly argue that there is no such thing as a coherent digital ethics in archaeology. I'm not suggesting that digital archaeologists are acting unethically. It's more that digital ethics have a somewhat ethereal quality and are rarely made explicit, let alone comprehensively debated, and, where they are discussed (e.g., Colley 2015; Dennis 2020), this is often at a human rather than technological level (see the Computer Applications in Archaeology ethics policy, for instance). The absence of a more expansive digital ethics could lead us to over-estimate our ethical performance and that of our technologies, and make us blind to our – and their – ethical failings.

Ethical principles are a part of both everyday life and archaeological practice. They are assimilated through education, training, and practical experience, but they do not require to be written down to govern what passes as normative behaviour. The absence of a codified ethics therefore cannot be used to infer a lack of ethics although codification can provide guidance and reassurance. However, ethical expectations are not universal and differences between cultures and contexts can result in misunderstanding and offence. Nor is there a uniform strategy to ethics, as is demonstrated by the number of different approaches to ethics. For instance, utilitarian ethics emphasise the consequences of actions, whereas deontological approaches are concerned with duties and rules of behaviour, while virtue ethics emphasise the moral characteristics of individuals and groups rather than their specific actions. The reasoning involved in arriving at an ethical determination therefore can be quite different and may be more or less helpful in different circumstances. Consequently, Beever *et al*. (2020, pp. 37–39), for example, propose a pluralistic approach which considers the perspective of multiple ethical theories for a more practical, robust, and inclusive approach to

decision-making. In archaeology, Carman (2024, p. 176) and González-Ruibal (2018, p. 355), for example, similarly propose pragmatic rather than instrumental approaches to ethics.

Archaeological approaches to ethics have developed over many years but accelerated since the mid-1980s because of increasing concerns about the professionalisation of archaeology together with questions of stewardship, ownership, and heritage protection. This is reflected in the growth in number of edited volumes and research papers on ethics (Moshenska & González-Ruibal, 2015, p. 4). However, none of these volumes make any refererence to digital ethics apart from one which includes Colley's (2015) early discussion, while the introduction to the recent ASOR publication (Costello & Lepinski, 2024) specifically regrets the absence of a chapter on digital ethics.

Furthermore, when digital ethics are discussed in archaeology they are frequently cast quite narrowly with a focus on professional behaviour and a particular emphasis on data stewardship: its preservation, accessibility and ownership. But digital ethics extend beyond this relatively limited perspective. While they certainly entail ***information and data*** practices (e.g., data creation, recording, curation, processing, dissemination), they are also concerned with ***algorithms*** (e.g., machine learning, artificial agents, artificial intelligence), and with ***practices and infrastructures*** (e.g., programming, hacking, standards) (Floridi *et al.*, 2019, p. 11). The landscape of digital ethics may equally be characterised in other ways. For instance, Belliger & Krieger (2021, pp. 175–76) define it in technological terms: ethical robotics, ethical AI, data ethics, algorithmic ethics, and so on. Alternatively, Beever *et al.* (2020, p. 65ff) characterise digital ethics in terms of the distributed nature of the digital, its algorithms and programmability, and its embeddedness. ***Distributedness*** relates to the reproducibility and transferability of digital information which raises ethical issues surrounding authenticity, replication, repurposing, access, ownership, and privacy, for example (Beever *et al.*, 2020, pp. 65-78). ***Algorithms and programmability*** refer to software design, development, and implementation, raising ethical issues in terms of both code and use including bias, error, trust and reliance, black boxing of process, and agency, for example (Beever *et al.*, 2020, pp. 80-102). ***Embeddedness*** concerns ethical questions of influence, trust, identity, values, privacy and anonymity in the relationships between people and digital technologies (Beever *et al*., 2020, pp. 105-125).

A variant of Floridi *et al*. (2019, p.11) is to consider digital ethics simply in terms of ***data*** (characteristic of archaeological digital ethics to date), ***devices*** (software and hardware, concerned with questions of bias, function, practice, agency, transparency, etc.), and ***infrastructures*** (standards, power, control, values, policies, etc.). This is the approach I take in a discussion of trust in digital archaeology (Huggett, forthcoming b), for instance. On the other hand, Belliger and Krieger (2021, p. 243) suggest that digital ethics may be approached through the affordances of the digital, which is the model I adopt in a discussion of digital ethics in archaeology (Huggett, forthcoming a). For obvious reasons I'm not going to encroach on the ground covered in those two chapters which are currently sitting with their publishers, but it's worth considering some of the implications of this discussion so far.

Since writing that chapter on digital ethics, I've been thinking more about the value or otherwise of ethics codification. If archaeological digital ethics are poorly defined and understood, would they not benefit from the effort of formalising them in some way? It's not a new question and the issue of codification has seen some debate amongst archaeologists over the years. However, ethical codes

are seen to have establishment values embedded within them (Tarlow, 2001, p. 246), and the very act of defining ethical principles can seem to freeze reflexivity and flexibility (Gnecco, 2015, p. 1), and risks closing down debate (Meskell & Pels, 2005, p. 2). Hamilakis (2016, pp. 21–22) also identifies a range of criticisms regarding the association of codification with Western managerial culture, with a focus on individual moral autonomy and the attempt to create universal ethical principles. Indeed, many commentators observe that ethics are contextual, dependent on circumstances, and hence cannot (or should not) be universalised (e.g., Tarlow, 2001, p. 248; Wylie, 2003, p. 12; Gnecco, 2015, p. 15; Carman, 2024, pp. 175–76; and see Colley, 2015, p. 16 for a specifically digital perspective). Furthermore, ethics should always be in-the-making: constantly revised and renegotiated to ensure they remain relevant to contemporary concerns (e.g., Tarlow, 2001, p. 255; Wylie, 2003, pp. 13–13; Tarlow & Pluciennik, 2007, p. 125; Hamilakis, 2016, p. 22; González-Ruibal, 2018, pp. 354–55).

In the chapter, I'm doubtful of the benefits of codification, partly because I've long been instinctively resistant to codification and standardisation, but also in agreement with the rather negative perspectives summarised above. In particular, the always-in-the-making nature of ethics, and especially the speed of technological change that digital ethics would need to somehow capture, seems to militate against their codification. But I recently came across a paper by Vincent and Hooper (2025) which makes me wonder if there's a middle course. They argue for two schemas of research integrity:

> … the 'thick' ethos embodied by deeply engaged and ethically reflective researchers, and the 'thin' rules, prohibitions, metrics, and incentives by which we communicate, assess, and enforce research integrity across broad and diverse contexts. (Vincent & Hooper, 2025, p. 2).

In particular, they identify what they call a "deontic shift" in which the thick values become thin values through codification – as professionals operating from a 'thick' perspective codify those values for application by a wider, more diverse audience (Vincent & Hooper, 2025, pp. 5–6). They argue that this process is desirable, since

> The ethos of passionate and ethical researchers cannot be transmitted wholesale to the wider research community; to render it into a useful form, we need to decontextualise it and codify it in the language of rules about what is desirable, permissible, impermissible, and obligatory. (Vincent & Hooper, 2025, p. 7).

Ultimately, the aim is for the thin values – the codified values – to inculcate thick behaviours; for instance, that students will develop thick values though adopting the thin values. They identify three problems: mistaking thin values as thick values and hence becoming an end in themselves; mistaking proxies for ethical behaviour for the values themselves (for instance, where metrics as a proxy for quality take on a life of their own); and where the rewards for ethical behaviour or penalties for unethical behaviour become more significant than the behaviour itself (Vincent & Hooper, 2025, pp. 7–13). They talk of an "essential tension" between thick and thin ethos, and emphasise the importance of ongoing reflection (Vincent & Hooper, 2025, p. 17)

I'm unsure whether this resolves the codification challenge of digital ethics – emphasising the positive benefits of the tension between thick and thin ethics, and the need for constant reflection is relatively easy to say but rather more difficult to practise, and experience suggests that there is always a tendency to fossilise rather than retain flexibility and revisit through time. It also presumes there is an agreed body of ethics in the first place. But the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' is helpful in considering ethical codification, and maybe when I have been thinking about digital ethics I have tended to mix the two, whereas they may be better held separate. Perhaps there are a series of broad principles which can be identified and which are by their nature largely unchanging, and a set of more specific ethical statements which are related to the technologies and which we might consequently expect to change more frequently. Be that as it may, we need to have a comprehensive debate about digital ethics in archaeology in the first place. In the end, though, the benefits may lie more in the process of reflection and characterisation entailed in the attempt to identify the full range of archaeological digital ethics rather than in any final set of definitions, however ethereal they might turn out to be.

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