

# **Value Sensitive Design & the Virtues**

**A presentation by Naomi Jacobs**

New research project together  
with prof. Barbro Fröding from  
KTH Royal Institute of  
Technology, Stockholm.



# Ethics & Technology...

... “are connected because technologies invite or *afford* specific patterns of thought, behaviour, and valuing”

-Shannon Vallor (2016 *Technology and the Virtues*)

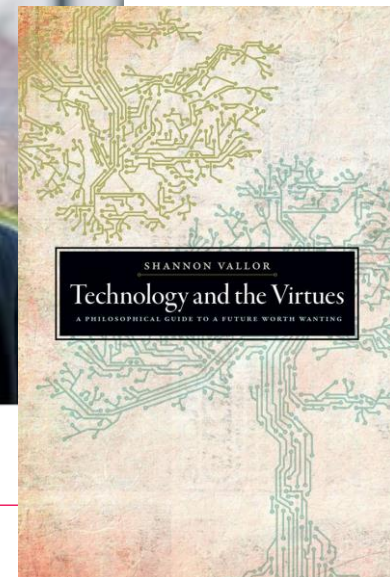


# Ethics & Technology...

“Decisions about how to live well- that is, about *ethics*- are not simply moral choices.

They are ***technomoral*** choices”

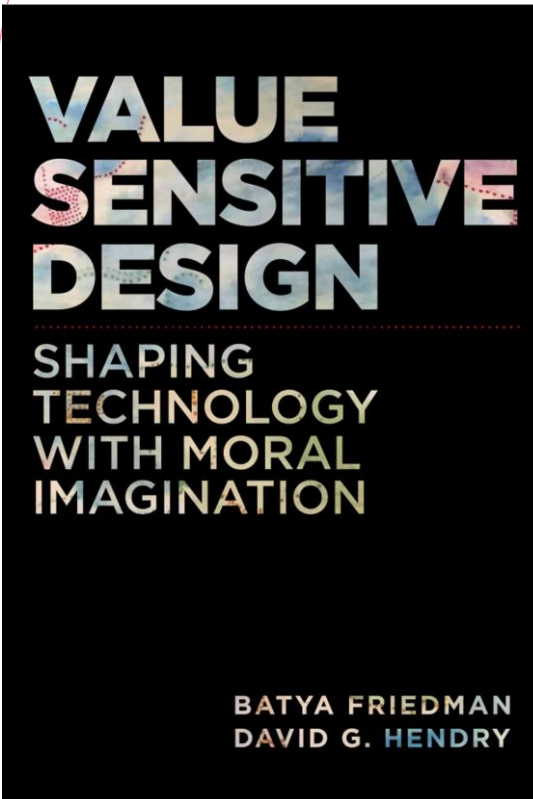
-Shannon Vallor (2016 *Technology and the Virtues*)



# Value Sensitive Design

“Provides theory, method, and practice to account for human values in a principled and systematic manner throughout the technical design process.”

-Batya Friedman & David Hendry (2019 *Value Sensitive Design, shaping technology with moral imagination*)

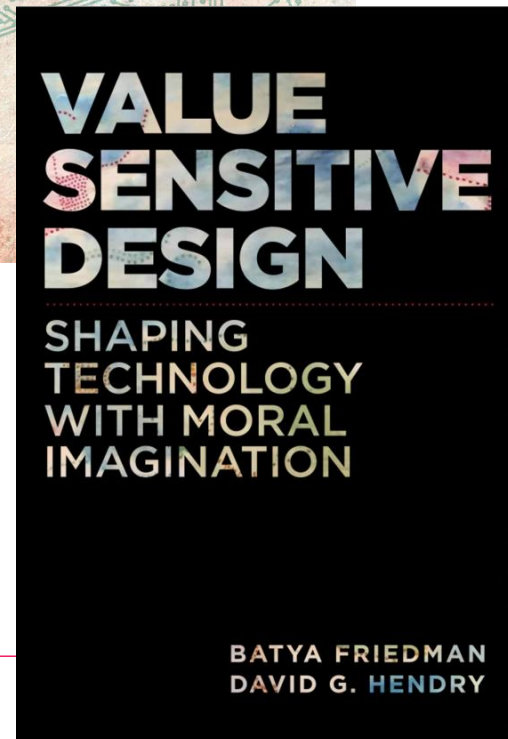
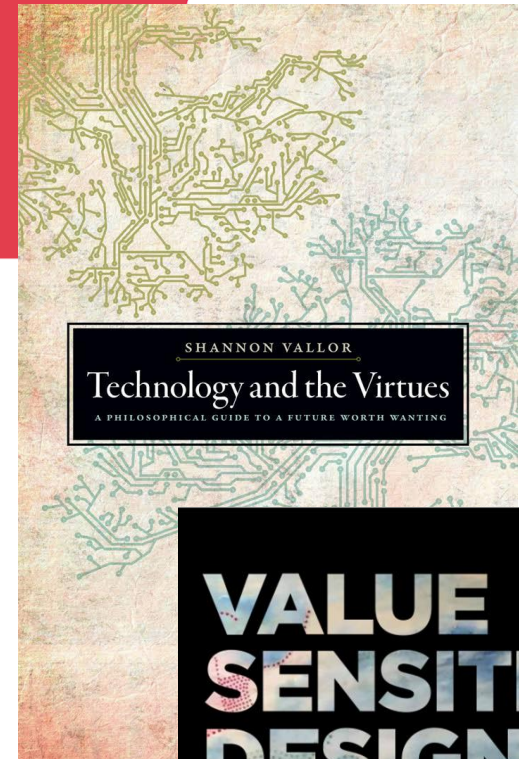


# Exploring...

To inform VSD with a contemporary account of Virtue Ethics

Why?

VSD takes the design of technological artifacts and systems as the primary focus of intervention, while virtue ethics has *practice* as its aim.



# VSD & Virtue Ethics

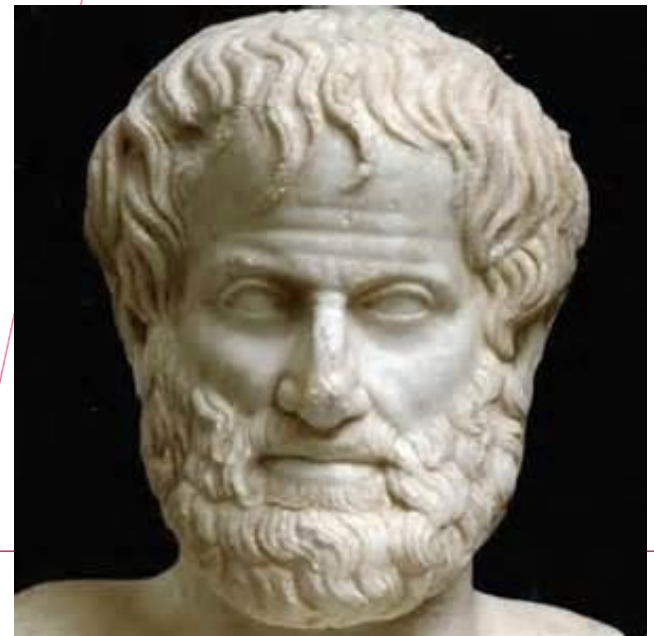
Virtue ethics: the point of intervention is the *technical practice* in which humans and technologies interact. - Wessel Reijers & Bert Gordijn (2019) 'Moving from value sensitive design to virtuous practice design'

➤ Promising for engineering education?

# Virtue Ethics

"a way of thinking about the good life as achievable through specific moral traits and capacities that humans can actively cultivate in themselves" - Shannon Vallor (2016) p.10.

Virtue ethics has its roots in **Aristotelian**, as well as Confucian and Buddhist ethics.





# Virtue Ethics

**Moral virtues:** states of a person's *character* such as honesty, courage, moderation, and patience that promote their possessor's reliable performance of right or excellent actions.

Virtues of character are states that the person must **cultivate** in herself. - Shannon Vallor (2016) p.10.

# Virtue Ethics

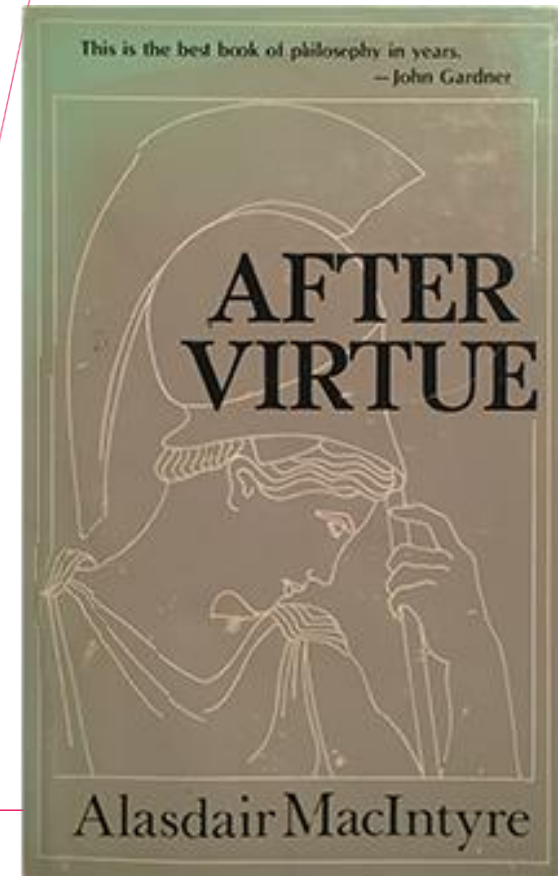
***Phronēsis***: practical wisdom



# Virtue Ethics: *Practice*

A given reference to a virtue is only meaningful:

1. Within the context of a recognized human *practice* dedicated to securing moral goods internal to that practice;
2. Where that practice is embedded in a coherent *narrative* concerning a whole human life;
3. Where that life is itself understood as participating in a shared moral *tradition* of seeking the highest good for a human being (MacIntyre *After Virtue* 1984).



# Virtue Ethics: *Practice*

A *practice* is "a socially established activity through which goods internal to that activity are realized"

*Internal* goods are produced purely from excelling with others in the practice.

*External* goods are e.g. a salary one is paid for doing such things.

# Virtue Ethics: *Practice*



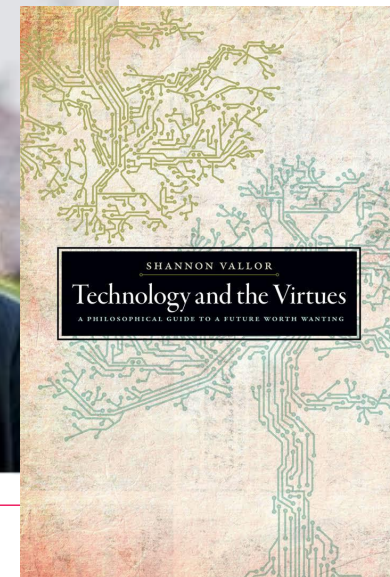
# Virtue Ethics: *Practice*

A **virtue** is: "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."

- Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* (1984) p.191.

# Technomoral Virtues

"As technosocial conditions change over time, our virtues will have to evolve with them." – Shannon Vallor (2016) *Technology and the Virtues*



# Technomoral Virtues

1. honesty
2. self-control
3. humility
4. justice
5. courage
6. empathy
7. care
8. civility
9. flexibility
10. perspective
11. magnanimity (moral leadership)
12. technomoral wisdom



# VSD & Technomoral Virtues

Reijers and Gordijn (2019): “Virtue ethics could be used as the basis for a method practicing ethics in responsible innovation that adopts merits of VSD concerning the responsiveness to the design process.

But instead of the design of a thing (a technological system or an artifact) it is the "design" or shaping of *a practice* that is at stake.”

# Practice

Practitioners of a practice explain their practices in the *narrative mode*: according to a story line.

To know whether and how a practice cultivates virtues, we need to inquire into the narratives that both reveal a particular conception of the good life, and the standards of excellence that govern the practice.

# *Practice: operating a military drone*



# Empirical investigation: narrative of the practice

"(1) Pilots are pretty good at compartmentalizing different aspects of life. They teach you that early and often.

(2) You get more attached than you would think from being in Nevada. For instance, you are trying to protect those guys on the ground.

(3) The other guys are exposing themselves, and that to me is still quite an honorable thing to do. So I feel like I am cheating them.

(4) Killing someone with an RPA is not different than with an F-15. It is easy to think that, to fall from that trap. We are well aware that if you push that button somebody can go away." -Reijers and Gordijn (2019) p.204.

# Standards of excellence (derived from narrative of the practice):

1. compartmentalizing different aspects of life;
2. engaging in combat to protect fellow soldiers;
3. taking responsibility for the decision to strike.

# Corresponding virtues:

Empathy

Justice

Courage

Flexibility

**Perspective**

# Virtue of perspective

Perspective – “compartmentalization”



# Prescription for technical practice:

Reijers and Gordijn (2019): “to educate military pilots to have a practical understanding of political philosophy.

This would incline a pilot to interpret decisions he would have to take in the moment (e.g. initiating or withdrawing from a strike to potentially save fellow combatants) in relation to an understanding of the good life in a political community.”



# Prescription for technical practice:

Through cultivating a sense of perspective through education, a pilot might consider withdrawing from striking and to conscientiously object in case the reason for engaging in a mission would conflict with his notion of the good life in a political community” (p.206).

## To conclude:

The focus of VSD & the virtues combined broadens the scope of concern and intervention.

Focus is on design/shaping technical practices, instead of design of technical artifacts or systems.

Prescriptions go beyond technology design, also including considerations of regulation, human development and education.

# Engineering education

Make future engineers not only aware of societal and ethical implications of their technology design.

Also teach them that being a 'good engineer' requires reflection & cultivation of technomoral virtues.

Result: not only (more) ethical technology design, but also (more) ethical technology practices.

**Thank you!**

**N.Jacobs@tue.nl**