The Existential Paradox of AI and Encryption

A Moral Dilemma

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Abstract

This essay explores the paradox of releasing advanced encryption and AI tools through the lens of Robber Zhi and Taoist principles, raising essential existential questions about morality, identity, and conflict. It emphasizes responsible governance and stewardship, moving away from the false binary of control versus freedom, in alignment with Floridi's philosophy. Collective responsibility for ethical management is society's intrinsic guide to the development of AI and encryption for the benefit of society.

As we advance into a world shaped by artificial intelligence (AI) and encryption technologies, we are confronted with a profound moral paradox. Some argue that releasing these tools freely benefits society by empowering good actors to innovate, protect privacy, and create progress. Others caution that the same tools, if left unchecked, could be weaponized by bad actors, leading to harm, inequality, and loss of control. For example, *strong encryption* helps innocent actors avoid being hacked or routinely data-mined, or could be weaponized by bad actors, enabling covert cybercrimes. This potential for dual use—both for protection and harm—highlights why the debate over freedom and control for these technologies matters.

However, framing this debate as a binary between control and freedom is a false dichotomy. As Luciano Floridi suggests, a more nuanced approach emphasizes **responsible governance and stewardship**. The real question is not about imposing strict control or allowing total freedom, but about how we can ethically guide the development and use of these technologies for the common good. This dilemma reflects a deeper tension in human nature and society, one that is echoed in ancient philosophical discourses, such as the Taoist parable of Robber Zhi from the Zhuangzi.

The Story of Robber Zhi: A Challenge to Conventional Morality

In the *Zhuangzi*, Robber Zhi defies the established moral codes of his time, questioning the arbitrary distinctions between good and evil imposed by those in power. His challenge suggests that societal definitions of morality often serve the interests of the powerful, rather than reflecting any inherent truth. In many ways, the modern debate over AI and encryption follows the same pattern. Should we tightly control these tools to curb threats to social constructs, or should we release them freely, trusting that virtue arises naturally?

Proponents of free access argue that withholding these technologies limits human potential, curbing progress and innovation. Yet, as Robber Zhi suggests, there may be hidden power dynamics at play: those in favor of restricting these tools may not only fear bad actors but may also be seeking to maintain control over the systems that define society. Rather than falling into this dichotomy of control versus freedom, we should focus on *how these tools can be governed and stewarded responsibly*, aligning their use with the public interest.

Floridi's Ethical Framework: Information as a Moral Entity

Luciano Floridi's The Ethics of Information (2013) reframes the debate by viewing information itself as an entity with intrinsic moral value. Floridi argues that the way we handle, share, and protect information affects not just individuals but the social fabric as a whole. He advocates for *informational ethics*, which emphasizes **collective responsibility** in the management of information technologies, such as AI and encryption. The focus shifts from control and freedom to **responsible stewardship**—the need to design, deploy, and regulate these systems in ways that promote societal well-being, transparency, and fairness.

Floridi's perspective challenges the notion that free access to AI and encryption is inherently good. Well-meaning individuals who support these systems may fail to consider the broader consequences of how information is processed and disseminated. This lack of awareness, as *Cathy O'Neil* illustrates in *Weapons of Math Destruction (2016)*, often leads to biased algorithms that amplify inequality, even when those designing or deploying these technologies intend to do good. The solution, therefore, is not strict control but **ongoing stewardship**, ensuring that technologies are continually evaluated, adapted, and held accountable.

Reevaluating Virtue: From Opposition to Synthesis

Robber Zhi's challenge to societal morality mirrors the tension in today's technological debates. Those who support restricting AI and encryption argue that control is necessary to prevent harm. Yet Taoist philosophy, which encourages alignment with the natural flow of life, suggests a different approach: rather than resisting the evolution of these tools, we should trust in their natural development.

However, both O'Neil and Floridi highlight the complexities of this perspective. AI systems, as O'Neil critiques, are not neutral forces of nature—they are shaped by human biases and power structures. Floridi reinforces this by showing that information is not just a resource to be used, but a morally significant entity. In this view, virtue in the context of AI and encryption lies not in opposing control and freedom, but in *how we design and govern these tools responsibly*. Are they being used to empower and protect, or to control and exploit?

Tranquility in a Digital World: Stewardship, Not Control

The Taoist concept of tranquility suggests that peace comes from aligning with the flow of the universe. The Art of Peace teaches us to resolve conflict not through resistance but through transformation and understanding. In the context of AI and encryption, this means recognizing the dual nature of these tools—their potential for both good and harm—and finding ways to *steward their use* toward ethical outcomes.

Floridi's ethical framework supports this idea, suggesting that tranquility in the digital age comes not from strict control or unrestricted freedom but from *responsible governance and transparency*. By fostering accountability and ensuring the ethical design and deployment of AI and encryption, we can cultivate a digital environment that promotes the common good. This aligns with both Taoist principles and modern ethical thinking, urging us to move beyond the false binary of control versus freedom and toward a future of shared responsibility.

Conclusion: Toward Responsible Stewardship

The debate over AI and encryption reflects a deeper existential paradox that goes beyond simple concerns about good and bad actors. As Robber Zhi questions conventional morality, Luciano Floridi and Cathy O'Neil compel us to rethink the very foundations of technology's impact on society. Floridi's call for responsible informational ethics, combined with O'Neil's exposure of systemic biases in AI, challenges the assumption that technology is neutral or inherently beneficial.

In navigating this paradox, we must move beyond the binary of control versus freedom. Instead, the focus should be on **responsible governance and stewardship**—ensuring that AI and encryption technologies are designed, deployed, and managed in ways that promote fairness, transparency, and societal well-being. Just as Robber Zhi forces us to reconsider the nature of virtue and power, Floridi and O'Neil reveal that our handling of these technologies can either reinforce inequality or foster justice.

By embracing this responsibility, we can move toward a future where AI and encryption are not tools of oppression or harm, but instruments of ethical balance, fairness, and progress for all. Stewardship, rather than control or unchecked freedom, is the key to unlocking the true potential of these transformative technologies.

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