



Beyond Moralism & Control

(Part I)

Ontology, Limits, and the Illusion of Mastery

Core statement (supporting foundation)

Moral exhortation and system control fail for the same reason: they operate downstream of an unexamined ontology.

When systems reduce the world to what can be measured and optimised, relational effects disappear from view and return later as moral problems.

Control then intensifies based on partial information, while morality is asked to compensate for what the system was never designed to perceive.

This dynamic is not a failure of ethics or technology, but a consequence of forgetting the ontological difference: being is never fully accessible through beings.

Time, irreversibility, and asymmetry ensure that no system can secure its own outcomes.

What remains is not mastery or moral certainty, but human-situated navigation: acting within limits, without guarantees, and without mistaking partial models for total reality.

When Morality Appears Too Late

Moral language rarely enters systems at the beginning.
It appears when something has already gone wrong.

First comes architecture: models, metrics, incentive structures, control loops. Systems are designed to stabilise outcomes under conditions of scale and uncertainty. Only later—when exhaustion, inequality, alienation, or ecological damage become undeniable—does morality enter the conversation. We call for responsibility, awareness, and care.

Ethics then functions as a **repair language**. It is asked to correct effects that were never part of the system's perceptual field.

This is not a moral failure. It is a structural one.

What Systems Decide to See

Every system makes an implicit ontological decision: it decides what exists for it.

Only what can be measured enters the model. Only what enters the model can be optimised. Only what can be optimised becomes valuable. Everything else—relational strain, dependency, erosion of trust, loss of meaning—does not vanish. It becomes ontologically irrelevant to the system.

Here, the relevance of **Martin Heidegger** becomes unavoidable. When the world is disclosed as *standing reserve*, reality appears primarily as available stock. What cannot be rendered available does not properly appear at all.

This is not a technical limitation. It is a way of revealing.

Information, Control, and Escalation

Control always follows information.
But information is never neutral.

What a system can control depends on what it can register, and what it can register depends on prior assumptions about relevance and value. When those assumptions are narrow, control intensifies within a shrinking field of vision.

The paradox is familiar: the less a system sees, the harder it steers.

When the resulting damage becomes undeniable, morality is invoked—not to question the ontological framing, but to stabilise it. Responsibility is displaced onto individuals, users, or communities, while the architecture itself remains untouched.

Moral exhortation thus becomes a **symptom** of ontological blindness.

Ontological Difference and Misplaced Ethics

At this point, the ontological difference becomes decisive.

Being is never fully accessible through beings. Any representation of reality is partial, situated, and contingent. When this difference is forgotten, systems begin to treat their models as exhaustive descriptions of the world.

Ethics then attempts to correct behaviour without questioning the worldview that produced the behaviour in the first place.

This is why the following claim is not rhetorical, but precise:

Moral exhortation cannot substitute for ontological clarity.

As **Donella Meadows** showed, the most powerful leverage points in a system lie not in behaviour or incentives, but in paradigms and assumptions. Moral appeals typically operate at the lowest leverage levels precisely because the deeper layers remain unexamined.

Hierarchy as Ontological Projection

At this point, hierarchy must be addressed explicitly.

Hierarchy is often defended as a neutral necessity: a structural response to scale, complexity, and limited perspective. From this view, ethical reflection fails not because it is misplaced, but because it operates within hierarchical constraints that prescribe roles, behaviours, and narratives.

This diagnosis is partially correct—and yet, it is incomplete.

Hierarchy is not an ontological feature of reality. It is a **human ordering response** to limited overview, temporal pressure, and relational overload. Treating hierarchy as a fundamental property of the world is itself a human-centric projection: a coping structure mistaken for ontological truth.

Appeals to a position “outside hierarchy” reproduce the same error. There is no neutral vantage point beyond asymmetry, coordination, or power. Any stable form of coordination introduces patterns, expectations, and implicit roles. These may be fluid or rigid, explicit or informal, but they do not disappear.

The problem is not hierarchy as such, but the **ontological elevation of hierarchy**—the moment it is treated as natural, inevitable, or morally authoritative.

Time, Irreversibility, and the Collapse of Guarantees

Modern systems behave as if time were an ally.

Progress narratives assume accumulation: more data, more intelligence, more optimisation will eventually secure desired outcomes. But time does not accumulate wisdom. It enforces irreversibility.

Philosophical readings of thermodynamics remind us that the arrow of time marks dissipation, not direction. Complex structures may arise and persist, but they do so temporarily and without protection.

No system can secure its own outcomes. Guarantees are always retrospective illusions.

Navigation Without Arrival

This illusion becomes visible in everyday navigation.

Enter a destination, and a route is calculated. An arrival time is predicted and continuously updated. Deviations are treated as inefficiencies. Movement is justified by arrival.

Remove the destination, and only orientation remains: *you are here*.

No route is prescribed. No arrival is promised. Alternatives appear. Attention widens.

Navigation happens **within** time, not toward a destination protected by it.

Human-Situated, Not Human-Centric

This distinction is crucial.

Rejecting human-centrism does not mean accessing a non-human perspective. Humans cannot step outside their condition. Any attempt to speak *as* the planet or *from* the system simply reinstates mastery in another register.

What is required instead is **human-situated humility**.

Humans are not the measure of reality, but they are the locus of responsibility within it. Responsibility arises not from superiority or insight, but from being entangled in processes that exceed comprehension and control.

This is sometimes called *not knowing*. More precisely, it is knowing where knowledge ends—and acting without pretending otherwise.

What This Essay Establishes

This essay does not argue against ethics, technology, or system design. It establishes a boundary.

When relationality is not ontologically embedded, morality becomes compensatory.

When hierarchy is mistaken for reality, control becomes compulsive.

When models are treated as total, responsibility is misdirected.

What remains once mastery collapses is not despair, but orientation: acting within limits, without guarantees, and without mistaking partial models for the world.

Conceptual grounding

This essay is written in dialogue with:

- **Martin Heidegger**, *The Question Concerning Technology*
- **Donella Meadows**, *Leverage Points*
- **Gregory Bateson**, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*
- **Th.C.W. Oudemans**, *Moeder Natuur*, incl. *Het casino van de natuur*

Closing

Beyond moralism and control lies neither certainty nor escape.

What lies beyond is a position:
human, situated, constrained—and still responsible.

This essay establishes a boundary. What follows is not a solution, but a consequence.

Link to Substack:

https://open.substack.com/pub/artmotivator/p/beyond-moralism-and-control-part1?r=6grdon&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=true