

Ethikos Volume 37, Number 1. January 02, 2023 On ethics: Reid Blackman

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AT: Before we get into the heart of the interview, I have to say you have one of the most diverse backgrounds I have ever come across: Philosophy professor, fireworks wholesaler, and trapeze instructor. Is there a common theme that ties them together?

RB: Ha! Yeah, I suppose it's a bit unusual. As for a common theme? I don't think so, except perhaps a continuous desire to try new things. That would also explain why I left academia and started an ethics consultancy, and why I've recently cut way back on rock climbing so I can take Brazilian jujitsu classes (which is an echo of my high school wrestling days). And it explains, in part, other hobbies I've had or still have, like hang gliding and scuba diving.

Also, here's a fun story, for me anyway: the night I met my wife, someone suggested we play "two truths and a lie." So, I had to tell her three things, and she had to guess which was the lie. So, I told her I was a philosophy professor (which was true at the time), a fireworks wholesaler, and a trapeze instructor. She was stumped since none seemed probable. Of course, I cheated in a way—I just told three truths. But I wasn't trying to win the game; I was trying to get her phone number! And now we have two kids.

AT: What led you to focus on artificial intelligence (AI)?

RB: I was looking to take my expertise in ethics and apply it outside academia. At some point, I heard the alarm bells engineers were ringing about the societal impacts of AI. I did a little digging and began to see what was there. Not only did I find the alarm bells plausible, but I also found the problem intellectually interesting. I already knew a bit about AI, but the prospect of getting a deeper understanding and marrying it to my ethics expertise was very appealing.

AT: There is a lot of promise in AI and its ability to make better, faster decisions than humans and to free us from repetitive tasks. How close are we to realizing that vision? On the one hand, we have chatbots that seem pretty good at figuring out what we are asking; on the other hand, I'm almost six-and-a-half feet tall, buy clothes online in tall sizes, and I keep being served online ads for clothes for short men.

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