

Ethical Coding
By Emily Jaster

Writer's note:

This play may be performed as a staged one-act or as a radio play.

If staged, moments marked as “recordings” may be performed either as a tape or as a live scene on a designated area of the stage. If a director chooses the latter, something about the set or the lighting of this area should indicate a departure from the physical reality.

If performed over the radio, a narrator should read any setting and stage directions **that are not contained within parentheses or inset in dialog.**

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

SGT. INGRID HARRIS

DR. PHILLIP MORGAN

DR. ELEONORE WOOD

DANIEL (surname redacted)

Inside a small room composed concrete floors, white walls, dim lighting, and not much else, SGT. INGRID HARRIS and DR. PHILLIP MORGAN are seated on opposite sides of a small table. SGT. HARRIS has a laptop in front of her.

SGT. INGRID HARRIS: Alright, Dr. Morgan. To start, I'm required to tell you that our entire conversation will be recorded, beginning with our entry to this room. The data extracted from the video and audio recording will be stored indefinitely, and may be included in analysis for this and future investigations. Do you understand?

DR. PHILLIP MORGAN: Yes, I understand that bit, but I don't understand why I'm here.

HARRIS: We're getting there Dr. Morgan, don't worry. First of all, how are you today?

MORGAN: Annoyed. Stressed. Pissed off—I woke up and was called to the police station, what the hell do you expect?

HARRIS: Thank you, Dr. Morgan, I'm doing quite well. To answer your prior questions, as I mentioned before, you are here for an investigation. Some of your lab records have been leaked to our office—

MORGAN: I'm sorry, what?

HARRIS: Oh, no, that's not the focus, we gathered the records ourselves, quite intentionally—but I have brought you here so that we could discuss them a bit.

MORGAN: My lab work is absolutely classified.

HARRIS: As is this investigation, so do not worry.

MORGAN: No, that's not—

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan, silence, please. Let's play the first recording, shall we?

HARRIS begins to play a recording.

(Recorded:)

DR. ELEONORE WOOD: Yes?

MORGAN: Hello, Eleonore. What progress have you made today?

WOOD: You never start by asking 'how are you.' Why is that?

MORGAN: That's frivolous.

WOOD: It's polite, and further, I prefer Dr. Wood, thank you. So, if you don't mind.

MORGAN: Dammit, how are you?

WOOD: Quite busy, *Phillip*. In fact I'd love not to be bothered with—

MORGAN: What progress have you made today?

WOOD: Ah, of course. A few pages, mostly useless iterations, but perhaps a couple leads.

MORGAN: What are your leads?

WOOD: I've expanded the list of motives to work. From the latest set of files, I've found production, profit, self-interest—

MORGAN: Self-interest? Eleonore, that's practically what we're trying to define.

WOOD: Not necessarily, within the context in which I've seen—

MORGAN: What category did this all come from?

WOOD: Economics, mostly. From the work of—

MORGAN: Eleonore, no. Those systems are bullshit math, and we know that. When are you going to try—

WOOD: Dr. Morgan, there could be an underlying—

MORGAN: Alright, just—find it faster. Could you? And let me know when you've reached a better field.

(Pause.)

WOOD: How are we defining "better?"

MORGAN: More useful.

WOOD: Ah, so, productivity. How economical.

Click. End of Recording.

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan, could you describe for me your relationship with Dr. Wood?

MORGAN: She's a colleague.

HARRIS: For what line of work?

MORGAN: My research.

HARRIS: Could you describe for me, Dr. Morgan, what you are researching? And Dr. Wood's role in this research?

MORGAN: No, sergeant, I could not. It's classified.

HARRIS: Ah, well, we do have more recordings, so perhaps we can discuss those more directly.

Sgt. Harris begins to play a second recording. Click.

WOOD: Yes?

MORGAN: Your memo.

WOOD: Ah, yes, I found—

MORGAN: Something interesting, yes, you wrote. What was it?

WOOD: The philosophical works are extraordinarily varied. Some might have minor overlap, but most are too convoluted to extract anything definite.

MORGAN: Isn't it your job, to analyze all of that? What's interesting?

WOOD: Yes, and I've pulled a few different answers, of sorts.

MORGAN: What do we have?

WOOD: Beauty, for one.

MORGAN: So, Plato. And?

WOOD: It's not just his. I found—

MORGAN: (*irritated*) Anything else?

WOOD: Okay, religious tenets, but religion's a mess and not a lead in itself.

MORGAN: Clearly, Wood. What's the interesting bit?

WOOD: The only consistency so far, amid the philosophical works, is that most of them are centered in fear, which tends to be the primary leverage for their answers—even the philosophers' motivations to write. As varied as their answers are, they're all trying just to cure their fears.

MORGAN: Fears? Of what?

WOOD: Meaninglessness, guilt—

MORGAN: Those are *anxieties*, Eleonore, and we have already identified those, generally. It's everything that the AI catastrophe is causing these days. What we need here is—

WOOD: I know, Dr. Morgan. I'm working on that.

Click. End of recording.

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan, what is the 'AI catastrophe' that you mention here?

MORGAN: I am aware that I'm being recorded, Sargeant.

HARRIS: Would I be right to guess, Dr. Morgan, that you have a negative opinion of the modern workforce technology?

MORGAN: (*sighs.*) I have a negative opinion, if you will, about humans being pushed out of their own world. Might you agree with me there?

HARRIS: I can't offer an opinion at the moment, Dr. Morgan, but even if I could, you'd first have to explain what you mean a bit more clearly.

MORGAN: Oh, to hell with it. Humans will be rendered obsolete if we're not careful. The spread of the AI needs to be tempered. They're hardly distinguishable from humans now, and we can't—

HARRIS: I'm sorry, Dr. Morgan, but do you realize the implications of what you just said?

MORGAN: I do, and, fine, I stand accountable.

HARRIS: The dissemination of AI is perhaps one of the most successful programs of our century, not to mention narrowing the ratio between their Turing scores and the scores of confirmed humans.

MORGAN: No, absolutely not. The human population, human relevance, dare I say it, is dwindling—

HARRIS: What I'm getting at, Dr. Morgan, is that we have a lot more recordings from your lab, and several are highly disturbing.

MORGAN: It's not my lab, and I don't see—

HARRIS: Whose lab is it?

MORGAN: I don't know his name.

HARRIS: But you've been assigned to a case study?

MORGAN: The what? Dr. Wood is my colleague, I told you.

HARRIS: Yes, Dr. Morgan, but I'm not talking about her—we'll get to that again later. I was referencing a different file.

MORGAN: What?

SGT. HARRIS begins to play another recording. Click.

MORGAN: How are you feeling today, Daniel?

DANIEL: Eh.

MORGAN: Phrases are more helpful. Sentences if you can.

DANIEL: I feel eh.

MORGAN: Alright, let's clarify. Are you feeling better or worse about yourself than when we last met?

DANIEL: Myself? Fuck, I dunno.

MORGAN: Any thoughts of self harm or suicide?

DANIEL: Ah, nope.

MORGAN: None? Did you read what I assigned to you last week?

DANIEL: Uh, a bit.

MORGAN: Daniel, seriously. I can't be of much help to you if you're not doing your part.

DANIEL: I didn't ask for help.

MORGAN: But haven't you even— *(the dialog of this moment in the recording blends with the physical reality of the interrogation room, as in the next moment:)*

DR. MORGAN reaches across SGT. HARRIS to stop the recording; SGT. HARRIS jerks her laptop out of his reach.

MORGAN: Why do you have that? How?

HARRIS: Do you know what this implicates?

MORGAN: It's research, it implicates—

HARRIS: This could qualify for abuse, Dr. Morgan.

MORGAN: You're kidding, right? That's clearly an AI, I've never heard more generic responses. I—

HARRIS: You don't have ample proof of that, Dr. Morgan, and even if you did, some anti-abuse laws extend to AI these days.

MORGAN: Hogwash. You can't emotionally abuse a computer. And that's research. It's necessary. And classified.

HARRIS: But this is an investigation, Dr. Morgan.

MORGAN: Of what? I'm a scientist, I'm doing a service. This is the most—

HARRIS: Do be clear, Dr. Morgan, you are studying this boy because you believe he's AI? What is the goal of your research, Dr. Morgan?

MORGAN: No, I mean yes, he's a sample, to test our methods—

HARRIS: Of addressing what you call the 'AI catastrophe'?

MORGAN: No comment, it's classified. Or it was.

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan, please. Could you clarify just how far you made it into your research?

MORGAN: Do I really need to, if you've somehow hacked all my recordings?

HARRIS: Well, we don't have your paper files, of course, and—

MORGAN: Oh, really? What a surprise.

HARRIS: And yesterday morning's call was of special interest to us.

MORGAN: *(beat.)* I'm sorry?

SGT. HARRIS begins to play another recording.

WOOD: Yes?

MORGAN: Updates?

WOOD: Ah, yes. We're getting very close. It's thrilling.

MORGAN: What do you have?

WOOD: Please, couldn't I just work today, without this distraction?

MORGAN: No, Eleonore. Correspondence is crucial.

WOOD: Alright, fine. So we have that the majority of drives to life as an intelligent being are paradoxically bound to the creations of human beings, and to—

MORGAN: What's that first one?

WOOD: Human product, Dr. Morgan. Most motivations to life and goals within are innately linked to civilization—to innovate, to produce, to exist peacefully, to survive, to produce and enjoy literature, art, music, and so on.

MORGAN: Okay, and—

WOOD: Even this study arises from an obsession with improving civilization. Even your own goal for existing as an intelligent being is linked—

MORGAN: Let's not get personal, Eleonore. What was the other thing?

WOOD: Anxieties.

MORGAN: Those do the opposite, Eleonore.

WOOD: No, it's complicated. *(speaking carefully, calculating)* Some motivations to live appear to be attachment to the manufactured solutions for supposed anxieties—and they sometimes overlap with the human product motives, yes—but it seems that anxieties justify the perceived beauty of human products like art, literature, family, and so forth.

MORGAN: So, to be clear, when someone says that their meaning of life is art, family, achievement, and so on, that's basically—

WOOD: Saying that the meaning of life is to combat meaninglessness, yes. The meaning of good just to combat guilt. The meaning of—

MORGAN: Which would suggest—

WOOD: That all the life motives are circular.

MORGAN: And you have that in your algorithm, Eleonore? It checks out mathematically?

WOOD: Almost. It seems to be leading that way, but I'm not quite done yet. A few factors aren't quite balancing, and I'm still working out the coefficient for—

MORGAN: Not important, Eleonore, keep working.

Click. End of Recording.

HARRIS: So what's with this algorithm?

MORGAN: It's the goal of the study.

HARRIS: What are you trying to calculate, with this algorithm?

MORGAN: It would be more accurate to say that we're making a mathematical model.

HARRIS: What are you modeling, then?

MORGAN: Yes. The algorithm, once we have one, will quantify when it is ethical, meaningful, fruitful, and personally beneficial to continue to exist as a human being—which, as we all might guess, it almost never is.

HARRIS: And this relates, somehow, to what you call the ‘AI catastrophe’?

MORGAN: Well, when it comes to the AI who think they’re human, which is most all of them now—

HARRIS: Why the algorithm?

MORGAN: It is the only form, I believe, that would target AI specifically. The AI will internalize the algorithm as factual proof, then begin to act upon it as part of their arithmetic-ethical framework.

HARRIS: Which is to say, self-destruct?

MORGAN: Precisely.

HARRIS: And the biological humans?

MORGAN: Probably won’t do the math.

HARRIS: And those who do?

MORGAN: Will just art their way out of it, like they always have. Philosophize out of it, music out of it—you know. That’s a part of our research, too. We’re running a control to make sure they’ll be alright.

HARRIS: Have you heard from your colleague Dr. Wood today, Dr. Morgan?

MORGAN: No, you brought me here before I could, I—

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan?

MORGAN: Yes?

HARRIS: I don’t need an explanation.

MORGAN: You—

HARRIS: She was found dead this morning.

MORGAN: No, I don’t believe it.

HARRIS: Perhaps I can describe the condition in which she was found?

MORGAN: Why were you—

HARRIS: Dr. Morgan, I regret to inform you that your colleague, Dr. Wood, was found to have made an incision to herself that would have been utterly illogical for any human being.

MORGAN: You’re not—

HARRIS: (*theatrically*) She was found at her desk, collapsed amid a great deal of graph paper. There was a small incision to her upper abdomen, around the solar plexus, exposing a motherboard from which several copper wires protruded, linking her internal command system to—

MORGAN: No!

HARRIS: —her primary microchip, which she appears to have withdrawn from her own system and smashed on the table, prompting her own, immediate, irreparable system crash.

MORGAN: She was brilliant, yes, but she was absolutely human. She believed in the cause as much as I do.

HARRIS: Could you remind me, Dr. Phillip Morgan, of the name of your employer?

MORGAN: I told you, I don’t—

HARRIS: Or, more specifically, Dr. Morgan, the name of your designer?