Experiencing AI and the Relational 'Turn' in AI Ethics

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Extended Abstract:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Ethics is a burgeoning field that has brought to the various existing and emerging technologies subsumed under the heading of "artificial intelligence" (e.g., machine learning, deep learning, neural networks, etc.) some much-needed ethical scrutiny (cf. Coeckelbergh, 2020). However, several authors have highlighted the extent to which this almost unprecedented and interdisciplinary ethical attention remains sorely limited, if not fundamentally misguided (cf. Birhane, 2021; Crawford, 2021; Heilinger, 2022; Keyes et al., 2019).

Here I contend that as a result of such misgivings existing AI Ethics falls considerably short of carrying out one of the key tasks of moral inquiry: namely, to better understand our current lived experience and the various limitations to human flourishing entailed therein so as to better equip decisions for improving thereon (Kitcher, 2011). What this task requires, as Dewey (1938) elucidates, is a nuanced and thoughtful account of the actual experience of AI technologies. When executed well, this can then direct the exploration of alternative socio-technical arrangements that do not simply reproduce the myriad social injustices so complexly caught up in the development and use of AI technologies. The recent what I here call the relational 'turn' in AI ethics can be understood as a seeking to address some such shortcomings; a move I will endorse and look to both bolster and embolden in this paper.

In particular, Heilinger (2022) and Birhane (2021) (each in distinct and important way) emphasize that the inadequacy of existing AI Ethics follows, at least in part, from an overall failure to account for the "relational" character of human life and the rich social context in which AI technologies are rapidly becoming not only ubiquitous but also seemingly unrelinquishable in our daily lives. While Heilinger (2022) emphasizes this through his adoption of relational egalitarianism, on the one hand, and the feminist attention to social structures (of injustice), on the other, Birhane's (2021) "relational ethics" explicitly targets the individualistic and atomistic character of exist ing AI ethics and grounds her own proposal in the thoroughly social conception of self-found in enactive conceptions of cognition, the ubuntu tradition and afro-feminist

epistemology. Together these texts make important strides in AI Ethics, yet I suggest that more is to be done if it is to become a mature relational ethics of AI. Specifically, I argue that there is a need to (1)

deepen the social account of the self that underscores the relational approach to explicitly account for the place and role of technology (and AI in particular) in social experience and (2) detail the character and directive of relational ethics (i.e., what it should seek to do and how it ought to go about doing so).

Concerning the first, the relation turn is yet to properly capture the deep reciprocal influence of technology in human experience, as has been detailed in the intricate work of philosophy of technology. In particular, postphenomenological explorations of technology have already undertaken much of the difficult work of articulating the complex "co-constitutive" character of human-technology relationships (Ihde, 1990, 2002). This I will I argue is capable—with some assistance from Dewey's (1922, 1925) social psychology—of providing a firm basis for building an AI ethics attuned to contemporary socio-technological experience. Accordingly, the social context central to the relational turn is to be conceived of not just as indivisible from the individuals who are the 'target' of ethical determinations nor as just providing the ethically relevant 'space' wherein AI technologies ought to be examined. Rather, it becomes evident that the very richness of that social context (and its injustices) obtains from its being technological through and through.

With this in view, AI technologies are revealed as inextricable caught up in individual experience, such that ethical attention must as a result be attuned to the extent to which AI might reconstruct our lived experience in ways that should either be aided or resisted (cf. Verbeek, 2011). Moreover, if the task in moral inquiry is to improve human life then a suitable AI ethics must also be designed and executed as itself something seeking to reconstruct experience or helpfully facilitate as much (cf. Dewey, 1920). This already directs us to the second proposed embellishment of the relational turn, as it suggests that appreciating the relational character of human experience of AI can then shape a distinctive and proactive relational ethics of AI.

Where postphenomenology largely steers the first task, in my proposal, pragmatism (specifically Dewey's ethics and moral philosophy) largely takes the reins in the second. I am, of course, not the first to pair these fields of inquiry or recognize their synchronicity (cf. Hickman, 2008). Indeed, Ihde (2009) explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Dewey's pragmatism. There are nevertheless relatively few sustained at tempts to merge them into sturdy ethics of technology. On the one hand, while

postphenomenology has helped advance our appreciation of the moral salience of technology (Verbeek, 2005, 2006, 2011), a postphenomenological ethics of technology remains underdeveloped (cf. Introna, 2017; Thompson, 2006; Verbeek, 2016), particularly in the reconstructive sense advocated by Dewey. On the other hand, while there have been attempts to build pragmatic ethics out of Dewey's work (cf. LaFollette, 2000) and to even apply it specifically to technology (cf. Hickman, 2008; Machielsen, 2022), the insights of postphenomenology remain underutilized. To amend this, I will compare and seek to unify two ethics frameworks that have explicitly emphasized the notion of "relationality" (one from each domain).

On the phenomological side, Langdorf's (2020) "relational ethics" stresses the "primacy of experience" and provides a detailed link between Husserl, Ihde/Verbeek, and Dewey. It thereby proposes the first genuine merger of Dewey pragmatic method of moral inquiry and the postphenomenological recognition of the moral dimensions immediately generated out of technologically mediated experience. As such, Langdorf establishes the basis for ethics that promotes the "transformative possibilities of moral action" (2020, p.137) in a technological setting, which I will build on. Specifically, I do this by further detailing the pragmatic side by way of (Humbert, 2022), whose "Deweyan ethics for human/non-human relationships" can, I argue, be helpfully expanded to the human-technology relationship.

It is by renewing the dialogue between a Deweyan ethics and postphenomeno logical philosophy of technology that I seek to not only take up the aforementioned well-founded relational turn in AI ethics but to advance it so that it is suitably attuned to the co-constitutive character of human-technology relations. Through this I hope to help set the stage for a robust AI ethics that is not simply reactionary and fastened to static "goods" and aging social practices but is rather evocative and directive, adapted to our lived (so 'fluid') socio-technological experience—i.e., is "techno-realist" (Hughes & Eisikovits, 2022)—and suited to the difficult emancipatory work of moral inquiry.

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