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AI Ethics as Research Ethics? On the roles of AI ethicists and the creation of ethics-free situations.

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now being integrated in almost every field of the academic enterprise. However AI is not only a product or a scientific tool, it can also be considered as a field of inquiry on its own, associated with its ad hoc “AI ethics” which are rapidly emerging in the past few years – in the literature as well as in institutions and corporations. However, AI ethics appear to be as equivocal as the nature of AI in itself. On the one hand, there may be a call to embrace it as the new expression of a critical theory fostering the emergence of emancipatory and empowering technologies in society (Waelen, 2022), while on the other hand, it is qualified as toothless and useless (Munn, 2022).

The aim of this intervention is to question the foundations of such a supposedly new ethical field, from a research ethics perspective, with the intention to understand how should so-called AI ethicists be involved in the design process of AI systems – be it in research or in the development of AI-based products. In doing so, we will discuss the possibility of having AI ethicists as designers, directly embedded into the design process. Such an embedding originates from the ethics of technology and of engineering (van Gorp & van der Molen, 2009; van Wynsberghe & Robbins, 2013), as well as it stems from a will to consider ethics not only as procedures but also as a process – inspired by the research ethics of anthropology (Perrin, 2018). In doing so, we move from envisioning ethicists as external to the design and research processes, to ethicists as pragmatist in situ translators of ethical stakes, actively contributing to the sociotechnical specifications and orientations of AI systems.

However, having ethicists as designers does not imply getting rid of programmers and designers, it rather requires a redistribution and refinements of the roles of agents in the design process, by integrating ethics as much as possible but also with the definition of ethics-free situations (Grunwald, 2001). These are understood as contexts in which making decisions would not require further ethical scrutiny – such situations can still be value-laden. Ethicists as designers of AI-based systems would thus as much positively participate in the design process as they would highlight the limits of their realm of intervention in this very process.

In the end, the aim is to understand how AI ethics could be a research ethics fostering the ethical design of ethical AI-based systems.

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Keywords

AI ethics, design, processual ethics, pragmatism