Real AI Ethicists are urgently needed

Emmanuel R. Goffi

So-called "AI ethics" is everywhere, overused and often misused. Despite the number of documents published, and talk given on the subject, it seems that we are still unable to tackle ethical issues raised by artificial intelligence (AI).

Much more than that, many companies, whatever their size, are totally lost in translation, trying to understand what is really at stake with "AI ethics" (or as I prefer using Ethics Applied to AI) and how to address it in their daily activities.

The growing number of documents, codes and guidelines, pertaining to ethics applied to AI (EA2AI), raises the questions of our ability to reach a compromise on what is ethically acceptable and what is not when it comes to AI, and of the risk of deregulation stemming from this excess of regulations.

Instead of framing the design, development, and use of AI systems, the current trend is leading to more and more complexity, opening the door to grey areas in which some stakeholders will not fail to rush into.

At the end of the day, promoters of AI regulations will have to deal with an anarchic system where the profusion of normative instruments will make them inapplicable.

Even worse, it will not take long before we realize that we have not addressed all ethical issues related to AI and that we have missed the most important ones.

It might be too late to change the course of events, but it is still possible to mitigate the undesirable consequences of our ethical inconsistency by giving AI ethicists the role they deserve.

It is intriguing to notice the gap between the regular assertion that AI ethicists are needed to mitigate risks associated with the development of AI, and the fact that companies, while agreeing on this need, do not recourse to such professionals.

Companies agree on the fact that ethics is important in the field of AI, yet they do not invest that much money in making sure they benefit from skilled AI ethicists. Quite often, companies do not see EA2AI as sufficiently important to be put at the top of their priorities. Consequently, they either put the question aside, or hire ethics officer with little, nay no knowledge in the field.

Indeed, it is striking that most ethics officers have no or clearly insufficient skills in philosophy, which might prove problematic considering that ethics is a branch of philosophy. At best, they have a legal background with some philosophy in their curriculum. At worse, they do not have the slightest idea of what philosophical reasoning and ethics are really about.

Both cases are highly problematic for companies, and at a larger scale for humankind. When ethics officers are lawyers by experience and education, they tend to mix law and ethics, and to reduce philosophical questions to compliance with established norms.

> *It seems that we are still unable to tackle ethical issues raised by AI.*

Doing so they give companies the false sense that they are behaving in an ethically acceptable way, while they potentially are not. Law and ethics are two different fields even if often intertwined. Think about death penalty. The fact that it is legal in some places does not mean it is ethically acceptable. When it comes to a specific AI product, ticking boxes of compliance does not make it ethically acceptable.

When ethics officers, have little or no background in ethics, they mostly do communication, making do of repeating summaries of summaries, themselves summarizing former summaries. Eventually, and as Walter Lippmann's say goes, in his book **The Stakes of Diplomacy**, "[w]here all think alike, no one thinks very much."

Self-proclaimed ethicists are playing a very problematic role in the field of EA2AI. They mostly defend vested interests; may they be related to careers promotion or comfortable incomes, or even defending their personal perspective if not ideology. Opportunism is not an issue per se, neither is defending specific beliefs. But they become a huge issue when their consequences on humankind become harmful.

Not providing appropriate advice, not being able to ask relevant questions, not offering the necessary tools to companies to make wise and rational decisions, ethics frauds are jeopardizing the future, not only of the company they work with, but of humankind as a whole, in that they close the debate and confine it into a superficial, easy-to-digest narrative, without addressing relevant questions and problems.

Interestingly, while EA2AI is subject to many discussions, the question of the ethics of AI ethicists is totally absent. "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*", who will guard the guards themselves as Juvenal asked it in his *Satires*.

EA2AI deserves more than mere ethics frauds promoting their own interests regardless of the potential consequences such a choice could have at a larger scale.

EA2AI must be thoroughly considered resorting to real AI ethicists.

Companies must understand that, like in any other field, ethicists they are consulting or hiring must be skilled people, with both a background in ethics and a knowledge of the reality of the world companies are evolving in.

On the other hand, companies must make sure that AI ethicists they are working with are correctly trained. They must make sure AI ethicists will not just be regurgitating inconsistent narratives, that they have the ability to think by themselves to address AI related ethical concern with sufficient distance to be as objective as possible, and to provide relevant and accurate support accompanying the company in its ethical decisions.

Eventually, companies must ensure that AI ethicists are enough open-minded to know about their own biases and circumvent them by being knowledgeable about different ethical perspectives at work around the world.

Repeating mainstream narratives about "AI ethics" elaborated in one's cultural setting is as good as looking for one's way wearing blinkers.

> *If you shrink your ability to think, you shrink your ethical reflection.*

If you shrink your ability to think, you shrink your ethical reflection.

At the end of the day, AI ethicist must be considered as a real job requiring real skills. It must not be limited to a nice heading for one's LinkedIn profile.

Being an AI ethicist is demanding, as is being a lawyer or a programmer. If companies fail to understand that when they hire an AI ethicist, they put both their activities and humankind, at risk. Is it ethically acceptable? Ask a real AI ethicist.

Emmanuel Goffi *is Co-Director of the Global AI Ethics Institute, Paris, France and Research associate with CEST.*

Academic Coordinator: Edison Spina

This article is a result of the author's ascertainment and analysis, without compulsorily reflecting CEST's opinion.