QUICK-TAKE

"ALL WATCHED OVER BY MACHINES," OR AI ETHICS, SURVEILLANCE, AND PLURALISM

By LEVI PULFORD

Right now, multiple conversations are occurring across places as disparate as damp IT basements, lofty executive suites, virtual team meetings, pristine computer labs, and hazy dorm rooms about what AI *really* is in this present moment and what AI can *really* become in the near and distant futures. Doomers claim artificial general intelligence is on the horizon, bringing with it widespread job automation, economic disruption, and the collapse of modern-day societies. Utopians posit that AGI will bring unprecedented freedoms; increase access, safety, and democracy; and reshape our relationships among ourselves and with the world into a perfect, self-sustaining harmony. Halfway along this ideological spectrum, between doomer and utopian, lies the pragmatist, who weighs both the benefits and the risks associated with AI as it is deployed today, with an eye toward how AI might also be deployed tomorrow. Whatever super-intelligent AI might be invented five or fifty years from now, it will likely come about through a series of deceptively small and seemingly insignificant steps, as, in the words of Emily Dickinson, Forever is composed of Nows.

It is my opinion that we have now found ourselves in an all-hands-on-deck situation, and we need doomers, utopians, and pragmatists, as well as other perspectives existing within and beyond this spectrum, if we are to successfully crack what Nick Bostrom in 2014 referred to as the "control problem," or "the problem of how to control what the superintelligence would do" [1]. Bostrom was thinking about issues of value-loading nearly three years before the formation of AI ethics, a field centered around determining what our values are, how we arrive at them, and how we might apply them toward AI technologies. However, pragmatists such as Rodrigo Ochigame have since argued that AI ethics as a discourse has become co-opted by tech industry leaders seeking to avoid government regulation [2].

Even though corporate, academic, and military interests have converged on AI ethics in crucial ways, people continue to be subjected to and exploited by the move-fast-and-break-things ethos dominant across the private sector. This fact is perhaps made most salient by the experiences of Kenyan content moderators hired by OpenAI [3]. In response to a widespread number of cases and controversies, a few U.S. cities and states have begun regulating and outright banning specific AI technologies, such as face recognition, but there is still much to be done on this front. For instance, a recently proposed Massachusetts bill would limit the governmental use of face recognition technology to a centralized office specifically trained to handle the material, ideally mitigating racial bias and inaccuracy [4].

Various officials, experts, and policymakers have acknowledged that AI has the potential to disrupt our lives in myriad ways. Our personal and professional livelihoods are on the line, as IBM's CEO, Arvind Krishna, has expressed the need for people to develop critical thinking skills if they wish to future-proof their careers against AI [5]. To think critically is to attend to power. As Foucault explains, modern society has subjected itself to an extended Panopticon; our need for discipline has transcended the limits of architecture and technology and transformed how surveillance operates. For Foucault, "visibility is a trap" which automates the labor of surveillance within the disciplinary society [6]. With the rise of personal smart devices and personalized social media feeds, we have traded the Panopticon for a labyrinth of echo chambers. For the poet Richard Brautigan, however, visibility is how we can come to live in a "cybernetic ecology... all watched over by machines of loving grace" [7]. In other words, visibility is not inherently a trap; it also contains opportunity for liberatory recognition. Just as discipline is part of human nature, so too is loving grace.

To navigate our way through the increasingly disorienting labyrinth that is society in the age of AI, it is not so much about *where* one aligns oneself on the AI ideological spectrum but more importantly *how* we recognize, voice, and validate our stances while embracing the stances of others. This is, in effect, a call for pluralism in AI ethics and ideological criticism. Before we can act as pluralists, however, we must reconcile what Karl Popper first identified in 1945 as the paradox of tolerance. Put simply: a tolerant society must not tolerate intolerance, and yet too often we cannot agree on what constitutes intolerance in human behavior, let alone what intolerance looks like in machines. We can only strive to build artificial intelligence with all the loving grace we, ourselves, possess.

References

[1] Bostrom, Nick. 2014. *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[2] Ochigame, Rodrigo. 2019. "The Invention of Ethical AI." The Intercept. Retrieved from https://theintercept.com/2019/12/20/mit-ethical-ai-artificial-intelligence/
[3] Rowe, Niamh. 2023. "'It's destroyed me completely': Kenyan moderators decry toll of training of AI models." The Guardian. Retrieved October 24, 2023 from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/aug/02

/ai-chatbot-training-human-toll-content-moderator-meta-openai
[4] Borondy, Kinga. 2023. "How often should police use facial recognition technology? Mass. considering strict limits." Worcester Telegram & Gazette. Retrieved from https://www.telegram.com/story/news/state/2023/10/13/massachusetts-police-facial-recognition-limits-proposed/71159918007/
[5] Thompson, Polly. 2023. "This is how to futureproof your career in an AI world, says IBM's CEO." Insider. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com/futureproof-career-ai-world-ibm-ceo-jobs-employment-2023-10
[6] Foucault, Michel. 2008. "'Panopticism' from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison." Indiana University Press. Retrieved from https://muse.jhu.edu/article/252435/pdf
[7] Brautigan, Richard. 1967. "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace." The Communication Company. Retrieved from https://www.readingdesign.org/all-watched-over-by-machines