Challenges of Dealing With Rapidly Emerging Technologies

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics are prominent emerging technologies, garnering attention for their strides in convenience and technology. Coined in the 1950s by mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing, AI has become widely accessible, integrated into daily life through virtual assistants like Siri or search engines. In her work "Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting," philosopher Shannon Vallor emphasizes that cultivating moral virtues is crucial for a positive and ethical future amid technological advancements like AI and robotics. This paper will use Vallor's work to assess navigating challenges posed by rapidly evolving technologies, including AI and robotics.

The discourse on AI and robot ethics involves diverse opinions, with experts like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Stephen Hawking emphasizing the need for ethical guidelines and regulations to mitigate potential risks. While not opposed to AI, these figures heavily advocate for responsible development. However, a challenge lies in the lack of specified responsible and ethical frameworks. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that the media often treats AI and robotics ethics as future predictions, assuming a predetermined understanding of what is ethical and how to achieve it (Müller). Evidently, a common challenge in discussions on robotics and/or AI ethics is the absence or lack of clearly defined ethical frameworks.

It is important to note that there haven't been prominent figures or widely recognized articles explicitly advocating for the dismissal of robot or AI ethics. Consequently, the predominant discourse has revolved around the importance of ethical considerations in AI and robotics development. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to establishing an ethical framework for navigating the challenges posed by rapidly emerging technologies like AI and robotics.

Deloitte, a site providing insights into current business challenges, sheds light on ongoing ethical discussions around AI, revealing that its deployment in societal decision-making has led industry players to establish advisory panels and principles addressing bias and transparency concerns. Simultaneously, the rise of disinformation threats prompts technology companies to seek government regulations, cooperate with law enforcement, and enhance vigilance against attacks on truth. Meanwhile, the technology industry's impact on physical and mental health remains a subject of ongoing research and debate (Silverglate). In her book, Vallor underscores a crucial distinction, stating that ethics, defined as the manner in which individuals lead fulfilling lives, is no longer solely a moral decision but is now tied to the evolving capabilities of the technological systems shaping our lives—necessitating the need for technomoral decision-making (Vallor 2). She posits that throughout history, human social practices, including morality, have been closely intertwined with technological development. Thus, Vallor asserts that the connection between ethics and technology emerges from technologies shaping distinct patterns of thought, behavior, and values, opening new possibilities while potentially constraining others.

Prior to reading Shannon Vallor’s book, I was under the impression that robot and technology ethics primarily involves examining the moral and ethical dimensions related to the design, creation, deployment, and behavior of robots. This view, which focuses on the ethical considerations tied to the development and use of robotic technology, as I see it, is widely accepted. However, Vallor's work introduced a fascinating dimension by connecting technology ethics to virtue ethics, applying the latter to navigate the challenges posed by advancing technologies. Vallor defines virtue ethics as a moral philosophy that gives greater importance to the cultivation of virtuous character traits as the basis for ethical decision-making. Unlike ethical frameworks centered on rules or consequences, virtue ethics is more concerned with fostering positive moral character within individuals (Vallor 24). Furthermore, Vallor explores diverse religious and philosophical perspectives, such as Aristotelian, Confucianism, and Buddhism, to underscore the idea that an ideal life starts with proper moral habituation into social roles and responsibilities, achieved through personal effort. She describes this process as "moral self-cultivation," a voluntary practice aimed at leading a virtuous life (Vallor 42). In lieu of the aforementioned virtues, Vallor advocates for a renewed understanding of the German concept of Bildung. This entails providing guidance for the personal and social cultivation of virtues conducive to creating a more humane and technologically integrated society. This notion, as I believe, aligns with the recognition that technology is rapidly becoming intertwined with our daily habits and is increasingly exhibiting intelligence akin to ours. Hence, in alignment with Vallor's perspective, it is important to renew/add upon existing philosophies and concepts to effectively adapt to the continually evolving technologies.

Vallor introduces the concept of technomoral ethics to address ethical challenges stemming from rapid technological advancements. This notion involves a thorough examination of the moral dimensions of emerging technologies, emphasizing the need for ethical considerations in design, development, and use. The cultivation of essential virtues in this context involves moral habituation, relational understanding, self-examination, intentional moral development, perceptual attention, and prudential judgment. Vallor outlines virtues crucial for ethical engagement with technology, contributing to techno-moral wisdom and emphasizing moral habituation as a foundation for ethical conduct within the evolving technological landscape. In line with Vallor's views, I belive that these virtues are fundamental for addressing the ethical challenges posed by the rapid evolution of technology, establishing a foundational framework for ethical guidance in such a landscape.

In light of our current experiences and the rapid evolution of technology, adapting our lifestyles to ethically coexist with advancing technologies is both logical and necessary. Vallor's 2016 book, "Technology and the Virtues," draws from timeless philosophical foundations, providing a relevant guide even amid significant technological advancements. Her work facilitates a philosophical approach to navigating evolving technologies, leveraging classical virtues to address the challenges. Vallor underscores the need for a new set of virtues in the face of technology's impact, ethical decisions, technosocial opacity, and existential risks, emphasizing collective actions over individual moral decisions.

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