

**Evaluating Ghost Work Through Various Ethical Lenses**  
**A Case Study**

As more and more companies look to integrate AI into their business models, they face the challenge of ensuring that these models are honest, helpful and harmless. In order to ensure that this is done in real time and correctly, they resort to using ghost workers. By definition, ghost work is work that is done by humans but believed largely by the consumers to be done by AI automatically. Several companies use ghost workers to do tasks such as content filtering, annotations, etc. Companies have an incentive to hide the work these people do to build trust in AI systems and maintain the perception of seamless, automated performance. This can be judged with moral relativism, as the incentives of companies and ghost workers collide. However, as it stands right now, ghost work is a largely exploitative practice. Ghost workers may face low wages, challenging working conditions, and limited recognition for their contributions, which we can analyze using virtue ethics. Lastly, we can analyze the background of these workers through the lens of feminist ethics. Overall, we need to create more awareness about ghost work and work towards finding new solutions to aid this process.

Ghost work (Suri, & Gray) is a groundbreaking study that does a great job of defining ghost work in the modern era, explaining how it was formed and how it works, and attempting to paint a picture of the future of this form of work. The book explains how supposedly “automated” services require thousands of humans who carry out tasks like content moderation, labeling training data, authenticating Uber rides in real time, etc behind the scenes. However, due to the lack of general awareness, and company incentives to make these tasks seem “automatic”, these people become a quiet labor force that work under the gig economy with limited benefits. They often work for extremely low wages, and an inconsistent or unpredictable pay. In some cases, ghost workers are paid per task, which can lead to inconsistent earnings and financial instability. There is a lack of job security in the field, and virtually no benefits like a 401K, etc. (Suri, & Gray) describes how this goes against the principles of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on the character and moral dispositions of individuals and organizations, emphasizing virtues such as justice, compassion, and honesty. It would argue for better treatment of these workers under a more structured framework. Even though a framework like utilitarianism would argue that the work of a few benefits the larger society, it is important to acknowledge that that is a weakness of utilitarianism. On the other hand, this issue needs to be resolved with a framework like virtue ethics. A virtue ethicist would argue that this work needs to be made transparent so companies can be held accountable, and the larger public knows about the issues they face. Transparency also leads to an honest view of the true capabilities of AI, which virtue ethics would argue everyone deserves to know. Another ethical framework we can use to analyze this issue is deontological ethics, which emphasizes the duties and rules companies have in society. From this perspective, companies should recognize a moral duty to treat their workers fairly and with dignity. This includes making sure that workers get fair wages, job

security and health/retirement benefits as a fair compensation for the time they have invested in the company. Deontology would not let companies mistreat their employees under the pretense of efficiency or profit. This is a particularly useful framework, because it is unambiguous and enforceable- and almost any law can take it into account, in any part of the world.

If analyzed from these perspectives, we can solve a lot of the problems related to exploitation of workers that (Suri, & Gray) describe in their book.

Ghost work is an interesting modern problem. It stems from companies' incentive to hide their true capabilities from their customers. But why do companies feel the need to do this? This can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. On one hand, companies like Uber, Google, etc work on consumer trust. If the user believes that the system is doing what it's supposed to, they use it more, which in turn leads to better development of the system. On the other hand, if they are made aware of the intricacies that go behind some of these models (like a human manually verifying driver details before a trip), they might stop trusting these services, use them wrongly or become hesitant to use them altogether. This hesitation could stem from concerns about privacy, security, or the overall reliability of the service. Additionally, revealing the human involvement behind AI systems may lead customers to question the technology's capability and sophistication, potentially damaging the company's reputation and market competitiveness. We can analyze this from the ethical framework of moral relativism. Moral relativism is the philosophical view that ethical principles and moral judgments are not universal but instead vary depending on cultural, societal, or individual perspectives. In other words, moral relativism suggests that what is considered right or wrong can differ based on the context or circumstances in which an individual or group finds themselves. From the point of view of companies, it is an obvious decision to hide these workers, so they can retain their status in society. But I would argue that even from the point of view of customers, these workers staying hidden is a good idea. If customers perceive AI systems as entirely autonomous, they may feel more comfortable using the services without worrying about human error or biases, thus enhancing their user experience and satisfaction. This perception of seamless automation fosters a sense of trust in tech, leading to a more positive relationship between the customer and the company. However, moral relativism would argue that the perspective of the workers is just as important. (Irani and Silberman) points out how most workers on these platforms say that they feel like their work is rejected for no reason, that their pay is unfair, and that their employers do not listen to their concerns. From the perspective of these workers, ghost work and the actual capabilities of AI need to be revealed to the world, so that they get better recognition in society. However, not all workers feel this way. (Gray and Suri) argues that there are pros to this work- increased flexibility, being able to work from any place, etc which a lot of people enjoy in various parts of the world. They don't want this work to stop, but just for them to make a slightly better living doing this work. Thus, if we evaluate from this perspective, we can see that the solution to this problem might not be as straightforward as we would've liked.

The next question we can ask to potentially understand this problem better is about who these workers are. (Gray and Suri)'s research suggests that these people often come from places like India, are people who are desperate for work, and will often have to do anything

without any control over it. This is largely a problem I have noticed in places like India as well. Overpopulation leads to competition in the workplace- especially in the IT sector, which India's economy is primarily based on. This leads to workers having little choice in what kind of work they can pursue, and they have to do any work to make ends meet. (Crawford) explores the case of a worker from India, who traveled to Nepal under the false pretense of a IT specialist job, and now has to do manual labor, with no choice or ability to leave. He also describes how he thinks his work is probably worth a lot more than he is being paid for. However the issues of ghost work stretch further than just this. (Steiger) is a study that explores just this. The authors of this study estimate that over 100,000 people serve as content moderators for various platforms, and are continuously exposed to violent, obscene, and inappropriate content. They talk about how people assume that these jobs are done automatically- and hence it's difficult to know the effects of them on a large scale without awareness. However, in those in the know, this is known as the worst job in tech. The authors then discuss how content moderation can cause trauma, and PTSD, similar to other jobs like journalism, etc which are exposed to preliminary content. We can analyze these effects from the lens of feminist ethics. Feminist ethics is an ethical perspective that emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing issues of gender, power dynamics, and social justice in moral reasoning. A lot of women on these platforms have to sift through thousands of images to classify them as genitalia or not. They are exposed to content that is actually traumatizing, on a daily basis, as a part of their work. They can't talk to anyone about this because of the relatively unknown nature of this work, nor can they hold any companies they work for accountable because most of these companies don't reveal their names. (Gray and Suri) talks about how workers suspect that they do work for much bigger companies than they know, but they cannot confirm that. Feminist ethics or a similar lens would argue that the power imbalance this creates is too high, and should be immediately addressed.

Now that we have seen the issue from multiple ethical frameworks, and analyzed the view of various stakeholders, we can think of a few potential solutions to the issue of ghost workers. One way to tackle the challenges faced by ghost workers is to introduce stronger labor protections and fair work practices. Companies can start by paying ghost workers fair wages and offering benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and paid time off, much like what you'd find in other industries. Companies should also offer more stable and predictable pay structures, like hourly wages or salaries, instead of per-task payments, which can be challenging for workers. Another important aspect is transparency in the workforce. Companies should be honest about how much human involvement is in their AI systems and provide consumers with clear information on how these systems operate. This transparency can help consumers better understand the human effort behind the scenes and may lead to a greater appreciation for ghost workers. This comes with the trade-off of consumers being reluctant about systems, and questioning its security, privacy, etc more- however as AI grows, companies can convince customers that their reliance on these workers has either changed or reduced. Sometimes these services are so crucial (like Uber) that a customer will likely stick to using the service, despite the issues they might have with it.

Most importantly, ethical guidelines and standards should be established for ghost work, emphasizing the importance of treating workers with dignity and respect. This can include clear communication channels for workers to voice their concerns and grievances without fear of retaliation, similar to (Irani and Silberman). Additionally, offering training and professional development opportunities can empower ghost workers, helping them build valuable skills and advance their careers. One of the best ways we can support these workers is to allow them to learn transferable skill sets (that they can use in other industries) while they are doing important work for us to be able to use our apps and websites. Advocacy and support for ghost workers from external organizations, such as labor unions and advocacy groups, can also play a significant role in protecting workers' rights, promoting equitable treatment, and arguing for more training. These organizations can work to raise awareness of the issues facing ghost workers and push for systemic changes within the industry.

In conclusion, as AI continues to evolve and reshape industries, it is important to recognize the hidden labor force that underpins these systems. The phenomenon of ghost work is a novel problem that has stemmed from the novel integration of AI into our everyday lives. Through various ethical frameworks such as virtue ethics, moral relativism, and feminist ethics, it becomes evident that greater transparency, fair labor practices, and equitable treatment are necessary to address the issues of ghost workers.

#### Citations:

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