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RESEARCH

Three challenges for a global AI ethics: towards a more relational normative vision

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Abstract
When it comes to global coordination and global governance of AI, it is reasonable to suppose that we need a global ethics to guide it. But the idea of a global ethics of AI raises several philosophical and practical challenges which, despite the existence of AI ethics guidelines and related governance documents with a supranational character such as those from the European Commission, the OECD, UNESCO, and the UN, have received insufficient discussion. This paper argues that a truly *global* ethics of AI that aims to be effective and morally adequate must overcome at least three fundamental philosophical and practical, political challenges related to cultural differences, geopolitics and ideologies, and anthropocentrism. The paper offers some conceptual resources that may help to navigate these difficulties. The analysis and discussion provided in this paper can be used to critically assess existing AI ethics guidelines and offers elements of a vision for a global AI ethics that is more inclusive, more open, and more radically relational.

Keywords Global ethics · AI · Global governance · Cultural relativism · Nationalism · Sustainability · Climate · Relational thinking

1 Introduction

In the past years there have been calls for more global cooperation on, and global governance of, artificial intelligence (AI), both in the academic literature (e.g., [1, 5, 21]) and in the policy arena. For instance, the United Nations' High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence has been established under the assumption that 'globally coordinated AI governance is the only way to harness AI for humanity' [25] and there is an emerging global AI governance landscape [18]. Sometimes this is inspired by earlier work in the European Union to establish supranational ethics guidelines—the High-Level Expert Group on AI created *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* [10]—and a supranational governance framework for AI: the EU's AI Act was adopted in 2024.

In this context of moves towards a more global approach to the governance of the AI, it is reasonable to suppose that such efforts need to be underpinned by a global ethics of AI. But what does that mean? And is such a global ethics even possible? Despite the existence of AI ethics guidelines with a global scope, notably the UNESCO *Recommendation of the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (2022), but also the IEEE Ethically Aligned Design principles, the Global Partnership on AI, and to some extent the OECD's AI Principles ([17] updated version 2024), there has been too little reflection on the philosophical and practical challenges of formulating an effective and well-founded global ethics of AI. Engaging in such an exercise is important for ensuring the impact of existing global AI governance frameworks and for supporting the development of future ones.

This paper therefore takes a step back and argues that a truly global ethics of AI that is both effective and morally adequate must overcome at least three fundamental challenges that are philosophical and matters of moral imagination, but also at the same time practical and political. The paper is structured along the three challenges: (1) cultural differences, (2) geopolitics and political ideologies such as nationalism and imperialism, and (3) anthropocentrism and lack of relational thinking. The paper ends with a conclusion that suggests how these analyses and philosophical discussions may be used as an *instrument* to critically assess existing guidelines, and notes that they also offer elements of a

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vision for a global AI ethics that is inclusive, open, and more radically relational.

2 Three challenges

2.1 A philosophical and practical challenge: cultural differences

A key challenge for a global ethics of AI is the existence of cultural differences. Cultural differences have been a challenge to any philosophical ethics with universal pretentions [20]. Yet in a global context of AI ethics this is not only a philosophical but also a practical problem: non-Western countries may criticize existing ethics and regulations as disregarding their cultural values and (hence) as a form of colonialism and imperialism by other means. Moreover, they may not only philosophically criticize global AI ethics initiatives but also block the enforcement of global AI regulation on this basis. Proponents of a global ethics of AI—and indeed of global AI governance—that aim for a global regulation and a consensus on its ethical basis need to have a good answer to this objection from cultural difference.

A typical response is to refer to human rights as a framework. These human rights are supposed to be universal and hence seem a good normative anchor for global AI ethics and regulation. For example, many policy documents refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When it comes to values, the UNESCO recommendation starts with embracing 'human rights and fundamental freedoms and human dignity'. UNESCO [24] But as Wong [27] rightly notes, this approach is problematic in so far as it insufficiently account for cultural differences and even the role of culture per se. Not only is the human rights agenda often shaped by Western countries and can the interpretation of these rights differ and conflict, as Wong shows, there is also a deeper problem the very idea of individual rights per se might not be seen as important by cultures that put more emphasize on community and on the collective. For instance, individual privacy is not necessarily given the same weight in different cultures. It is important to be sensitive to these cultural differences. At the same time, one also needs to avoid a form of relativism that would disable any attempt to find a common, global ethics of AI. In other words: the mere existence of cultural differences should not be used as an excuse. How can and should a global ethics, including a global ethics of AI, deal with this challenge?

One reply is to reinforce the universalist position. After all, we *do* in fact share common needs and interests as human beings, and at a more general level, the challenges posed by new technologies such as AI are similar across countries and cultures. For example, while the biases and discriminations may differ across the globe, in all cases AI may worsen or reproduce them. For this reason, one could try to agree on a minimal ethical framework. Theologian Hans Küng, for instance, has proposed such a minimal global ethics based on human dignity, human rights, solidarity, and peace. He believes that ethics needs an objective foundation. We also have a collective responsibility to address global challenges such as war, poverty, and environmental degradation. At stake is our survival and the survival of democracy, which needs a basic consensus [11]. Today one could add the challenges of AI and climate change. According to Küng we have a planetary responsibility: we need a moral foundation that helps humanity to address global challenges and have a collective responsibility for the welfare of the planet. This is relevant to global AI ethics. However, while Küng recognizes diversity and says that shared ethical principles can be found through dialogue between different religions and cultures, this reply does not address the core critical concerns voiced by philosophers such as Wong. Not everyone thinks rights or dignity should be the cornerstones of AI ethics. Consider recent criticism of using the concept of dignity in AI ethics [22]. Rueda and colleagues argue that dignity is not specific enough as a normative guide since it can and has been used to defend opposing positions. For example, it has been used to both defend and oppose the development of care robots for the elderly. Next to those specific concerns, there is still the suspicion of ethical imperialism and colonialism, and it is not clear if and how cultural diversity is really taken into account in universalist approaches.

Another, perhaps more sophisticated and in any case more (moderate-)relativistic response is to mobilize the concept of ethical pluralism against ethical universalism. This is the approach taken by earlier scholars in the ethics of information technology. Ess [7] and Capurro [2] argued that multiple moral frameworks and cultural values must be taken into account when addressing issues in the digital age. For this purpose, they argue, we need intercultural dialogue and negotiation to mediate between different cultural and ethical systems. In this way they hope to avoid ethical imperialism on the part of the West: imposing Western norms and values on other cultures through technology and policy. With their concept of ethical pluralism, they thus propose a middle way between extreme relativism (anything goes) and strict universalism. Relativism fails to provide a basis for critique or dialogue across cultures and leads to incommensurability, but rigid universalism in turn risks to be imperialist and colonialist. Ess's position is that some core human values can be shared, but that there are also cultural differences in values and practices. A pluralist ethics respects cultural diversity while recognizing overlapping moral concerns though deliberation and intercultural dialogue. Capurro, inspired by the interreligious thinker Raimon

Panikkar, similarly recommends dialogue between cultures and stresses their complementarity. His position is based on Pannikar's [19] view that no single culture is complete or self-sufficient. True understanding requires dialogue,he proposes a pluralist hermeneutics based on humility, listening, and shared inquiry. Capurro therefore sees ethics as connected to hermeneutics: the idea is to understand, not impose. Moral insights emerge through mutual respect, openness, and interpretative negotiation rather than through pre-determined rules.

What is interesting in this conception of ethics of information technology, which we could also apply to global AI ethics, is that the common ground is not fixed a priori but is found through a procedure of respectful and ongoing dialogue. In such a conception of global ethics, human rights would not necessarily be excluded, but they could be part of a broader moral framework in which other values, concerns, and interests are also taken into account. It is an approach that aligns with Dewey's pragmatist approach [6], which emphasizes situated, participative, and democratic decision-making over rigid principles, and with approaches in contemporary ethics and political theory that criticize abstract rights and propose versions of universalism that leave room for pluralism in interpretation. Consider Nussbaum's work, for instance, which proposes capabilities as cross-cultural minimal ethical commitments with respect for cultural variation in how they are realized [15]. One could work towards a shared moral ground while allowing different interpretations. Moreover, taking inspiration from Dewey, one may also argue that ethics is an evolving, experimental process. It is open, never finished.

For a global AI ethics, this would mean that one must show more sensitivity to cultural differences (for instance individual privacy in Europe versus collective harmony in East Asia) both in the principles and in their interpretation, organize participative and democratic processes involving stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds instead of assuming universal standards from the outset, counter the ethical imposition of Western-centric ethical norms (ethical colonialism), and create a shared ethical baseline through political, philosophical, and religious dialogue while allowing for cultural flexibility in interpretation and implementation. It is also interesting to use Dewey's more experimental understanding of ethics for ethics of AI: given that the technology is relatively new, perhaps as a society we have to go through a process of learning and experimenting how to best deal with AI. And on the global level, cultural diversity could then be seen as a positive thing rather than a problem: in dialogue we can learn from other approaches that may be better than the ones we can imagine monoculturally. If we need to experiment, then we better ensure diversity in the input of ideas. The assumption is that one perspective is not enough since it is in principle incomplete; we better respectfully listen to others. It is our collective responsibility to together figure out how to address the ethical challenges raised by AI and its global impact. In line with both Küng and Pannikar, we could conclude that for a global AI ethics to succeed, we need to foster a spirit of cooperation and open dialogue; building our common future needs it. Academic AI ethics has started to contribute to this by engaging with non-Western perspectives and values, for instance Asian and African ones. For example, recently scholars in ethics of AI and robotics have shown interest in Ubuntu philosophy and values [4, 14].

However, it is not clear how optimistic one can be about the possibility of such a radically dialogical and open approach given the current global political context.

2.2 Political problems: geopolitics and ideologies

In the current global political context, it is difficult to establish effective forms of global governance due to competitions between states, dysfunctional international organizations, and a lack of agreement over policy priorities [21]. Behind this are not only cultural differences; instead, the main challenges seem to be (geo)political.

The possibility of a global AI ethics depends on what happens in this realm, and this does not only have to do with political-organizational matters but also with specific ways of thinking: political ideologies. In particular, efforts towards global AI ethics face the barrier of nationalism and related ideologies and are confronted with calls for digital sovereignty. Nations often wish to favor their own cultural norms or advocate for sovereign control over data, algorithms, and infrastructure. This may hinder efforts to arrive at globally shared ethical norms for AI. Multilateral cooperation and dialogue with regard to AI ethics and governance becomes increasingly difficult when right populist and nationalist movements withdraw from international institutions or weaken them. Consider for instance how the Trump administrations have consistently undermined internationalism. War also destroys trust and the possibility of a space in which dialogue can take place. Ethical principles may be hijacked to support nationalist narratives, for instance when AI is used for national security and concerns about bias and inequality may be downplayed. And fueled by nationalism and fascism, other cultures and societies may be seen as enemies. The result is that a pluralist perspective becomes impossible to implement. Ethical pluralism requires the acceptance of mutual vulnerability and openness, seeking a common ground through dialogue. But nationalism insists on security, borders, and difference and separation. More generally, convergence on a global ethics for AI becomes impossible when the possibilities for international dialogue

and ethical convergence are narrowing down or even closed off.

These challenges are increasingly recognized in the more critical regions of AI ethics. For example, in *A New AI Lexicon: AI Nationalism* [13] Mackereth notes that AI may reproduce nationalist projects and that in this sense there is a kind of 'AI nationalism'. For instance, the discourse on AI is plagued by the rhetoric of the AI arms race between China and the United States. This is a form of nationalism and imperialism. In such an ideological framework, AI becomes a nationalist and imperialist weapon in an arms race, perhaps even in a 'contest of racial and civilizational superiority' rooted in colonial history. In such a context, cultural differences come to be seen as unbridgeable or even annoying. Furthermore, AI nationalism can also take the form of maintaining and strengthening national borders, both metaphorically and literally, for instance through less international collaboration with regard to AI and through the use of AI surveillance technologies. In his Brookings Institution article on the geopolitics of AI, Larsen [12] examines how the United States, the European Union, and China are asserting control over data and AI technologies to protect national interests and 'digital sovereignty': there is a growing mistrust between nations and in response they each try to control their digital destiny and hence AI and related technologies. This emphasis on national (digital) sovereignty and self-sufficiently, however, threatens forms of economic interconnectivity, leading to fragmentation of both innovation and ethical discussion. Ideologies are used to create trenches. For example, the U.S. and the E.U. talk about human rights in the context of their competition with China. China, in turn, emphasizes social stability and social control, next to innovation, and rejects Western approaches and technologies. Ideological differences thus have geopolitical consequences for AI and, ultimtately, for dialogue about its global ethics and governance.

In response to these developments, one could insist on the importance of a global approach and use a moral argument to argue for the global governance of AI [5]: we need global ethics of AI since without it there will be morally problematic impacts, worldwide. Nationalist reflexes do not help dealing with them. Based on such reasoning, one could then try to create a pluralist, inclusive, and flexible governance mechanism that allows for ethical convergence without ethical imperialism. One could establish inclusive, multistakeholder governance processes that are more democratic in that they reduce the dominance of powerful nations and prevents ethical frameworks to be shaped by a few vested interests. One could use ethical diplomacy and start with soft law (non-binding legal agreements). One could also promote regional consensus on AI ethics. One could provide resources to the Global South to enable underrepresented groups to participate in AI ethics discussions and AI governance; ethical capacity-building is as important as technological. One could promote cross-cultural dialogue and ensure that education creates more awareness about (AI) ethics but also supports the training of skills and virtues for intercultural dialogue: education needs to build empathy, awareness, reflexivity, respect, and openness.

However, such an argument and vision is unlikely to succeed in a political context that is increasingly deaf to morality, empathy, and respect. If this is the case, one could rather take a more pragmatic approach. One could mobilize Hobbesian or otherwise contractarian arguments to say that nationalist directions lead to a worse situation for all—ultimately a Hobbesian "state of nature" in which there is only conflict and suffering, also through the use of technologies such as AI—and that in order to avoid this one situation one needs international cooperation and limitations to nationalist and digital sovereignty reflexes. This could then lead to a global AI contract with some minimal norms for ethical AI, which is not the result of moral convergence but pragmatic and contractarian thinking. The argument is not moral but practical: we need to agree to some AI rules at the global level in order to survive and have peace.

This pragmatic, realist direction could be supported by Sætra's Hobbesian argument for world government [23]. Hobbes argued that government is necessary to maintain order and peace between individuals. Sætra then argues that this argument could also be applied for the international level and make an argument for world government to ensure peace between nations and deal with crises such as the environmental crisis. Based on Sætra, one could argue that the absence of a global governing authority in AI development could lead to a competitive environment where nations prioritize their own interests over collective ethical standards. This risks to exacerbate issues such as injustice and security threats. To mitigate these dangers, one could then argue, we need the establishment of a global authority to oversee AI governance.

In practice, perhaps a combination of these two pathways is a realistic way of moving forward this area: one could argue that a more global approach is needed for both moral and contractarian reasons. In any case, the (geo) political problems show that without structural political and ideological change, significant success in creating an effective global AI ethics (and hence an effective global governance framework) remains unlikely. Nationalist ideologies and competition narratives render open dialogue and more intense international cooperation much harder. Harder borders and war make it impossible. The UNESCO [24] guidelines rightly endorse the value of 'living in peaceful, just and interconnected societies.' But realizing this value is difficult in the current geopolitical and ideological context.

2.3 Limitations of moral imagination: anthropocentrism and lack of relational thinking

Today there is increasing attention to environmental and sustainability issues raised by AI. In AI ethics there is an emerging academic literature on topics such as sustainability and climate [3, 26] and policy documents increasingly mention environmental matters next to (other) ethical issues. For example, the UNESCO [24] recommendation mentions the value of 'environment and ecosystem flourishing'. This sounds promising since it seems to imply recognition of beyond-human value. But despite this lip service to ecological perspectives, current AI policy fails to thoroughly integrate it in its ethical principles and does not sufficiently and critically discuss its anthropocentric orientation. This is problematic. Since AI systems increasingly influence not only human societies but also non-human animals, ecosystems, and planetary systems, it is important to question the human-centeredness of AI ethics and consider other, more relational worldviews than the Western one. These problems are also—and perhaps more so—relevant for the project of a global AI ethics, which inherently has a planetary scope.

Let me unpack this. Anthropocentrism is the belief that human beings are the most ethically significant entities in the universe. Anthropocentric AI ethics, then, is concerned with how AI affects humans while ignoring the impact of AI on animals and the environment. It is human-centered. A truly global ethics, however, must consider these beyond-human aspects and consider interconnected global systems and ecologies. So far, no major AI ethics framework, let alone *global* AI ethics guidelines, have systematically addressed and integrated issues such as ecological justice or inter-species ethics. Even the topic of (human-centric) sustainability is not sufficiently dealt with. For example, in contrast to its earlier ethics guidelines [10], the EU's AI Act [8] hardly mentions environmental issues. In response to this lacuna, global AI ethics needs to address issues regarding the environmental impact and sustainability of AI and its scope needs to be widened to non-humans.

Current AI ethics also tends to be based on Western liberal individualism while ignoring other, more relational worldviews (for instance indigenous ones) that do not restrict moral status to individual humans but extend it to non-human animals and the environment. For example, the Māori see all life as interconnected, including rivers, mountains, and forests, and natural entities like the Whanganui River have been granted legal personhood based on this view. Australian aboriginal cultures see the land as embodied with spirit beings. Rivers and rocks are seen as spiritual entities. The Native American Ojibwe religion (Anishinaabe) beliefs in the interconnectedness of all beings, both human and non-human. Inuit cultures see animals hunted for food as spiritual beings who need to be respected. Indigenous people from the Amazon emphasize harmony with the natural world, rather than domination over it. An effort to create a global AI ethics must take into account such different, more relational worldviews and religions.

In addition, some more relational Western views can also provide inspiration. For example, the mentioned theory of ethical pluralism goes beyond liberal individualism and acknowledges the role of emotions and imagination in ethics; this ethical imagination can also be pushed beyond the human. And Nussbaum [16] argues for adding animals to our frameworks of moral and political consideration: we should also include their capabilities and flourishing. Based on this view, one could argue that AI ethics should also take into account how AI influences animal capabilities and flourishing. We must use our moral imagination to envision AI's impact on animals and take their interests and needs into consideration. This is also relevant at the global, planetary level, which holds a diversity of species and ecosystems. While one would need to further discuss what such an extended capabilities approach exactly implies in theory and practice, from this perspective a focus only on our own, human flourishing seems unnecessarily and undesirably myopic.

Thus, from a relational perspective—Western or otherwise—a global AI ethics needs to be based on an extended moral and political scope and ultimately also on a deeper recognition of our *human* relationality, interdependence, and vulnerability, which then leads into non-anthropocentric directions. Humanity is highly (inter)dependent on the non-human world. From this perspective, anthropocentric ethics appears not only as yet another form of ethical imperialism, but also as a misunderstanding of, and ignorance about, our own nature as humans. In order to avoid *this* kind of imperialism and ignorance, we need to reflect on what we are and use our moral imagination to create a global AI ethics that includes non-humans such as non-human animals.

Finally, an anthropocentric AI ethics also fails to sufficiently address planetary sustainability and the planet's future. This is so since the environment is seen as merely instrumental to human needs rather than a stakeholder with intrinsic value, and since the emphasis is on local (national) conexts and on the short-term consequences of AI. Seen from a global, planetary point of view and longer-term perspective, these spatial and temporal limitations to our moral thinking are unforgivable. A global ethics of AI should be literally global in scope and future-oriented and consider not just short-term human benefits and challenges but also those of the next generations and the planet as a whole. For example, it is clear today that AI has a significant carbon footprint, that AI training is intensive, and that AI devices create electronic waste. These environmental and climate

problems should be treated not only as technical challenges but also as important ethical issues, both from a largely human-centred perspective (sustainability) and an ecocentric or planet-centred perspective.

In this context, it is important to recognize that AI itself may hinder the development and exercise of this moral and political imagination. AI often replicates anthropocentric bias in training data and thus replicates harmful human-centric norms and goals, rather than helping to bring about a world and a planet that is, and is likely to remain, hospitable to humans and non-humans. It is therefore important to work towards less anthropocentric directions not only by changing the minds of people but also by changing the technologies. A less anthropocentric AI ethics, at local and global level, can only come about if we also attend to the ways technologies and media shape our perception of the world and influence our thinking. In this light, it becomes important to creatively think about how AI can help us, rather than hinder, in extending our moral and political imagination beyond the human.

Note that some believe that a relational and more-than-human perspective also implies that one should consider giving moral and political status to AI itself. For instance, in the light of successes in the development and application of large language models, some people have claimed that AI is sentient or conscious. Some believe that addressing these experiences requires extending moral standing to such technologies, or at least seriously discuss the question regarding the moral standing of AI. I will not do this here, but for this purpose for example Gunkel's [9] and my own work in robot ethics may be helpful.

To conclude, from more relational points of view in both Western and non-Western cultures, anthropocentrism is inadequate for addressing the current global challenges and crises—in AI ethics and elsewhere. A non-anthropocentric, or at least *less* anthropocentric, properly global ethics of AI would help shifting the technology and the ethics in a direction that is not only more sustainable but also more radically pluralist, inclusive, and imaginative. For this purpose, we need education that trains people in thinking beyond the human and, taking seriously what technologies do to our perception and thinking, we need to re-shape our media and technologies—including AI—in ways that enrich and enlarge our moral imagination.

3 Conclusion

The three challenges for a global AI ethics analyzed and discussed in this paper are interesting topics in themselves and deserve more attention. The paper has shown that and why the project of a global AI ethics must respond to some key cultural, political, and philosophical challenges, and has offered some conceptual resources that may help proponents of such an ethics navigate these difficulties. But more work is needed to further develop the normative basis of a global ethics of AI that can handle these and other issues.

The discussions presented in this paper are not only philosophically interesting and needed; they have also practical and political relevance. For example, they may serve as a lens to critically interpret and assess existing AI ethics and policy frameworks, including those with a global scope and aim. The paper offers some comments on such texts (the UNESCO Recommendation and the EU AI Act), but more systematic and elaborate work in this area is to be welcomed.

Furthermore, from the three discussions emerges a specific normative horizon. The paper offers elements of a particular vision for a global AI ethics (and indeed a global ethics more generally): one that goes beyond the current Zeitgeist marked by insular and ethnocentric reflexes, nationalist and fascist ideologies, neo-imperialist political strategies, and naïve ethical anthropocentrism, and that is instead sensitive to differences, inclusive, open, respectful, dialogical, and truly relational. This may inspire people in AI ethics and policy: especially those already working towards a more global approach, of course, but hopefully also some others who might be encouraged to further explore and discuss this direction.

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