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Ethical Assessment of AI Cannot Ignore Cultural Pluralism: A Call for Broader Perspective on AI Ethics

Dr. Emmanuel R. GOFFI
Global AI Ethics Institute
Paris, France
emmanuel-goffi@hotmail.com

Louis COLIN
Poincaré Consulting
Paris, France
louis.colin@poincareconsulting.com

Dr Saida BELOUALI
ELCN - Université Mohammed Premier, Oujda, Morocco
s.belouali@ump.ac.ma

Abstract—

Artificial Intelligence is at the center of many discussions regarding the risks and benefits it could carry. The vocabulary of ethics is now widely used in order to build trust towards AI. Yet, the whole narrative stems almost uniquely from Western reflections leading to oriented ethical principles supposed to have a universal significance. Looking closely at the subject, it is clear that the ethical narrative is, first, not based on ethical grounds but on vested interests, and second, deprived of non-Western perspectives. This article aims at questioning the relevance of ethics as it is used in the field of AI and at calling for a deeper and broader ethical assessment of AI.

Keywords— ethics, artificial intelligence, culture, pluralism, universalism.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity."[1]

With this statement, UNESCO clearly establishes a link between human rights and cultural diversity. While the former should be respected at all times and in all places, the latter should be protected for both are deeply intertwined.

This strong tie between human rights and cultural diversity is also asserted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 22 that "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to

[1] Article 4 of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization at its thirty-first session on 2 November 2001.

realization, (…) of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality".[2]

In the same vein, the United Nations Charter states that the General Assembly is expected to make recommendations aiming at "promoting international cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields"[3] and calls for "international cultural and educational cooperation"[4] in several fields, even stressing the importance of ensuring just treatment and protection against abuses "with due respect for the culture" of the peoples.[5]

Yet, and intriguingly when it comes to ethics, it seems that cultural differences are left aside. Namely, in the case of artificial intelligence (AI), ethical standards clearly ignore the diversity of cultural perspectives on what is acceptable and what is not. It is believed that the only acceptable standpoint on AI ethics is a very superficial deontological Western view on the subject. This can be seen in the numerous AI codes of ethics that have been issued in the past five years.

Does that mean that diversity is no longer to be respected when it comes to AI ethics, which would mean that human dignity, and consequently human rights, should not be respected either? Or does that mean that the only way to have those rights respected is through the adoption of the Western approach of AI ethics?

The following lines are not intended to provide definitive answers to these questions but rather to humbly offer new approaches to the subject to open a real debate on AI ethics that would take into account cultural pluralism.

To do so, we will first try to understand what "AI ethics" is really about, deconstructing the sacrality of the phrase to bring it back to the secular world of rough reality. We will then develop the idea that philosophy is needed like never before to revitalize reflections on AI ethics and to avoid falling into the trap of what we call cosm-ethics. We will also elaborate on the importance of cultural diversity in the ethical assessment of AI-fitted systems to open new paths to explore and rearticulate the respect of

[2] The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22.
[3] United Nations Charter, Chapter IV: The General Assembly, Article 13.
[4] United Nations Charter, Chapter IX: International Economic and Social Cooperation, Article 55.
[5] United Nations Charter, Chapter XI: Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories, Article 73.

ethical particularisms with respect to human rights.

II. WHAT IS HIDDEN BEHIND AI ETHICS?

When looking at AI ethics, the first striking analysis is the lack of definition. Then the question arises: how to thoroughly address something that is ill-defined? Indeed, AI ethics is made of three words for which there is no clear and universally accepted definition.

A. A TYRANNY OF WORDS

Artificial, as opposed to natural, is a controversial word. Obviously, one can easily find a definition of artificial in any good thesaurus, yet this adjective is subject to various interpretations. The Merriam-Webster thesaurus defines artificial as something "humanly contrived often on a natural model," which is the widely used acceptation of the word. [1] However, it would be wise to question the meaning of "humanly" asking what "human" refers to exactly. We would then understand that since human is impossible to define, so is artificial. Intelligence is even more difficult to define, for it refers to different notions such as emotions, situation, data collection or processing, reasoning, understanding, and so on. As for ethics, it can be either seen as a synonym for moral using the etymology of the word, or as the study of the aim and construction of moral norms (metamoral), or even as the application of moral norms in specific situations (applied ethics). It may be seen as the mere opposition between Good and Bad or Right and Wrong, or as the questioning on the "best possible action" [2]. Ethics can stem from philosophical reflections or be revealed by gods like in the Chinese *shanshu* [3]. In other words, ethics is plural as it will be discussed.

Those three words, like any other, could be questioned through the difference stressed by Ferdinand de Saussure between signified and signifier in semiotics, that is to say, between the word as we hear or see it (the "sound-image") and the meaning each and every one of us will attribute to it (the "concept"). As Saussure wrote it, "contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact" [4]. Ultimately, the idea is that if one asks several people from several cultures to define one of these words, there is a good chance that definitions would differ widely from each other. As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote it in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "*the*

limits of my language mean the limits of my world" [5] [6].

Consequently, we would end up with very different understandings of the phrase "AI Ethics," which makes it an ambiguous notion subject to a wide range of interpretations. The notion of artificial intelligence is itself a questionable one since *"Artificial Intelligence* is a cultural reference," a myth that "signifies a subconscious collective meaning." [7]

At the very end, the question appears: are we, Westerners, up for the task? Can we offer an acceptable ethical framework given that "our point of view might be limited because of our language, which is not holistic?" [8].

Then, the first issue with AI ethics is that we basically do not know what we are exactly talking about. This said, AI ethics is widely used, studied, and even implemented. That can seem paradoxical at first sight, except if we consider that the common interpretation of the phrase is a social construction.

B. A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Social constructivism holds that "reality is socially constructed, and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs." [9]. According to constructivists, reality is built through interactions between individuals that lead to shared representations and meanings. [10] The constitution of thought patterns and "habitualized actions" that Berger and Luckmann call "typifications", which, once routinized, become institutionalized and eventually constitute institutions. [9] These institutions will set a social arrangement in which agents will act rationally and appropriately depending on their identities and roles.

Interestingly, and connected to our previous point on words, Berger and Luckman stress the fact that language is the key vehicle of ideas and meanings and that, consequently, it shapes our perceptions, our thoughts, and eventually the way we define things.

Thus, social constructivism explains how agents make rules, that in return make agents, and then how rules form institutions which form societies through continuous interactions. This process will influence perceptions and ultimately behaviors, particularly through the repetition of rules that people will finally follow without even knowing it. [11]

As we see it, norms participate in the shaping of our behaviors. In that sense, they represent a powerful tool to lead people without using force. Instead of coercing people, norms allow governments to influence their citizens, to bring them to act in a specific desired way without violence. In so doing, norms are participating in the governance of people's practices through a system made of several actors that do not have any individual power or authority to unilaterally make decisions or to define and put into practice any policy. As such, governance is a way of governing through a variety of public or private bodies that will try to set stable practices and institutions.

In the late 70s, in a lecture he gave at the Collège de France, French philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the concept of "*gouvernementalité*" (governmentality), referring to the process through which "the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" [12], or the art of governing bodies through "the *ensemble* formed by the *institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics* that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population." [13]

In other words, governmentality refers to all the means used by governing bodies to make human beings subjects through disciplinary technologies, including mechanisms of management and administration. Through these means, behaviors can be oriented and controlled in a very subtle way. Yet, this technique is widely used by norms entrepreneurs, namely "people interested in changing social norms" [14], or in other words, actors that are in some way willing to shape normative environments.

The Foucauldian *gouvernementalité* is therefore used to advance norms by political bodies. The case of the European Union (EU) is illustrative of that type of governance influencing perceptions about what is ethically acceptable and what is not and in shaping the normative environment of AI. In setting ethical standards from the development of a so-called "trustworthy AI," the EU is actually influencing perceptions about normative expectations in the field of AI. It is sending a message saying that AI must be trustworthy. Through this performative act of language, it shapes both conduct and the institutional

landscape. If this tendency to influence AI ethics can be considered beneficial in the sense that it helps to set guardrails to the development and use of AI, it can also be seen as a powerful method to impose specific views linked to vested interests on the subject.

When it comes to AI ethics, it is, for instance, noteworthy to state that norms are set almost exclusively by Western countries, and for the most part, by Western private actors. The issue here is that by doing so, the West is ostensibly denying the diversity of ethical perspectives and trying "to conduct the conducts" of non-Western countries. This approach is ethically disputable and represents the strongest biases of all in the AI field.

C. A STRUGGLE FOR AI DOMINANCE

So, it seems that, with AI, norms entrepreneurs have become "moral entrepreneurs" that became part of some kind of "moral crusade" [15] in order to advance and protect vested interests. The paradox is that the intention is not necessarily bad for "the crusader is not only interested in seeing to it that other people do what he thinks right. He believes that if they do what is right it will be good for them." [15].

Yet, those crusaders are drowning the field of AI under hundreds of codes of ethics supposed to regulate its development and use. In doing so, they are multiplying sources of norms, making them unreadable, which in turn renders them ineffective. Thus, the number of ethical guidelines related to AI has grown in a concerning way these past four years or so.

Today, available figures go from 108 codes according to the Dynamics of Principles Toolbox developed by the AI Ethics Lab, to 133 guidelines and charters listed by the Council of Europe in its Digital Policies Framework, to 167 documents found by the AlgorithmWatch project and its AI Ethics Guidelines Global, and up to 1,180 codes pertaining to ethical principles identified in a meta-analysis conducted in 2019 by a team from the ETH Zurich [16].

To understand the dynamic behind the rapidly increasing number of codes of ethics applied to AI, one must consider the wider picture and look at the harsh competition at the international level.

According to a PwC report issued in 2017, "AI could contribute up to $15.7 trillion to the global economy in 2030, more than the current output of China and India combined." Furthermore, the "greatest gains from AI are likely to be in China (boost of up to 26% GDP in 2030) and North America (potential 14% boost)" equivalent to a total of $10.7 trillion and accounting for almost 70% of the global economic impact [17].

Actually, AI will impact all sectors of human activities, and behind these activities, a struggle for power is at work. The December 2020 online edition of the Global AI Index developed by Tortoise identifies 62 countries participating in this race for AI with the US and China in the lead, and the UK, Canada, and Germany right behind, followed by France. Each of these countries has interests in developing AI, and if legal or ethical constraints are not always welcome, the power of norms is fully integrated into their strategies.

In the race for AI dominance, the stakes are high, and the struggle is harsh. With the US leading the sector, being competitive requests some strategy. In its New Generation of Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, China clearly asserted its willingness to "occupy the commanding heights of artificial intelligence technology" [18] by 2030. Meanwhile, in 2017 Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that "*whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world*," while Saudi Arabia decided to invest more than $5bn in artificial intelligence and declared that the Kingdom would rank among the top 15 countries in AI by 2030. These are a few examples out of dozens of countries running the AI race.

More than that, it is worth stressing that private actors are also part of the competition. Whether they are involved in political decision-making processes, in ethics committees at both national and international levels, or as mere companies, private actors are heavily participating in the setting of AI regulations. They are even more interested in ethical principles since most of them are not keen on being constrained by legal norms that could close out opportunities [19] This reluctance regarding legal instruments is shared by states that "have little interest in wanting to strictly regulate a disciplinary field that promises significant economic benefits" [20].

A quick look at some studies indicates that private companies are, along with public authorities, the main actors in the establishment of ethical guidelines. Thus, the ETH Zurich study reveals that "most documents were produced by private companies (n=19; 22.6%) and governmental agencies respectively (n=18; 21.4%)." [16]. Furthermore, in the study, 4.8% of the documents are produced by private sector alliances and 1.2% by political parties. Ultimately, the private sector and public authorities together count for 50% of identified guidelines. These figures are somehow confirmed by the AI Ethics Lab, which shows that 35.1% of the documents are produced by private companies and 29.7% by governments and governmental agencies. Out of the 35 documents exploited in their White paper, Fjeld et al. have listed 8 documents coming from the private sector (22.9%) and 13 from governments (37%) (8-9). Eventually, the Council of Europe Digital Policies Framework reveals that out of 133 codes or guidelines pertaining to ethical principles, 50 emanate from the private sector [21].

According to Louis Colin, this dominance of private actors over the setting of ethical regulation of AI can be explained by two factors. First, private players need to promote as much as possible the societal acceptability of their technologies by potential customers, and in particular, the European and American markets, which are increasingly techno-skeptical. Second, by defining what the ethics of AI are, private actors also implicitly define what they are not [22].

Whatever the reasons, this authority is not neutral. It carries interests that do not necessarily meet those of the public. As stated by Greene et al., it seems that private actors are working on moving the debate on the technical field using experts that will "draw a narrow circle of who can or should adjudicate ethical concerns around AI/ML." [19] In this framework, it is essential to understand "how values statements work to construct a shared ethical frame" and how they "offer a deterministic vision of AI/ML" [19]. Then, "there is an urgent need to collectively recognize that the path to technological progress cannot be traced by the private sector alone" [22].

D. A MERE COSM-ETHICS

Words are weapons. Their normative power is indisputable. Discourse is,

therefore, an extremely powerful tool as a performative statement modifying the ideal structures of agents in a set of interactions and constructing the social realities on which institutions are based [23]. Language is never unbiased, and even the simplest phrase can contain intention. Thus, whether they are explicit or implicit, performative utterances will influence our understanding of the world we live in and, consequently, the way we define ourselves and the way we act.

In the field of ethics, things are not different. As Austin relevantly wrote, "it has come to be commonly held that many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts: for example, 'ethical propositions' are perhaps intended, solely or partly, to evince emotion or to prescribe conduct or to influence it in special ways." [23]

The current struggle over the normative dimension of AI is a perfect demonstration of the role communication plays in shaping perceptions insidiously and, eventually, behaviors. Using language as a vector for influence is nothing new. In the present case, the universalist aims established by some actors raise the question of the legitimacy of the West and of private actors to impose a specific perspective on AI ethics.

The exercise is not neutral. As a performative speech act, AI ethics rhetoric insidiously imposes itself and suggests that the mere evocation of the word ethics, its simple addition as a qualifying adjective to AI, is enough to make the latter acceptable if not desirable.

This kind of stance asserting the importance of ethical regulations while running for AI dominance illustrates the tendency to use ethics as a marketing tool and to fall into ethics-washing [24], or cosm-ethics [25] [26], namely a narrative aimed at putting some ethical make-up on the ugly truth, at disguising a reality, that is often difficult to face, in order to make "acceptable, if not attractive, the unacceptable" [27] [28]. Correctly used, cosm-ethics can give moral crusaders a huge power in shaping our future. Thus, added to their increasing economic power, cosm-ethics reinforce the normative power of multinational companies that are "able to create standards through soft law or more indirectly through lobbying." [22]

Easy to handle, ethics is a tool of choice for those who embrace cosm-ethics. Going from ethics to aesthetics, the focus shifted from the acceptability of the uses of this new technique to the beauty of the discourse that has been built around the subject.

At the end of the day, put in experts' hands, cosm-ethics, as "a reductive pseudo-ethical discourse with rhetorical value, only aims to legitimize a technology whose numerous potential abuses cannot make us forget the economic, political and diplomatic issues" [27]. This can lead to questioning democracy itself since private companies are now able to act "outside of any democratic process" in order to advance their own economic interests short of any societal considerations. [22] Besides, their influence in political circles can lead to decisions made by public authorities that would not aim for the greater good of the greatest number but that would benefit a few groups and people, potentially to the detriment of the masses. There, the relations between the private and the public sector should be questioned thoroughly to understand what exactly is at stake when it comes to AI ethics and who is really leading and shaping the debate.

E. THE CASE OF THE EU AS AN EXAMPLE

The most illustrative example of what we have seen so far is the EU's attempt to enter the race without competing directly against the two leading giants. The EU, like any other AI race runner, is perfectly aware of the benefits it could generate from this technology. Then, positioning itself as a normative actor, the EU has found a way to enter the competition knowing that it is, nonetheless, lagging way behind many other competitors. Conversely to its rivals, the Union is putting a lot of effort demonstrating its will to see AI being framed by ethical standards short of legal norms.

In June 2018, the European Commission set a High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, which issued in April 2019 a document entitled *Ethics guidelines for Trustworthy AI*. In this document, seven principles are listed, with the purpose of "achieving Trustworthy AI" "in the service of humanity and the common good, with the goal of improving human welfare and freedom." [29]

At the same time, one must bear in mind that this posture comes with the scope of a tenacious competition driven by the promises of huge economic benefits. While asserting the importance of having an ethical framework for AI, the European Union developed nonconstraining tools such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and principles that both lend themselves to all kinds of interpretation and are almost impossible to operationalize and, therefore, to implement.

This led Professor Thomas Metzinger, a member of the commission's expert group that has worked on the European ethics guidelines for artificial intelligence, to write that "the Trustworthy AI story is a marketing narrative invented by industry, a bedtime story for tomorrow's customers. (…) Hence the Trustworthy AI narrative is, in reality, about developing future markets and using ethics debates as elegant public decorations for a large-scale investment strategy." [24]

This assertion is clearly supported by the content of the EU *White Paper on AI* issued in 2020, in which it is stressed that "Europe is well placed to benefit from the potential of AI, not only as a user but also as a creator and a producer of this technology" and that the Union "should leverage its strengths to expand its position" and seize "the opportunity ahead" with the clear aim "to become a world leader in this area." [30] The whole White paper is indeed built on the quest for competitiveness supported by the establishment of an ecosystem of trust, making the ethical stance of the EU all but clear. No doubt, lobbyists that are wandering in the EU's corridors have done their part advancing private interests hidden by soothing wording.

III. RENEWING THE REFLECTION ON AI ETHICS

A. A WESTERN-ORIENTED AI ETHICS

A quick look at existing guidelines and other codes demonstrates that too many norms are killing norms.

Hence the question: "Do those ethical guidelines have an actual impact on human decision-making in the field of AI and machine learning?" [31]. According to Hagendorff the "short answer is: No, most often not." So, it seems that we are now in a dead-end: a situation where we are observing a multiplication of ethical guidelines applied to AI leading to saturation and deregulation, and where

eventually "AI ethics is failing in many cases" [31].

As we have seen it AI ethics is mainly the product of Western actors, mostly from the private sector and governmental authorities, with an instrumental purpose and where "in cases where ethics is integrated into institutions, it mainly serves as a marketing strategy" [31]. In this context, AI ethics look more like an arena where gladiators are fighting for survival than an Agora where people would debate about the future of the City.

In this struggle over ethical norms, Westerners have taken the lead. According to Jobin et al., 57 codes out of the 84 studied, 67.9% of the total, have been issued by the West – EU, USA, UK, Australia, and Canada, not to mention the participation of these countries in the setting of International Organizations guidelines – with the US and the UK counting for 59.6% of Western documents [16]. 82% of the codes identified by the AI Ethics Lab and 81% of those listed by the European Council Digital Policies Framework list have been produced by the West, despite the fact that the West, at large, represents barely 15% of humanity.

With an average of 77% of ethical guidelines elaborated by the West, a bit more than one-tenth of the world's population orients the reflection and sets ethical standards applicable to AI for all of humanity. What about China or India, which represent respectively 19% and 17.6% of humanity? What about Africa, which represents 16% of humanity? Furthermore, AI ethics stem from both a Judeo-Christian perspective and "Western ethical traditions" [32], with a huge focus on a shrunk approach of deontology. Adding to this the fact that most of these codes are written and issued by private actors and public authorities and that, in these spheres, only a few people actually work on them, it seems reasonable to assert that current AI ethics guidelines are made by an infinitesimal number of individuals in the Western world.

In political philosophy, such a situation of dominance is labeled tyranny. In any case, it is an ethically highly disputable situation.

At a time where biases are at the center of ethical concerns related to AI, it seems legitimate to wonder whether the "Western bias" that the "Western cultural hegemony" [33] represents is ethically acceptable.

Wouldn't the globalization of ethical principles of AI beyond cultural particularisms and civilizational considerations pose a problem, more specifically, an ethical problem? [2].

B. LOOKING TOWARDS NEW PERSPECTIVES

In order to avoid a dead-end, we need to step back from the idea of the universality of ethics in AI to examine, in particular, its contingent nature [34].

First, we need to abandon the unique superficial deontological perspective that aims to set norms by establishing what is to be done and what is not. Understanding deontology as the mere promulgation of rules in a top-down approach is not only contrary to the very spirit of deontology as developed by Immanuel Kant, but also to any democratic process. The point here is not to consider that democracy must preside over decisions made regarding AI ethics but to stress the contradiction and the gap between the value granted to democracy by Westerners and its application in the real world. This obviously highlights the difference between statements and acts or between theory and practice.

However, "checkbox guidelines must not be the only "instruments" of AI ethics" and a more bottom-up approach should be explored. Furthermore, we must consider moving from a "deontologically oriented, action-restricting ethic based on universal abidance of principles and rules, to a situation-sensitive ethical approach based on virtues and personality dispositions, knowledge expansions, responsible autonomy and freedom of action" [31].

Deontology is not the only tradition to be used in the ethical appraisal of AI. Consequentialism, which goal is basically the maximization of the satisfaction of the greater number, can also shed new light, especially for governments, on the subject. Aristotelian virtue ethics could also bring valuable consideration to AI ethics, notably concerning questions related to both individual and collective responsibilities. In marginalizing these two traditions in favour of deontology, the reflection on AI ethics is limited to a very narrow analysis.

Beyond these traditions, it would also be worth looking into other kinds of ethical perspectives. The ethics of care developed by Carol Gilligan [35] would, for instance, bring AI ethics back to its role as a mediator between human beings and

aim at harmonious relations within and between societies. This feminist approach, based on the idea that men and women have a different moral development, is "grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and heard with respect" [36]. Such a perspective would allow the necessary open-mindedness when it comes to different voices that have remained or kept silent.

Other philosophers such as Hans Jonas would provide us with tools for a deeper reflection regarding our responsibility in terms of "the survival and humanity of man from the excesses of his own power" [37]. His ethics, applied to technology, would definitely enlighten the debate on the future of AI and its consequences, foreseeable or not, on humankind. As Jonas writes it: "the first duty of an ethics of the future: visualizing the long-range effects of technological enterprise" [37]. Consequently, we all have a duty to abide by an imperative of responsibility that he formulates this way: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life." [37]

Even before thinking about our responsibility towards the future, it would also be beneficial to question our deeply rooted belief that technology is a mere tool in humans' hands and that, consequently, we are and will remain in control of AI. Indeed, "for years, experts have debated the issue of technological determinism" [2]. Yet, with AI, we have embraced the instrumental stance stating that "technologies are 'tools' standing ready to serve the purposes of their users" [38]. This stance must be put in the wider competitive context we have seen earlier in which cosm-ethics is resorting to a reassuring vocabulary aiming at building trust. Nonetheless, asserting that humans are and will remain in control of AI can and should be challenged using Martin Heidegger's critical thought on our blindness towards the very essence of technology to which we are chained [39] or even Gilbert Simondon and Jacques Ellul perspectives on our alienation from technology [40] [41]. This substantivist approach of the relationship between humans and technology claims that "technology is relentlessly overtaking us" shaping our perceptions, and restructuring our social world through the establishment of "a new cultural system."

[38] As with AI, "technology threatens to slip from human control," the myth of human control over technology needs more than ever to be disputed. [39]

Through those few examples, we can see that ethics is far from being homogenous and one. Ethics is indeed plural, and facing the rise of AI, this plurality must feed the debate.

C. FROM SINGULAR ETHICS TO PLURAL ETHICS

Interestingly, AI presents the advantage of putting us in front of ourselves, discovering our weaknesses and flaws. Doing so, it invites us to question the very meaning of ethics and to explore its complexity. Trying to mimic human cognitive abilities is helping us to understand what we really are, but it also plunges us into the intricacies of the human mind.

AI is giving us a unique chance to revitalize the debate on ethics in its original vocation of a social mediator. It is up to us to seize it and to challenge our convictions. A first step would be to accept the diversity of ethical viewpoints. Instead of being adamant on the supposed universality of ethics relying on supposed universal values, we might admit that ethical particularisms are not only a reality but also humankind's riches.

As Belouali et al. put it, "ethics is contingent" [2]. This contingency lies on the fact that human beings do not share values. At best, we can postulate the existence of a universal structure of values [42], but so far, the reality of even one universal value has not formally been proved. Here again, words are powerful tools, and the overuse of the word "universal" and its derivatives led us to lose sight of its very meaning to accept it as a synonym for "generally," "widely," or even "predominantly." Yet, strictly speaking, there is no universal value out there.

Starting from this assessment, it becomes evident that without universally shared values, there cannot be any universally accepted ethical rules.

Even if we admit that human beings can universally recognize common values, that will not entail that they would grant them equal importance and prioritize them the same way [2]. The hierarchy of values is thus not common to all human communities. This hierarchy is actually possible only within a culture or in relation to an individual [34].

Paul Ricœur's categorization can help to grasp the complexity and diversity of ethics. Separating moral from anterior ethics and posterior ethics, Ricœur allows us to operationalize ethics and withdraw it from its subjective relation to moral obligation. According to the philosopher, "we need such a split, fragmented, dispersed concept of ethics, anterior ethics pointing to the rooting of norms in life and in desire, posterior ethics aiming to insert norms in concrete situations," in what he calls practical wisdom [43]. When it comes to AI ethics, the trap in which we have fallen is to consider that there is no difference between moral and its imperative injunctions and applied ethics and the liberty of action it implies. To some extent, we can postulate that "morality is not negotiable, whereas ethics is reasoned" [2]. In other words, posterior ethics set the final aim of life as the quest for a "good life with and for others within just institutions" [44], while anterior ethics contextualize action in specific situations. Both ethics are articulated within the realm of moral norms, but Ricœur considers that ethics has primacy over morality and, consequently, that the aim, namely the quest for a good life, has primacy over the norm [45]. What that means for AI ethics is that assessing AI through the unique lens of Kantian categorical imperatives regarding what is acceptable and what is not denies individuals' right to be autonomous in their decisions, to act according to a context.

This problem is not new, and the risk of moral absolutism stemming from a strict and superficial understanding of Kantian deontology is well known and documented. William D. Ross William tried to actualize Kantian deontology making it adjustable to conditions through a system of deontological pluralism asserting the existence of both *prima facie* duties, incumbent to circumstances of the case, and duties proper, based on the situation [46]. In any case, the appraisal of AI systems should free itself from rigid deontology to focus on a contextual approach.

The risk of moral absolutism carried by moral crusaders is not mere philosophical ethereal consideration real; it is real and already causes diplomatic issues in wider circles, as illustrated by the harsh exchange between US and Chinese representatives in Anchorage on March 18th when Dr. Yang, the Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief,

responding to criticism coming from the American side stated: "I don't think the overwhelming majority of countries in the world would recognize that the universal values advocated by the United States or that the opinion of the United States could represent international public opinion, and those countries would not recognize that the rules made by a small number of people would serve as the basis for the international order" [47].

Thus, ethics cannot be universalized, whether in the field of AI or in any other field, for neither values nor their hierarchy are universal. The ETH Zurich study showed that "no single ethical principle appeared to be common to the entire corpus of documents, although there is an emerging convergence" [16]. In the same vein, one of the key findings of a study conducted by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) is that each of the 18 national strategies for AI exploited was unique and that they do not share the same strategic priorities [48]. This is to be related to the point we made about the race for AI dominance which shapes national strategies and their priorities. In some cases, ethics is not even mentioned in strategic documents like for Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. That does not mean that these countries do not have ethical guidelines, but at least it tends to show that ethics might not be in their strategic priorities list.

Eventually, it is clear that our narrow perspective on ethics as a regulation tool is challenged by philosophy and by the reality of our world. Viewing ethics as the mere application of the deontological principle is not only ineffective, but it is also dangerous. Norms are power, for they enhance both control over valuable resources, of which AI is part of, and over the influence some actors can have on others' "affect, cognition, and behavior" [49]. Norms, thus, participate in the ethical tyranny of the atrophied Western deontology that "alter others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments." [49]

There are still many other paths to be explored in AI ethics, and rigid deontology is far from being the only relevant approach to the topic. In that framework, there is an existential need for opening the debate to non-Western philosophies and wisdom. In a globalized world, where diversity is praised as richness, it is paradoxical to accept that the unique Western perspective could

define for the rest of the world what is acceptable and what is not regarding AI.

D. AN OPENING TO NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

In 1980, in a seminal work recognized as a reference in cross-cultural comparative research, Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede studied how organizational cultures in the workplace can differ from a country to another depending on specific values, customs, and behaviors. In his book, Hofstede argues that "each person carries a certain amount of mental programming" that is "partly unique, partly shared with others" [50]. Thus, cultures are the product of "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."[50] In other words, cultures are based on different programmings that lie on different values and lead to different behaviors. What is true for organizations is also true for bigger communities or societies.

The point here is to consider that when it comes to AI ethics, it is important to understand the mental programming through which cultures have been built instead of requesting them to accept our own programming.

As Kai-Fu Lee wrote it, "it is becoming harder to force people of all countries and cultures into a cookie-cutter mold that was often built in America for Americans" [51]. The exchange between China and the US in Anchorage is illustrative here.

In the world of technologies, it is noticeable that the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) is questioning the "monopoly on ethics by Western ethical traditions" and stressing that the full benefit of autonomous and intelligent technical systems "will be attained only if they are aligned with society's defined values and ethical principles." [32] According to the Institute, there is an "urgent need to broaden traditional ethics in its contemporary form of 'responsible innovation' (RI) beyond the scope of 'Western' ethical foundations." [32] In its document, the IEEE even offers some openings on non-Western ethical traditions such as Classical Buddhism, African Ubuntu, and Japanese Shinto.

This interest in non-Western ethical traditions demonstrates that what Mahdi

Elmandjra calls the "cultural arrogance" [52] has limits and that, in the field of technology, we might have reached them.

Other cultures challenging our restricted and restrictive perspectives on AI ethics will certainly open doors towards new options. It would mostly avoid tensions regarding norms between the West and rising AI powers such as China. It seems unlikely that, if China reaches its goal to become the leader in AI by 2030, the Empire will keep on accepting a normative diktat from the European Union and the US. China is actually an interesting illustration of our inability to understand cultural differences in the field of AI. This inability, rooted in our ignorance about the Confucian grounds of the Chinese mentality, is furthermore reinforced by our rejection of its political system, which has eventually taken precedence over the respect of its cultural rights engraved in the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the UN Charter. From a Chinese perspective, this is seen as an infringement of the Chinese people's dignity.

In the field of AI, it is clear that cultural differences can lead to very different viewpoints on what is acceptable and what is not. This has been illustrated by the Moral Machine project set by the MIT and gathering data "on the way citizens would want AVs [autonomous vehicles] to solve moral dilemmas in the context of unavoidable accidents" provided by 70,000 participants from 42 countries [53]. Following the experiment, a paper published in 2020 identifies several cultural clusters and demonstrates that "every culture has rules about what is right or wrong, but they often disagree on the particulars of moral decisions. Moral universals are difficult to find, as they often reveal some degree of cultural variation upon closer inspection." [54]. If it is clear, as the authors themselves admit it, that the study is questionable on several points and that its results must not be used for normative purposes [55], it nonetheless highlights trends that tend to show that culture is far from being neutral when it comes to ethical appraisal, and that, at least, deserve deeper scrutiny. The experiment reveals, for instance, that there are "systematic differences between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures" [53].

This split between individualistic and collectivistic cultures clearly impacts the way different cultures will address problems such as autonomous cars risk-

related for pedestrians, data collection and processing, or the use of lethal autonomous systems. Since "the "West", however it may be defined, is an individualistic society, arguably more so than much of the rest of the world", its perspective on video surveillance and facial recognition will obviously differ from other collectivistic cultures. [32]

As Soraj Hongladarom puts it, "Buddhism has much to offer anyone thinking about the ethical use of technology, including those interested in AI" [56]. It could help bridge the individualistic perspective with the collectivist one offering "ethical statements formulated in a relational way, instead of an absolutist way" [32]. Applied to privacy, Buddhist ethics sheds new light on questioning the relevance of the self and, consequently, of the reification of individuals as owners of private data and showing that, given the absence of self in the Buddhist tradition, privacy is nonsensical, at least in the way the notion is understood in the West [57].

Other cultural standpoints such as Shinto would also challenge our relationship with robots, for the relationship between AI systems and human beings, in the Japanese culture, is way more natural than it is in the Western world. [32].

In Africa, "Ubuntu philosophy tells us that Humans are interconnected" [58], that conversely to the West, individuals are not an end but cogs in a larger ecosystem. The quest for happiness is then not related to the satisfaction of individual needs but to the building of harmonious relations within the community. Thus, when it comes to privacy Ubuntu emphasizes transparency to group members rather than individual ownership of data [59], stressing the gap between the rational personhood of Western culture and the relational one advanced in the Ubuntu tradition [60].

The Muslim world should also be part of the debate. As stressed by Dr. Junaid Qadir and Amana Raquib, "there's a lack of representation in AI for the two billion people who profess these beliefs." [61] The Muslim perspective on AI used for medical purposes would, for instance, revitalize the debate on life prolongation by technological means. It would also pave the way for a new discussion on the use of driverless cars. [61]

These are a few examples of other perspectives that need to be integrated to

the reflection on AI ethics. Further work needs to be done in order to dive into the complexity of cultures and their relationship to technology.

At the end of the day, what is clear is that "one of the big mistakes done by Western values promoters (…), is to qualify as universal all their values and conceptions of democracy, human rights, justice, equity, rationality, scientific method, technology, aesthetic." [33]

In doing so, the West deprives itself of the richness of cultural diversity and, at the same time, this tends to deny peoples their fundamental cultural rights indispensable for their dignity.

IV. CONCLUSION

While we were writing these lines, UNESCO held a roundtable on the ethics of artificial intelligence entitled "Shaping the Future of AI through Cultural Diversity" showing, if needed, that the subject is of utmost importance and topical.

This article has not been written as an end in itself. It has been envisioned as a starting point for further discussions, a means to a greater end which is the needed debate on AI ethics and its relationship to cultures. Every point, every statement, every analysis is disputable and must be disputed to open the subject to the wider range of perspectives possible.

We have thus tried, roughly, to explain what is hidden behind the phrase "AI ethics," shedding light on the complexity of the notion, on the bigger picture it must be placed in, and on the importance of wording as a normative tool shaping perceptions and influencing behaviors. From our work, it appears that AI ethics is a purely Western product that defines for the whole world what is acceptable and what is not, what is to be done and what is not. Furthermore, we have seen that only some actors in the West are deciding upon the norms that must frame the development and use of AI. This tyranny of Western norms is slowly and insidiously pervading minds all around the world, denying the right for cultures to express their peculiarities and have a say in the debate on a technology that is slowly invading people's everyday lives worldwide.

There is a strong existential need for revitalizing the debate over AI ethics. Discussions must integrate new perspectives that will both challenge mainstream approaches, namely atrophied deontology and the instrumental view on

technology and help us to make better choices through the confrontation of opinions.

The technological future of humanity depends on the respect and the integration of cultural particularisms leading to them to balance each other out to prevent us from venturing into destructive horizons. The cultural uniformity carried by the crusaders of universal morality can only lead to tyranny, a moral unipolarity that will crush diversity and create and accentuate tensions between peoples.

Let us give the final word to the great Moroccan sociologist, Mahdi Elmanjdra:

> "The blossoming of this cultural diversity cannot, however, occur without freedom, the freedom to think in a different way, the freedom to live and act in accordance with the specific and inalienable values of each community" [33].

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