

A Phenomenological Study of the Place of Human Autonomy and Agency in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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<https://doi.org/10.62050/faic2025.bop25.007>

Abstract

Artificial intelligence has greatly influenced our modern society and is being incorporated into almost all facets of human life. The capabilities and possibilities of AI are endless but its use and safety has raised a lot of ethical questions. There are also concerns that AI will negatively impact humanity if it is not designed and used ethically. Ethical considerations in the design and use of AI is a recent and pertinent issue which designers and producers of AI need to consider because of the possibilities of its tremendous impact on humanity. The dilemma of the place of human autonomy and agency in this new age of artificial intelligence is a notable ethical issue which the paper seeks to address; will human dependence on AI lead to the reduction of human autonomy and agency in the future? Will our preference for efficiency and optimization lead to the replacement of humanlike traits with machinelike traits? Employing the existentialist framework, this paper sets out to explore the place of human autonomy and agency in the age of artificial intelligence, it identifies the impact of the adoption and use of AI on human freedom, it also advocates for a future without total reliance on AI. Adopting the phenomenological method, it seeks to establish that humanity must maintain control over AI to ensure its safety and that AI must be designed and produced in a way that it augments humanity and not made to replace humanity. This must be done to ensure that humanity does not become over dependent on AI in the future. The paper recommends that AI must be designed to align with human values to ensure the preservation of human autonomy and agency in a world that is increasingly becoming dependent on AI.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, ethics of AI, autonomy, agency, existentialism.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is changing the world, it is impacting how we live, work and play. It is influencing human interaction, experiences, actions and freedom. AI has been incorporated into almost all sectors of the society and nations are all jumping aboard the AI ship. The age of AI has already begun and we must move along with it or get left behind. AI is currently being used across industries and there are prospects for incorporating it into many more industries including: healthcare, finance, transportation, education, customer service, cyber security etc. The advantages of AI are numerous and its possibilities are also promising. Many companies or groups now use AI to help them take more informed decisions because AI's capabilities makes work and analysis way easier that it was in the past. According to Meissner and Narita (2023) "Artificial intelligence already plays a crucial role in the decision-making processes of many companies and is increasingly used to inform policy and public sector decisions around

the world. Supervised learning, for example, is already used by some governments to detect potential criminals and terrorists”

AI has numerous advantages and promise but there are concerns about its use now and for the future. Ethical considerations in the use of AI has been the topic in various conferences, workshops and summits across the world and there are concerns that unethical use of AI could be harmful to humanity. Ethical issues which arise from the use of AI include bias, worsening gender inequality, increasing the divide between owners and users of these technologies, etc. and it is therefore pertinent that ethical considerations be made in the design and programming of AI.

Human autonomy and agency are ethical issues which border on human existence. Existential questions concerning human autonomy and agency arise as our world is becoming more dependent on AI. As AI takes on decision making roles, humanity need to ensure that AI is designed or programmed to reflect human values since AI can influence human decisions or choices. There is concern that because of the ease and capabilities of AI, humanity may become over dependent on the use of AI, this will have negative impact on our ability to act freely or take our own decisions without the influence of AI. This paper focuses on how AI has influenced and will continue to influence human beings and the need to design and use AI in a manner that is ethical and that will not erode human autonomy and agency.

Conceptual clarification

Artificial intelligence: Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think and learn like humans. Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think and learn like humans. The term may also be applied to any machine that exhibits traits associated with a human mind such as learning and problem-solving. According to Cole Stryker and Eda Kavlakogl (2024)

Applications and devices equipped with AI can see and identify objects. They can understand and respond to human language. They can learn from new information and experience. They can make detailed recommendations to users and experts. They can act independently, replacing the need for human intelligence or intervention (a classic example being a self-driving car).

The term is frequently applied to the project of developing systems endowed with the intellectual processes characteristic of human beings such as the ability to reason, discover meaning, generalize or learn from past experience. The term may also be applied to any machine that exhibits traits associated with a human mind such as learning and problem-solving. According to Moumita G. and A. Thirugnanam (2021) types of AI include:

1. Narrow or Weak AI: Designed to perform a specific task, like image recognition or language translation.
2. General or Strong AI: Aims to match human intelligence and perform any intellectual task.
3. Superintelligence: Significantly surpasses human intelligence and capability

Autonomy: According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “autonomy has been variously rendered as self-law, self-government or self-determination. is variously rendered as self-law, self-government, self-rule, or self-determination. The concept came into prominence in ancient Greek cities which were called autonomous because they were self-governing.” The Encyclopedia Britannica also defines it as the state or condition of self-governance, or leading one’s life according to reasons, values, or desires that are authentically one’s own. The concept

of autonomy came into prominence in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In Kant's ideas, autonomy consists of the capacity of the will of a rational being to be a law to itself, independent of the influence of any property of objects of volition. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy "an autonomous will is said to be free. Human autonomy can be said to be the freedom of a human being to act independently without external influence or control. An autonomous person can take decisions without the aid or influence of other persons outside of that person.

Agency: according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, agency denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity. In classical philosophical thought, human beings have been identified as rational actors that are capable of making independent choices based on personal will, reason and ethics. Schlosser (2019) defines it as "person who or thing which acts upon someone or something; one who or that which exerts power; the doer of an action". Ferrero (2022) sees agency as a "capacity that can be possessed without being exercised or manifested. Those who possess this capacity are agents, agency is goal directed and a productive power" this implies that agents can set out a goal and act in ways to achieve this goal by themselves.

Materials And Methods

Philosophical framework

This research adopts the existentialist framework. Existentialism is a school of thought in philosophy that studies human existence, it holds that existence precedes essence; emphasizing the role of human beings in creating their essence. According Lacey (1976) "men are not predetermined, men make their essences as they go along and do not have a predetermined essence or blueprint. Men are free and although the existentialists differ in the reality and nature of this freedom, they generally agree that men can choose and become something other than what they are presently." Freedom, authenticity, choice and responsibility are key concepts in existentialist thought. Autonomy and agency are closely related to human freedom to make choices as free acting agents that create their essence in a world which they find themselves thrown into. Human beings navigate the world and through their choices, create themselves. In a world that is filled with uncertainty and unpredictability people express their independence and their ability to own decisions by taking accountability for their decisions and actions (Amrit 2024) people are free to choose what they will with their freedom but will also be responsible for their actions as free people. Existentialism encourages people to accept their extreme freedom and take ownership of their decisions and deeds (Amrit, 2024.)

Autonomy and agency are important concepts in existentialism because the belief in human freedom depicts the ability of the individual to choose and act. Central to the thought of most existential philosophers is that personal freedom, responsibility and free choice are essential to the journey of self-discovery and meaning of life. There are many ethical issues raised when we consider the existential implications of human autonomy and agency such as freedom, responsibility, free choice, etc. It is therefore, important to consider how these existential issues can be addressed in the Age of AI.

Phenomenological Method

The employed the phenomenological method which is a qualitative philosophical method. the research employed the use of books, journals, internet sources and other materials/documents for data.

Results and Discussions

Human Autonomy and Agency in the Age of AI

According to UNESCO (2021)

The rise in AI has created many opportunities globally from facilitating healthcare diagnosis to enabling human connections. Through social media and creating labour efficiency through automated tasks, however; these rapid changes also raise profound ethical concerns. These arise from the potential AI systems have to embed biases, contribute to climate degradation, threaten human rights and more. Such risks associated with AI have already begun to compound on top of existing inequalities resulting in further harm to already marginalized people/groups.

Ethical concerns in AI therefore must be addressed to reap the rewards or benefits of AI.

On a positive note, Breakthrough in AI technologies have produced AI systems that can analyze large amounts of data and make decisions in milliseconds which is beyond what human beings can do. Stahl (2012) points out that “in reality, AI is already at work all around us, impacting everything from our search results to our online dating prospects, to the way we shop. Data shows that the way we use AI in many sectors of business has grown by 270% over the last four years.” The increase in the use of AI all over the world has led also to knowledge of AI becoming a marketable skill. Some jobs now and in the future will even require AI skills in jobs unrelated to tech because of the widespread use of AI and its wide reach. Stahl (2012) also observes that “AI and machine learning are at the top of many lists of the most important skills in today’s job market. Jobs requesting AI or machine learning skills are expected to increase by 71% in the next five years” this projection only reflects the speed with which AI use has advanced and will still advance over the next few years.

We are becoming increasingly dependent on AI because of its capabilities and speed. Decision making is another aspect that is making human beings more dependent on AI because AI systems have been used to trade in financial markets, for content creation on social media, in academic research, even in medical diagnostics. These are all areas where human brains and minds were previously employed, but AI has changed the game. Many companies who previously employed people to perform these functions now rely on AI because among other capabilities, AI can analyze vast data with great speed and accuracy. Narayan (2024) argues correctly that:

From a deterministic point of viewpoint, one might argue that decision making has always been influenced by external systems be it traditional norms, education or laws, AI in this sense is just another layer added to an already complex system. But there is something uniquely disruptive about AI’s decision making capacity; it is not human and yet it is beginning to reflect and shape human values, behaviors and outcomes.”

Narayan’s observations about how AI has influenced us are clearly observed in our society today. The use of AI in research have raised ethical concerns to the extent that some educational institutions have banned the use of AI for research for both students and teachers. Oyebanji (2024) reports that “some schools in New York have banned the use of Chat GPT by students and teachers to prevent plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism checkers have become common tools used by teachers to check the use of AI in research papers, books,” There many problems which arise from the integration of AI into education such accessibility and equity in its use, data privacy and security, ethical use of AI and training and capacity building. The use of AI in research has created dependence and students no longer engage in research, AI presents them with an easy escape from the rigors of research so they easily employ AI to do term papers or final year projects which they do not have any personal touch or impute in because AI does all

the work for them. How can such a student be versed in research or his area of study if AI does all the work?

Dependence of AI is a major issue which will face humanity in this age of AI and the consequence of such dependence is pointed out by Saied-Faraz et al (2023): “when the usage and dependency of AI are increased, this will automatically limit the human brain’s thinking ability/ capacity, this removes intelligence and make them more artificial. It will slowly and gradually starve the human brain of thoughtfulness and mental efforts as it gets deep into each activity like planning and organizing.” A clear example of this is the invention of the electronic calculator, the calculator does all calculations when used and gives accurate results. The side effect of this is that it has made its users unable to calculate even simple sums or values with their brains, even when they are able to do so without the calculator, it is done with much difficulty and requires a longer period of time to complete the task correctly. This also applies to the use of AI in our world today. The invention of self-driving cars will make humans not to imagine or unwilling to learn how to drive, the question will be why do I need to learn how to drive when the car can drive itself? There will also be no need to learn how to navigate ones movement or learn directions because the self-driving car will take you to your destination while you relax and enjoy the ride.

If AI is left do all our work for us, what then is our use or purpose? How do we develop skills, acquire knowledge and improve on our skills? How do we discover our capabilities and the possibilities of our being? There is a danger of losing or reducing our intellectual capabilities over time and it is necessary that especially in the process of leaning, that the learner is actually involved in the learning process and actually acquires knowledge.

Preserving Human autonomy and agency in the age of AI

AI is changing the way we live, work, act and interact. The internet, social media and mobile phones have changed how we interact in our world. The invention of more sophisticated AI technologies will further change how we live.

We are already in the age of AI and this fact cannot be disputed. AI has been incorporated into decision making roles and the advantages of using AI are numerous for individuals, companies, nations, etc. Meissner and Narita (2023) hold that “some decisions today are already made entirely by AI. For instance, at Ant Financial, AI is approving loans and will now be increasingly used in wealth management. Also, tech companies like Facebook, Microsoft and Netflix allocate digital content by reinforcement learning algorithms. At Amazon, for example, 35% of revenue is driven by AI recommendations.”

As AI takes on more decision making roles, human freedom to choose diminishes. Human autonomy and agency recedes or is eroded when we cede our decision making to AI. We also loose our ability to choose freely when AI influences our choices and ability to make them. There is need to preserve human autonomy and agency in the age of AI.

Discussions on AI often centers on its potentials to increase productivity, streamline processes and automate tasks, there is need to consider the capabilities and its impact on our humanity. There is concern that AI might replace activities that are deeply personal and fulfilling for us as human beings, AI is taking over the way we communicate, interact and our intellectual output. The use of generative AI for instance to generate a letter of apology from an erring child to her parents strips away that personal touch and authenticity which makes gestures genuine. Such a machine generated letter will lack emotion and genuine heartfelt apology which a human touch will provide. There are things that cannot be automated even as we find ourselves in the age of AI where everything is becoming automated.

Automation and optimization cannot replace the human touch or emotional connection which makes us human. Activities like creative writing, artistic expression, reflection do not require automation and should be left to human beings. These areas are products of human experiences and should be allowed to remain so.

The desire for optimization is making humanity to move towards preference for AI skills and speed. The dependence on AI is also creating a preference for machinelike traits, while moving away from human like traits. Speed, accuracy, and performance are now being favored over process, authenticity and creativity. This limits human freedom to create genuinely and limits humanity's ability to create itself again in line with the existential thought that human beings are the main actors in the stage of life and not spectators who have relinquished their creativity to AI.

According to Nowspeed (2025) "the real value of AI lies in its ability to handle repetitive, mundane tasks freeing human beings to engage in activities that require creativity, judgment and emotional intelligence: qualities that machines cannot replicate, matters that require empathy, creativity and personal touch should be left to human beings who possess the capacity to handle such issues."

It is therefore pertinent that AI is designed to align with human values and also designed to complement and not replace human beings. The future of AI and humanity should be a future where humans and AI can complement each other and not AI replacing human beings. Although there have been huge job losses because of the use of AI, as mentioned earlier, there are roles which must be left to humans to perform while others can be carried out by AI but must be authorized by human approval. Preserving human autonomy and agency in the age AI is key to helping humanity to maintain a world where humans will continue to engage with the world as free and rational creatures capable of free authentic, rational choice and also capable of creating and recreating one's essence as the need arises.

Conclusion

AI is changing the world. It is changing how we live, think and act. It is important that ethical concerns be put into consideration in the design and production of AI to prevent worsening the already existing problems in our world. AI should be designed in a way that it complements rather than replacing humanity. AI can erode human freedom to choose and act when humanity cedes decision making to AI and become over dependent on AI. To preserve human autonomy and agency, AI must be designed and programmed to align with human values and also to complement and not to replace humanity. This suggests that more research needs to be done in the area of aligning AI with human values and also to incorporate human values into AI design, this will make AI more human as AI takes on more decision making roles around the world. There is also need to carry out more research on ways that humanity and AI can complement each other and coexist without being a threat to each other while preserving the experience that make us human.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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