

Tech Ethics Animated – Moral Distance and the Ethics of Care

Transcript

Imagine a delivery driver who has been delivering packages for more than four years. He has also been asked if he'd like to train other drivers. So he knows how his job works.

Most of his rides are smooth.

Some have situations that are hard to anticipate.

But one day, he received an email sent by a bot saying he was fired. He was astonished. From time to time, he was checking his employer's app and seeing feedback on his work development. And on a scale of Fantastic, Great, Fair, or At Risk, he received Great. Hence, he might have felt overwhelmed, but no one was there to give a kind word or to handle the situation if he had an anxiety reaction to the notice. He had no one he could ask why or a chance to use his voice to state his position.

A delivery services company was algorithmically rating and automatically firing its drivers by email. But, if the whole process, from rating to firing, is automated, the company is ill-equipped to address specific circumstances affecting the data. For example, when a human is asked to assess the ability of a driver, they may have been a driver themselves or understand what the data means in the context of a given route, and would be required to interact with the individual and know their specific circumstance before telling them they are fired.

Approaching this case with a traditional approach to ethics, one can argue there is nothing sinful with algorithmically terminating people by email. However, it seems to be something wrong with this practice.

Traditional theories such as utilitarianism could argue that this practice isn't wrong if it brings the greatest good to the greatest number of people, even if we adversely impact a minority of the people.

So from a utilitarian approach, one would ask, Is this practice bringing the greatest good for the greatest number of people in the company? Does the algorithm benefit the majority, even if there is harm for a small percentage of drivers?

Other theories could also defend that there is no ethical issue if no pre-established principle is violated. In the field of AI ethics, dozens of ethical guidelines have been proposed. Principles have been proposed by academia, governments, private institutions, non-profit organizations, and professional associations. Those are mainly based on four principles: autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence. From those emerged principles adapted to AI's characteristics, such as transparency and explainability. Hence, in the firing algorithm case, from a principle-based approach one would ask, Does this firing algorithm succeed in following the ethical guidelines of the company? For example, is this algorithm transparent? Is it explainable?

One of the biggest claims of the fired drivers is that they don't feel understood on how circumstances against their control turn out to be infractions held against them and how this ends in their unappealable dismissal.

The fact is there is a problem of distance between the developers of the algorithm and the people impacted by its use. This issue is recognized as the problem of moral distance and refers to how individuals behave unethically towards those who are not seen. Moral distance abstracts those who are impacted by the decision and leads to less ethical decisions.

When engineers are coding and developing an algorithm to terminate drivers, even if they work hard to make the model fair while considering several variables, there could be a problem of moral distance due to the proximity and physical distance between the developers and drivers.

Unlike traditional theories, from an ethics of care approach, there are essential ethical issues in how this delivery services company proceeds. From this approach, the understanding of "the other" while hearing its own voice is key to make decisions and solve ethical issues.

The ethics of care is a novel approach to ethics not based on inviolable impartial principles but one that appeals to fostering people's vulnerabilities and needs. According to ethics of care, one should understand individuals not in a contest of duties and rights but in a web of interdependent relationships on which we all depend.

In the "Ethics of Care as a moral grounding for AI," Dr. Carolina Villegas-Galaviz suggests some notions of the ethics of care that serve in the ethical examination of artificial intelligence. This notion can help to ameliorate some of the ethical problems derived from the moral distance between developers and those impacted by algorithms.

From an ethics of care focus,

- one should hear the voices that are silenced,
- the relationships that are impacted by the decision,
- acknowledge the missing context,
- and consider the needs of those that are made vulnerable or further marginalized.

Hence, when ethically examining the firing algorithm, it is not enough to ask about principles, ethical codes, or even justice, but to critically examine how the terminations impact other members or groups of society.

Also, to ask if context and circumstances of drivers are considered when rating and firing—e.g., the state of the roads when they deliver their packages or the holidays and their complications in finding people at home when necessary. Moreover, it should be asked, Does the data used imply the exploitation of the drivers' vulnerabilities? And what are the needs, issues, and interests of the drivers?

This means that ethics is more than a transaction of rights and implies the understanding of relationships and care, and the ethics of care help contextualize the other and make closer the person who is at a distance.

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Associated Readings

Villegas-Galaviz, C. (2022). Ethics of Care as Moral Grounding for AI. In [Ethics of Data and Analytics: Concepts and Cases](#). Taylor & Francis: USA, 78-83.

Villegas-Galaviz, C., and Martin, K. (2023). [Moral Distance, AI, and the Ethics of Care. AI & Society](#).

Soper, S. (2021). [Fired by Bot at Amazon: 'It's You Against the Machine'](#). *Bloomberg*.

