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The ethics of generative AI – an update 2025

Melanie Xu

Where does the ethical debate on generative AI stand today, three years after the release of ChatGPT? This presentation is not about ethically examining the blatant cases of harm caused to users of AI chatbots. These cases, which have been widely reported in the media, are only the tip of the iceberg. Generative AI now has countless victims throughout its entire production process, as well as in its proliferating applications. The lecture traces how the public ethical debate that began with great effort in 2023 has been "dwarfed." Given the enormous criminal energy with which generative AI is being driven into our culture, the debate seems powerless today. Narratives that equate human and artificial intelligence, citing the alleged "complexity" of algorithms, fuel irrational hopes for "ethical AI." It's time to distance ourselves from the hype cycle of generative AI.

In November 2022, *ChatGPT* was released to the public, and the hype cycle of generative AI began. Amazing texts, images, audio, video, program codes, etc. as instant wish fulfillment, a mental paradise with sometimes disruptive effects on markets. Under time pressure, the ethical discussion also began and was channeled quite quickly into a "product orientation," meaning, the "output" of generative AI was put to the ethical test. The discussion of its "input," however, the question of the material and immaterial prerequisites for its development fell far behind the output discussion.

To outline the ethical debate of the last three years, and to detect where it stands today, I would like to revisit some of its main international players, which I discussed in my master's thesis last year, namely 1. the *EU AI Act*, 2. the call for a moratorium (by Elon Musk and others), 3. the *Partnership on AI* (PAI) and 4. the OECD.

1. The EU AI Act has undergone a laborious and nuanced ethical debate, linked to hopes for protection against risks and for transparency regarding AI training data. Liberal economic positions were outvoted, and the *AI Act* came into force on August 1, 2024, with a period of one to two years for its binding implementation.¹ Forty leading European companies, including Lufthansa, Mercedes-Benz, and Philips, called for a

¹ More information at: <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/>

postponement of implementation at the beginning of July this year ² , because the bureaucratic requirements of the *AI Act* are like mildew on technological innovations in Europe. At the same time, the ethical discussion is no longer of interest. The Trump-friendly law firm *Mount Bonnell* is offering support to European AI entrepreneurs in case that they consider setting up companies in the US. *Mount Bonnell* calls the *AI Act* a "sad example of technocratic overregulation" ³ and mocks European ethics councils, whose moral finger-wagging US-based companies can avoid.⁴ It seems to be the fate of ethical debates to produce bureaucratic shackles that, if they cannot be broken, are elegantly circumvented by markets. ⁵ But how could civilian markets be blamed for this when the *AI Act* expressly does *not* apply to AI systems for military or scientific research purposes ⁶, meaning that ethics remain unregulated in these areas? Just a question...

2. The "moratorium demand". In March 2023, Elon Musk and others called for a six-month moratorium on the training of all AI systems. ⁷ In their reasoning, they projected the risks and dangers of current AI systems into the future and "inflated" them in a transhumanist manner. The open letter concluded by warning of the impending loss of control over our civilization ⁸ if the AI race was not stopped. During the moratorium, it would be the task of politicians and society to fund AI safety research ⁹ and develop robust AI governance systems as quickly as possible.¹⁰ The plan was apparently to

² See article "40 top managers call for postponement of AI Act" (Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland 2025)

³ Mount Bonnell Law Firm 2025

⁴ "What are you allowed to do as an entrepreneur according to the EU? Nothing without 37 forms. Maybe if an ethics council agrees. And only if your AI doesn't hurt anyone's feelings. What are you allowed to do in the US? Anything, as long as it works. [...] And if you want to develop the next big thing – please don't do it in Luxembourg with 19 ethics committees. Do it where they let you do it. Do it in America." (ibid.)

⁵ Joachim Paul comments: "Zuckerberg's and Musk's positions on the EU's regulatory efforts, as well as the views of other tech billionaires and CEOs, prove that a behaviorist mindset of digital controllability and programmability of humans at least has the upper hand in Silicon Valley. The fact that this worldview is in total contradiction to the libertarian fantasy of absolute freedom is obviously not perceived as disturbing. After all, programmability applies to others, not to the programmers and certainly not to their clients. At first glance, automation also offers the hope that if something goes wrong, responsibility can be shifted to the users and their prompts, leaving AI companies off the hook. This, in turn, corresponds to the classic neoliberal and libertarian views that responsibility ultimately always lies with the individual." (Paul 2025b, p. 8)

⁶ See Art. 2 AI Regulation Scope, para. 3: "This Regulation shall not apply to AI systems if and to the extent that they are placed on the market, put into service or used, with or without modification, exclusively for military, defense or national security purposes, regardless of the type of entity carrying out these activities." (intersoft consulting n.d.) As well as para. 6: "This Regulation shall not apply to AI systems or AI models, including their output, developed and put into service for the sole purpose of scientific research and development." (ibid.)

⁷ Future of Life Institute 2023

⁸ "...and we must ask ourselves: [...] *Should* we risk loss of control of our civilization?" (ibid.)

⁹ "...robust public funding for technical AI safety research" (ibid.)

¹⁰ "...AI developers must work with policymakers to dramatically accelerate development of robust AI governance systems." (ibid.)

skim off both the state and society: Not only would they later be paying consumers of generative AI applications, but they would also be required in advance, as "co-developers" with ethical expertise, to invest tax money on a large scale – so that democracy would not be damaged.¹¹ With this nice double investment in mind, the moratorium demand then promised a "flourishing future" ¹² for all of humanity.

And today? As we know, the moratorium did not happen. AI continues to be developed and fed with more and more training data. But – fun fact – a niche has also formed in which even more radical ideas are being cultivated. Eliezer Yudkowsky and the so-called "rationalist" scene ¹³ are calling for a complete shutdown of all AI systems; all other measures are considered insufficient.¹⁴ This shows how far the ethical debate has spread in theory since 2023, to the point of illusory demands, while at the same time remaining almost inconsequential in practice.

3. The PAI (Partnership on AI). In 2023, the PAI published its framework "PAI's Responsible Practices for Synthetic Media. A Framework for Collective Action." ¹⁵ The participating companies, including *OpenAI*, voluntarily committed to ethical practices with a focus on the risks of AI-generated synthetic media, in particular the occurrence of AI fakes and disinformation, which could be used to manipulate democratic and political processes. This discussion also appears to be settled and outdated in 2025. Rebecca Finlay, CEO of PAI, in September of this year:

"This summer, the generative-AI hype cycle debate officially moved from peak expectations to disillusionment. The evidence is everywhere, with studies highlighting the risks of AI companions, and media reporting on the dangers of chatbots. Research has also shown that 95% of businesses have not yet seen a return from their generative AI investments.

In response, attention has turned to agents as tools to drive both commercial returns and customer value. Unlike generative-AI applications, which produce content, agents can take direct actions.

¹¹ "...for coping with the dramatic economic and political disruptions (especially to democracy) that AI will cause." (ibid.)

¹² "Humanity can enjoy a flourishing future with AI." (ibid.)

¹³ "Eliezer Yudkowsky [...] is one of the defining figures in the so-called rationalist scene, which has been strongly influenced by his writings on decision theory, existential risks, and cognitive rationality, as well as by the platform he founded, 'Less Wrong'." (Schreiner 2025)

¹⁴ "AI safety expert Eliezer Yudkowsky is calling for a globally binding treaty to shut down AI systems. He considers all other governance measures – from safety protocols to moratoriums – to be meaningless consolation prizes on the road to disaster." (ibid.)

¹⁵ Partnership on AI 2023

Agents offer a win for productivity: a virtual assistant that can independently book a reservation and send calendar invitations is a step up from a generative-AI application that provides a list of top restaurants and available evenings.¹⁶

The PAI is now focusing on automatic "agent monitoring" and "agent policy governance."¹⁷ It recommends "real-time failure detection in AI agents"¹⁸, which is obviously sorely needed.¹⁹ So instead of deepening the ethical debate on generative AI, the PAI is concerned with how to prevent serious damage caused by AI agents — no easy task for companies that, after a potentially expensive investment in AI agents, now have to invest in monitoring systems. All that in an effort to turn the already flattening hype into a cash cow.²⁰

4. The OECD. In 2023, the OECD published a scientifically based working paper ("Initial Policy Considerations for Generative Artificial Intelligence").²¹ The paper offered serious policy advice and clarified many detailed ethical issues that other statements had overlooked. To date, the OECD has not published any further papers discussing ethical issues relating to generative AI at this level.²² But in April of this year, the OECD proudly presented the first transparency reports from 20 companies in seven countries, including *Google*, *Anthropic*, *Microsoft*, and *OpenAI*, and

¹⁶ Finlay 2025

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Srikumar 2025

¹⁹ "...it is the agent's real-time actions that directly cause incidents." (*ibid.*)

²⁰ Marina Danilevsky, Senior Research Scientist at IBM Almaden Research Center in San Jose, California, on AI agents: "I'm still struggling to truly believe that this is all that different from just orchestration. [...] You've renamed orchestration, but now it's called agents, because that's the cool word. But orchestration is something we've been doing in programming forever." Danilevsky is skeptical about 2025 being the year of the agent. "It depends on what you say an agent is, what you think an agent is going to accomplish, and what kind of value you think it will bring," she says. "It's quite a statement to make when we haven't even figured out ROI (return on investment) on LLM technology more generally." [...] "The current AI boom is absolutely FOMO-driven, and it will calm down when the technology becomes more normalized." [...] "Enterprises need to be careful not to become the hammer in search of a nail," [...] "We had this when LLMs first came on the scene. People said, 'Step one: we're going to use LLMs. Step two: What should we use them for?'" (Belcic/Stryker 2025)

²¹ Lorenz/Perset/Berryhill 2023

²² Instead, its focus is shifting — as is the case with the PAI (with which it also shares personnel) — toward the question of the "transformative" potential of generative AI and new use cases (keyword: AI agents) that could finally unleash its economic potential: "[...] developments in the technology, such as AI agents, are broadening its potential by creating new use cases for the technology. [...] As the technology advances, ensuring that generative AI's use remains innovative and trustworthy and respects human rights and democratic values, in line with the OECD AI principles, will remain equally critical. These efforts will be instrumental in unlocking generative AI's full transformative potential as a GPT to drive innovation, enhance productivity, and achieve meaningful societal advancements." (Calvino/Haerle/Liu 2025)

concluded: "Perhaps most importantly, the exercise signals a cultural shift: transparency is becoming a norm, not an exception." ²³

Transparency is the new buzzword that cannot be repeated often enough and to which all ethics are "condensed." Everything is feasible, as long as it is done transparently. In another context, the OECD promotes a "digital ecosystem for trustworthy AI." ²⁴ This wording suggests naturalness in high-tech contexts and peaceful coexistence between humans and AI. As a result of previous ethical debates, an ethical claim is presented: "ecosystem for trustworthy AI", offering two advantages: First, it describes a friendly, humanistic alternative to transhumanist dystopias. And second, it obscures all exploitation, the overexploitation of nature and culture that is a prerequisite for this so-called "ecosystem". ²⁵

These four examples can demonstrate the "seepage" of the ethical debate into a kind of general "moral mush." And in this respect, the debate resembles the technology itself, which is diffusing into countless applications, still struggling with economic viability. And it's not just about the ROI. The phenomenon of "workslop" ²⁶ causes additional economic damage *and* undermines the work ethic of the employees affected, thus becoming a new serious ethical problem. "Workslop" means "AI-generated content that might look like it completes a task at work: pretty on paper, well-organized and neatly formatted, but lacks substance upon a closer read." ²⁷

As early as 2023, the impact of generative AI on the world of work was being discussed, but the focus was on AI *replacing* human labor. Now it's *augmenting* it. It is becoming a grueling occupation to compensate for the inadequacies of AI output – just as the training of generative AI in the development phase created the bullshit jobs of

²³ Plonk/Perset 2025

²⁴ "Governments should foster the development of, and access to, an inclusive, dynamic, sustainable, and interoperable digital ecosystem for trustworthy AI." (OECD AI Principles)

²⁵ It is fitting that the summaries of the new OECD papers read as if they were written by *ChatGPT*, as a string of empty phrases that suggest significance but say nothing substantial or new.

²⁶ "The term was coined in research published this month [Sept. 2025, *author's note*] from the Stanford Social Media Lab and BetterUp, a professional training and coaching company. Surveying 1,150 desk workers in the US, the researchers found that 40% of respondents said they believed they had received this sort of AI-made sloppy work from their colleagues, which can take on many deceiving forms, like visually pleasing slide shows, long reports, or code that doesn't actually translate to a thoughtful product. On average, employees surveyed said they spent nearly two hours sorting through or cleaning up each instance of workslop." (Hoover 2025)

²⁷ *ibid.*

"content moderators".²⁸ Workslop also leads to friction among coworkers. Jennifer Liu of CNBC reports on Kate Niederhoffer, who coined the term first:

"Niederhoffer has herself judged the people who send her workslop. 'Why did they do this?' she'd wonder. 'Can they not complete the job themselves? I don't trust them. I don't want to work with them again.' The end result is 'confusion, annoyance, wasted effort and then some serious layers of judgement,' she says."²⁹

And such judgments often affect the wrong people, as Allison Morrow from *CNN* notes:

"What to say, then, to the overworked office associate making barely enough to cover their rent when they save themselves a few hours and ask ChatGPT or Claude or Gemini to write a report for them? *O, bad job, 25-year-old with six figures of student debt. Yes, we told you that you absolutely must use AI, but we didn't mean, like, actually use it. We meant for you to do all the work you'd do anyway but add a layer of AI fairy dust so that we can justify our subscription costs and tell shareholders we're embracing AI but obviously you must also fact-check everything it spits out.*"³⁰

So I leave it to you to assess the current impact of generative AI on the world of work from an ethical perspective...

As a final point, I would like to address the copyright debate. In my master's thesis, I pointed out that the cultural simulation of generative AI fits seamlessly into what Jean Baudrillard described – long before the advent of generative AI – as "coded 'creativity' and 'receptivity'"³¹ of "cultural recycling"³², which is now simply referred to as culture. Generative AI today appears as a condensation of cultural recycling, as the frenzied standstill of a "tire spinning" of cultural processing that can certainly no longer be called "culture." Original achievements of human authorship are constantly fed into this pretentious thing of overwound recycling, but only as a resource to be chopped up, not as genuine holistic material for reception, discussion or inspiration.

As is well known, a broad front of cultural creators, authors, and copyright holders took action as early as 2023, complaining about the systematic theft of their works or, like Ben Zhao from the University of Chicago, developing tools such as *Nightshade* and *Glaze*³³ that artists can use to prevent theft on the internet. After all, the AI startup

²⁸ The working conditions of *ChatGPT* content moderators were reported in the press in 2023. Workers in Nairobi, Kenya, reported serious psychological and financial exploitation by *OpenAI*, see the article by Niamh Rowe in *The Guardian* (Rowe 2023).

²⁹ Liu 2025

³⁰ Morrow 2025

³¹ Baudrillard 2015, p. 159 f.

³² *ibid.* p. 146 ff.

³³ "[Ben Zhao] is particularly known in the field for protective tools to mitigate harms of AI, including tools like *Nightshade* and *Glaze*, which artists can apply to their work to protect them from being scraped and used without consent to train AI models." (Redenbaugh 2024)

Anthropic is paying \$1.5 billion in settlement to authors whose works it had pirated to train the chatbot *Claude*. The scale of the compensation surprised the plaintiffs.³⁴ In any case, the legal disputes currently appear to be the most tangible part of the ethical debate. The public has now become aware that the input of generative AI touches on the very core of our culture. The output discussion, which is pursued with enormous effort ("transparency," "minimizing the risks," and so on), is so closely linked to the hype cycle of generative AI that it stands or falls with it. Meanwhile, old and new developments in AI are making headlines, such as neuromorphic computing³⁵ or, on a completely different level, the Frankenstein-like so-called *organoid intelligence* (OI)³⁶, which involves new ethical boundary shifts (it's about growing mini-brains in the lab) – but also the almost ridiculous admission that purely machine intelligence will remain unsatisfactory. – So much for this brief historical overview of the last three years.

To conclude my remarks, I would like to address the theme of this conference: complexity. "Complexity" is repeatedly attributed to AI systems and serves as a core argument for their comparability with the functioning of the human brain.³⁷ The propagated analogy between computers and brains gives reasons for the AI industry's promises for the future and is part of its marketing strategy. As such, it tends to obscure ethical debates in which it is then no longer possible to reliably distinguish between humans and machines — or, according to prominent authors of transhumanism, it should no longer be possible to distinguish between them.

³⁴ "'This historic settlement exceeds any other known copyright compensation,' plaintiff's attorney Justin Nelson told AFP news agency. 'It is the first of its kind in the age of artificial intelligence.'" (ARD-aktuell/tagesschau.de 2025, original German)

³⁵ Further reading, e.g., Alois Pumhösel: "Our brain achieves enormous feats with astonishingly low energy consumption. Researchers in Graz are working on transferring this principle to artificial neural networks. [...] Systems of this kind can be implemented using analog computing chips. Digital memory cells are replaced by so-called memristors, which are both memory and computing elements in one." (Pumhösel 2025, original German). For more on how memristors work, which could even enable a "departure from binary code," see Berthold Wesseler: "Schalter mit Gedächtnis" (Wesseler 2016)

³⁶ For further reading, see, for example, Zoe Kleinman: "Scientists grow mini human brains to power computers" (Kleinman 2025), or Alice Lanzke: "Organoide Intelligenz: Ein Computerprozessor aus Gehirnzellen. A kind of mini human brain is to become the center of a computer. Researchers show how they want to make this a reality." (Lanzke 2023, original German)

³⁷ For example, authors such as Yuval Noah Harari, Nick Bostrom, and Klaus Schwab, to name but a few. What all these authors have in common, as expressed by Jobst Landgrebe, co-author of the groundbreaking work "Why Machines Will Never Rule the World" (together with mathematician and ontologist Barry Smith), in an interview with Robert Cibis in 2023 (odysee.com 2023), is a lack of knowledge in biology, physics, and mathematics. Anyone looking for compelling, even mathematical proof in the strict sense of the word as to why generative artificial intelligence can never interact satisfactorily with complex systems such as humans and can never "act ethically" will find what they are looking for in the second edition of "Why Machines Will Never Rule the World" by Jobst Landgrebe and Barry Smith (Landgrebe/Smith 2025).

It seems obvious to call algorithms "complex" because their calculations in the black box are hardly comprehensible and the output of generative AI is often surprising. It seems to be just as unpredictable as complex phenomena in the real world or the behavior of a complex biological system. But here is a first, general point: Despite all the surprise effects that AI output can trigger, the number of possible internal states of an artificial neural network is limited.³⁸ We are dealing "with a finite state machine. This certainly does not apply to biology", as Joachim Paul states.³⁹ Surprise effects triggered by AI will finally come to a predetermined end.

Secondly, once again: The algorithm strips human cultural production of all meaning, "atomizes" and "remixes" it beyond recognition in order to spew out a monadic, unwarranted cultural simulacrum as a substitute. What is called "complex" here is in reality the destroyed coherence (or consistency) of human cultural production, the irreversible dissolution of its structures, in other words: its "cremation" in the black box. And it's a point of no return. Once this fundamental destruction has been understood, every output of generative AI, even the most "intelligent," appears ghostly and by no means complex. It is perhaps comparable to the shadow of a three-dimensional colored object, or at best to a 3D print generated from layers of plastic that mimics the external form of a handcrafted or industrially manufactured object.

Generative AI, then, is a kind of "intellectual" 3D printing. And like material 3D printing, it is suitable as a quirky hobby for home use, as a highly specialized component in a few professional applications, e.g., in medicine, or as an irritating momentum in the visual arts – no more and no less. At the end of this short contribution to the discussion, I would like to say that I do not want to ruin anyone's enjoyment of *ChatGPT*. Personally, however, although I am not a smoker, I would prefer a simple cigarette to entering a prompt. The more you know. Thank you.

³⁸ "An artificial neural network has a finite number of internal states, not least because of its nature as a digital system." (Paul 2025a, p.5)

³⁹ (ibid.) For those who want to delve deeper into understanding the fundamental differences between biological and artificial neural networks, and why the latter cannot claim the property of complexity for themselves, I highly recommend reading Joachim Paul's whole essay "Irreducible parallelism – a history of the concept. Linguistic investigations in the realm of the complex". (Paul 2025a)

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