

The Role of Culture in AI Ethics: An Eastern Perspective

By Jibu Elias, Research and Content Head, INDIAai

This module analyzes the shortcomings of the present AI ethics discourse and discusses the importance of cultural perspectives in AI Ethics through the lens of Eastern cultural and philosophical approaches. Using examples from South Korea, China, Japan and Buddhist philosophy, we explore the inherent links between culture and ethics, and seek to understand the value of nuanced approaches to global AI ethics frameworks.

Lecture Transcript

0:00 Hello there. My name is Jibu Elias and I will be talking about the role of culture in AI ethics, especially from an Eastern cultural perspective. Before I begin, I want to thank the Global AI Ethics Consortium for this great opportunity. I hope you will enjoy this lecture. Before we begin, let me introduce myself. I am an AI ethicist and researcher from India. I'm currently the Head of Research and Content for INDIAai, the Government of India initiative on AI. I'm also a member of the OECD network of experts called ONE AI and one of the founding members of Springer's *AI and Ethics* journal. So currently, my work focuses on building an unified AI ecosystem in India as well as working towards closing the digital divide that has arisen as a technology as a result of technologies such as AI. Through this course, I will be walking you through the following points. First, we will begin with the importance of AI ethics in the current scenario, the role culture plays in determining AI ethics. Thirdly, why we need diversity and inclusion in AI ethics discourse. And four and five are what we can learn from Eastern cultural perspectives in AI ethics, and Eastern philosophical approach to AI ethics as well.

01:17 So why AI ethics is important, or what is the purpose of an AI ethicist? So there is this definition, which I feel is the most accurate way to describe why we need AI ethics. So the purpose of AI ethics is twofold. The first one is to deal with ethical issues that arise from AI systems as objects, as we seen with the discrimination, the unethical biases and other issues arise as AI, more and more we use AI tools. And second is to deal with the moral questions raised by AI systems as subject. So what kind of rights an AI will have if we ever create an artificial consciousness? So these kinds of the moral and ethical questions falls under the second purpose of an AI ethicist.

02:12 So now coming to this examples of some unethical, or let's say, controversial AI ethics system, AI systems that have created some bad press in the last few years. So by going through these examples, it will help us understand why we need a strong AI ethics framework and what will happen if we didn't prioritize it. So a few years back, Amazon launched a recruitment tool that is a secret AI based recruitment algorithm. The idea was to find the best of the best engineers for hiring. But unfortunately, whether it's due to the bias in the data, inherent data, the algorithm started to show a lot of bias towards male white candidates as opposed to other people. So soon after they're realizing that, after it became a big news story, they shelled this algorithm. And we don't know

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right now if they are using any forms of algorithms for recruiting. Second is the COMPAS, which was an AI tool used in the US for parole allocation. So the COMPAS calculated the risk of giving parole, you know, what is the chances of a particular prisoner repeating the crime if he's out on parole. The sad thing was this algorithm was extremely biased against people of color. For example, the investigation done by ProPublica, probably again a few years ago, they found that a white male who has a serious crime of assault with a weapon, those kind of people were given a very low score, a very low score when it comes to the tendency to repeat these crimes. At the same time, a black man who has done something maybe as low as in possession of marijuana was given a very high score of a score of eight to 9% by this algorithm, which in turn affects a judge's ability to decide who should be given parole.

04:31 The third here is an issue that happened very recently, in the UK. Due to the pandemic, the UK government decided to use an algorithm to help grade the A level students. Now what this ended up doing was students from very bad neighborhood schools, poor neighborhood schools, even though they scored high marks in their exams, previous exams. This supplement score provided by the algorithm ended up making their scores comparatively lower. At the same time, students from an affluent neighborhood or schools which have a history of performing better tend to score higher marks as a result of this algorithm. Because how the algorithm calculated the previous year performance as one of the parameters for allocating this grade. So this was very controversial. And this is one classic case of implementing AI without much thinking of its consequences. And in the end, I think they had to go back on it, and went ahead with teacher provided assessment.

5:50 Now, the last one is very interesting. It's a case that as you can see in the screenshot here, it is a case that happened in Facebook. So a Palestinian man once posted a good morning message on Facebook, he was standing near a bulldozer and he posted “yusbihuhum” - I'm not very good with the language. So which actually literally translates to “Good Morning”. But however, Facebook AI system, back then actually, it was built by Microsoft's Bing translation in 2016. Instead translated the word into “hurt them” or “attack them” in English. So this ended up in arresting of this gentleman, and a lot of trouble he has to go through even though later on, he was released after understanding the whole fiasco about it. So this is why we need strong AI ethics framework. This is why we need strong AI ethics legislations across the world. Because if there is no strong AI ethics rules and guidelines, then these kind of examples and use cases are bound to repeat much frequently in the future.

7:09 Now, coming to the problem of AI ethics itself. The AI ethics discourse currently faces a big challenge, and that is the dominance of western perspective and lack of diversity. So AI in a global context right now is biased toward perspectives held in the US and limited by a lack of research, especially outside the US and Western Europe. West dominates this AI ethics landscape right now, which is not an ideal way to go ahead if we are talking about creating global frameworks, global guidelines, ethical guidelines and similar legislation. A study run by the team from ETH Zurich under Anna Jobin. They examined around a 1000 codes pertaining to AI ethical principles. And according to the researchers, the most worrying fact about this report, their study, was that they are essentially published by a small number of people in a small number of countries. So the ETH study concluded that the West accounts for this 63% of these codes relating to ethics in AI. So a further in depth analysis by the researchers, I mean, they went through 84 documents, and it shows that 23.8% of this came from the USA and 16.7 came from the UK and the rest coming from the EU constituting the 63%. Now, worryingly and worryingly, the other part was that the African and South American countries were not represented independently in any of these principles, or guidelines codes that were published, which is a very worrying trend. So this

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overrepresentation of the West or lack of global equality in the treatment of AI ethics shows that the most economically advanced countries are shaping the debate by neglecting local knowledge, cultural pluralism, and global fairness, which are very important. So this is a quote from a paper by Hagerty and Rubinov. And it is a very serious concern that AI ethics is being perceived as ethics from a European standpoint of view, or an American standpoint of view, or as we call the Western standpoint of view, when a significant part of the world lives in the Asia, the Africa, the South America, and where there is a different culture, there is different norms of ethics. And there is a different approach to AI and AI tools. So that's why we need, if we are to deploy these tools across the globe, you know the people who will be impacted by the deployment of AI tools of let's say the Global South or from countries like India or other Asian countries, then it is important that they also have a say in how the AI ethics or the frameworks must be shaped. And that means more participation from these people, more representation, inclusion, and bringing more diversity into the global AI ethics discourse.

10:39 Now why culture is critical in AI ethics. So, the study by Hagerty and Rubinov, they reviewed around 800 academic journals and articles, and they're finding these that which is a very important that AI is highly likely to have markedly different social impacts depending on cultural settings. So, we will get into that how three different cultures look at AI in the later part of this lecture. But this is very important how our perception of AI and how we use these tools are a lot tied to our culture. Likewise, the perceptions and understandings of AI are likely to be profoundly shaped by local culture, and social context. For example, if you remember the impact of culture on technology is not something new. From time to time, we have seen how Western science fiction has influenced technology and innovation for example, when Martin Cooper when he invented the first mobile phone, which was with the Motorola, he publicly stated that the whole invention was inspired by these communicators carried by a Captain Kirk and the crew in the *Star Trek* series. Similarly, we have seen how the idea of AI, especially in a Western perspective, is often of fear, especially coming to super intelligence of fear and worrying as a result of movies such as *Terminator*, *The Matrix* and so on. So the way culture shapes our perspectives is very important when we go forward with AI ethics.

12:28 What is culture? How do we define culture? So it is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from the others. So I think this is a very good definition by Hofstede on what culture is. So culture can see as a set of common values, or norms or beliefs, or ideas shared by members of the same group, something that's not written down, like a constitution or a, or a legislation, but it's a collective value that a group of people possess - you can say it in that way.

13:06 Now, how culture influences ethics is very important. And it's a reality that culture and ethics are very, very tied up and a lot depends on each other. So a person's cultural background can influence the way they look at the world or how they feel what is right and what is wrong. So that's why we say you know, many of these things are subjective, because these things that depend. For example, a person's standard on beauty, it varies according to the culture. A person's standard on how you interact in a society varies according to the culture. For example, there is a behavior in the corporate world in China, that you give a lot of gifts to the people. Now, it is a very accepted kind of behavior in China. But at the same time, if you are talking about the same thing in a Western scenario, it's often seen as bribing. Similarly, the idea of privacy, the idea of individual privacy, is very paramount when it comes to the West especially when it comes to America. But at the same time, you should come to countries like India, like India or China, India where we live in a joint family. You will be sharing your room with your cousin, your aunts will be knowing what you are doing, your uncles will be knowing what you're doing. And in a scenario

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if you go and say hey, I want privacy, I want to keep this information, these are my private information, and this is my private space. Then you will be seen as a bad seed, or you will be seen as a selfish individual who is not cooperating with the collective norm, or the culture as we said before. So how culture influences ethics you know, due to various cultural backgrounds, individuals can differ greatly with regard to what is ethically appropriate. As we said, you know, in some cases gifting is incorporated or accepted in some areas, in some places it's not. So, it depends on the culture. So, the inherited bias in AI, which is something we have seen with the COMPAS algorithm or the Amazon recruiting algorithm, and many other cases, such as credit scoring algorithms as well, this inherited bias in biases is likely due to some social and cultural, but an unfair, stereotypes that had been fed directly or indirectly into this algorithm.

15:38 So, they say is this historical data, the historical data that is generated as a result of our biases, our discrimination, that have been happening across say decades or centuries are now reflecting in these algorithms. So it is a cultural problem, more than a technological problem. And the best solution for these problems also lies from a cultural standpoint of view, rather than adding more technology to solve these things. And finally, culture influences how a person views the world, and can determine how a person may view different ethical scenarios. For example, there is this one particular thing I do with people across the world. I ask the famous Trolley Problem to people from across different geographies and different cultures. And the answer you get for the Trolley Problem is very different, very different from culture to culture. For example, if you don't know what the Trolley Problem is, you have a trolley coming out of control and there are two tracks going left and right and there is a lever in between. And on the left track, there is five people trapped, trapped in the left track. And on the right track, one person is trapped on the track. Now it is going towards the left track by default. And you being a bystander has this option to go and pull the lever which will then make the trolley go to the right track killing the one person. So the question is will you pull the lever and kill the one person to save the lives of five? So this question, if I asked two people from West, especially from North American continent, mostly the answer is they don't do anything right? They don't want to pull the lever and become a murderer. They would rather let the five people die in an accident. But if you ask this question to someone from Asia, whether from Southeast Asia or East Asia, then the answer is different, they will say definitely, they will pull the lever because the life of five will always exceed the life of one. So in a collective society, in Asia, which always has this one answer while as opposed to an individualistic society, that we have seen in the West. That's how culture influences how a person views the world or how they perceive an ethical scenario.

18:15 Now what is ethics? We've been speaking about ethics and its relation to culture. So, I have picked up three of the definitions that I feel is more appropriate and more in line with AI ethics. So ethics deals with human behavior. Ethics can be thought of as a framework covering philosophy, moral philosophy, moral problems and moral judgments. So, in the standard ethics is a set of norms and values, which have been improved to praise or criticize the behavior of individuals living in the same community which is very close to what culture is. And so, laws to regulate social life, even when it comes to the location of an event may be insufficient versus the ethical, ethical, especially increased interactions of nations shows a situation which can be considered as ethical in a society contradict and can be considered unethical in another. So, these are pretty much summarizing some of the points I discussed before.

19:19 So, ethics and culture are very closely tied. So the cultural norms and values affect both perceived ethical situation, alternative results and possibilities of these results. So according to a paper by Hagerty and Rubinov,

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ethics and culture must be considered together as an interlocking strand of social DNA, such as the twin helices we see in DNA structure. To understand any culture we must first understand its values. To understand the values we must understand, its cultural context as well. So because AI and ethics are joined, we cannot study ethics solely as a philosophical abstraction. But ethics must be studied in everyday cultural context if it is to be fully understood. So in other words, it's not enough to know the rules of the games right now for AI ethics, but we must also understand how people play this game. So, ethical perception has a crucial role on ethical decision making process. Because evaluation of the individual or a situation. Ethics depends on how an individual evaluates the situation.

20:41 Now, let's go to East. So I am going to look into three Eastern cultures here: the Chinese, the Japanese and the South Korean culture. Now, the reason why I chose these three cultures as opposed to something like India is that in the West, these three cultures are combinedly stereotyped as Asians. Now it will be interesting to go through these three cultures and see how different they are, when it comes to their cultural and ethical perception towards something like artificial intelligence, and robotics and technology in general. So Chinese, Japanese and South Korean perspectives on AI and robotics. This can be considered in two different ways, right? It can be seen as tools or as partners when it comes to this AI ethics debate. Now, let's imagine a spectrum. On the one end, you have a culture where you see AI as a tool, and on the other end you see a culture where you see AI as a partner. So in this spectrum stands these three cultures. And let's see how each of these cultures and where they stand in the spectrum.

21:56 Let's start with South Korea. Now South Korea stands on the extreme tool side of the spectrum. So AI is placed in the tool range due to the establishment of a, let's say, clear human over machine hierarchy in the society. So in South Korea, humans are of the highest priority and robots are expected to support and further enhance this position of dominance. So AI and robots, as I said, is to support and further enhance this position of dominance. And South Korea also demonstrates a clear preference for functional AI applications and robots, especially focusing on human empowerment in the area. So let's say something like public service, health care, education, social care, disaster relief, and security.

22:48 Now, going a little bit deeper into the South Korean culture, let's look at what are the principles they have, whether it's social or from a policy perspective. So in 2007, the South Korea Institute for Robot Industry Advancement actually published their Robot Ethics Charter. Now, this was updated or revised in 2016. And it provides four unique ethics guidelines. So the first guideline being it places considerable responsibility on users; it expects users to be informed and self regulated, when it comes to using AI and robots. It places the responsibility for preemptively assessing AI and robots for any potential negative impact it can have, so that has to be done by the provider. Thirdly, it holds the developer responsible to ensure that any socially discriminatory characteristic is eliminated in the design and to ensure that it is accessible to disadvantage and vulnerable groups. So developer is held accountable for these cases. And finally, it calls to refrain from developing AI and robots with antisocial characteristics, and to minimize social resistance and disorder against universal use of AI and robots. So this is what we can understand from a South Korean perspective on AI from an ethics and cultural standpoint of use. So they see AI and robots primarily as tools and not as a companion, not as a social element.

24:40 Now going to China, we will see a little bit of change here. Now China's stance, let's say on the middle of the spectrum, a little bit closer to the Korean and according to China, China holds a top down view of AI and

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robots as tools for progress. Also, they see AI as an important part of their asymmetric warfare strategy as well. Now as demonstrated in government and official corporate policies, the ethical component of this approach is only now being started to materialize. And if you look deeper, you can understand that the China's AI ethics approach is in pretty much alignment with what the global guidelines are being developed largely viewing AI and robots as tools. And finally, China also presents a strong interest in recent years in imbuing AI and robots with partner like capabilities to help them realize their full positive potential. Now, this is very apparent in recent academic thought, local practices and popular culture as we say.

25:52 So China, as we know, doesn't have a policy framework on AI ethics. But if you look at the China's big tech companies, who has been driving their AI innovation and adoption, you will see some of these guidelines or principles that have been put forward. So one important piece here is Baidu's Robin Li Yanhong's proposal in 2018 where he submitted a proposal calling on the government to speed up AI ethics research, you know citing the impending transition of AI from a simple tool to a stakeholder in many areas. So, let me also introduce Baidu's four AI ethics principles, which are: safety and controllability, equal access, human development and freedom. Now, another side of this is Tencent. Tencent's Pony Ma Huateng submitted a proposal similarly calling for ethical AI regulation. So, this stance is in line with some of the work by Tencent Research Institute. And their framework also focuses on four principles which are: available, reliability, a comprehensiveness and controllable. So this is what China's, let's say cultural or like an ethical framework they have when it comes to AI.

27:21 Now, Japan is a total different game altogether. So Japan stands on the extreme other end of the spectrum where AI is seen more as a partner or part of the society. So we have seen these very cute little robots designed by Honda, and other Japanese firms, you know, some of them helping with senior care, and some of them helping children, students, you know, acting as a part of family. Now Japan exceptionally has a strong mix of pro human AI robot partnership, whether it's in academic thought, or local practice, or popular culture. So like I said, Japan sits on this partner range of the spectrum. And while Japanese policy approach to AI is now moving a lot to the tool range of the spectrum, let's say closer to China and to an extent to South Korea, the extent of Japan's societal vision for coexistence, and coevolution with AI and robots is totally distinct. So this is the only culture or only country that came out and said, you know, we need to figure out a way to coexist and co-evolve with robots. And another distinct feature in Japan is that it's very strong techno animistic tradition, right, which has likely inspired the development of its favorable partnership attitude. So this entails a more intertwined and complex analysis of Japan's perspective, which requires a lot of work. So this is what Japan's cultural perspective on AI ethics in a nutshell.

29:09 Now let's look at what the policy work or framework they have in place. So Japan's Fifth Science and Technology Basic Plan back in 2016, it seeks to integrate AI and robots into all aspects of society to create an environment where humans, AI and robots can coexist and coevolve like I mentioned before. Now, this plan, again, introduces the idea of Society 5.0, which is a vision of an AI and robot enabled, convenient and diverse society that responds to all human needs, and this is the interesting part, and can even anticipate and respond to many of these human needs before they emerge. So that's what the idea of Society 5.0 is. So this vision also further expanded by the Cabinet Office counsels, a social principles of human centric AI. So the one aspect of this document is its view of AI and robotics as widespread social tools that necessitate the redesigning of Japan's social system, and even its individual character. So, to conclude to date, the Japanese government is most probably the only one going to such lengths to socially accommodate and integrate AI and robots as a part of its

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society's foundation. Now, it is very interesting to note that three of these cultures: the Korean, the Japanese, and the Chinese, which are often categorized together as Asians in the West, have three distinct approaches when it comes to AI and especially from an ethics and cultural standpoint of view.

30:55 Now going to Eastern Philosophical perspective, which itself requires much more in depth studies. So if you look at Eastern philosophical, I'm talking from a let's say, South Asian perspective, or an Indian perspective. So, there are 11 major schools of philosophy in India. You have the Vedic philosophy that goes through Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamse and Vedanta. The you have the school of Sramanic philosophy, which consists of Jain, Buddhism, Ajivika, Ajnana and Charvaka school of thoughts. Now, out of all this, the most important one, in terms of the widespread use across the continent, as well as the number of people whose following is Buddhist philosophy. And here we will examine how the Buddhist philosophical perspective influences AI ethics, or what is its stand on AI.

31:56 So, there is this amazing work done by Thai researcher Soraj Hongladarom. He has written actually a whole book on Buddhist perspectives of AI. So, here's what he says: the implication of Buddhist teaching for AI is that any ethical use of AI must strive to decrease pain and suffering. In other words, facial recognition technology should be used only if it can be shown to reduce suffering or promote wellbeing. Moreover, the goal should be to reduce suffering for everyone - not just those who directly interact with AI. So the Buddhism proposes a way of thinking about ethics based on the assumption that all sentient beings want to avoid pain. Thus Buddha teaches that an action is good if it leads to freedom from suffering. So that's why a Buddhist inspired AI ethics would also understand that living by this principle requires a lot of self cultivation, which also means that whoever, whether it is the developers or the makers, who are involved with this AI also should continuously train themselves to get closer to the goal of totally eliminating suffering. So, the Buddhist perspective of AI pretty much stands with many of these AI for Social Good, or AI for All perspective, which is adopted by countries like India and many other organizations across the world.

33:24 At the same time, it also explores some much complicated thoughts, when it comes to AI ethics, such as if we are to create a sentient being, does it have the rights of a human or how we will treat when something like an AGI or artificial consciousness comes into place. So, this is what Buddhism says about that, so: According to Buddhism, robots and AI can be persons because the conditions for being a person are more relaxed than in any other religions. AI can be a person because in general, it exhibits human-like traits here. So that's the Buddhist perspective on AI.

34:10 And now, let's look at why these cultural perspectives and these thoughts are very important, when it comes to building a global AI discourse on ethics. So, what we have seen so far is despite the regular need to create a framework on AI ethics and the need for diversity, the current norms and guidelines on AI ethics is mostly one sided and dominated by a Western approach to it. Now, by going through these four examples, the three cultures and one philosophy, I hope you will be able to understand how different or how diverse the approach towards AI is across the globe. And if you go to Africa, if you consider, such as Ubuntu philosophy, it will get much more diverse. So, it is important that we make the AI ethics discourse more diverse and more participatory, more representative. At the same time, we must ensure that there are people who are living in the parts of the world who might not have access, might not have the skillset to become a part of the AI revolution, to create products or create tools. For example, there are countries, there are remote island countries across the

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world, which doesn't even have many good internet connections. For example, we said data is a new oil. But according to a 2018 World Economic Forum white paper, an American household generates one data point every six seconds, but 96% of the country of Mozambique doesn't even have access to the internet. So, it is important that as AI ethicists, we must think about how we will ensure that let's say a person from the culture of Mozambique, their social values, their ethical norms, and their perspectives on technology gets representation and they are consulted and considered when it comes to creating a global AI ethics discourse. So thank you so much for listening to this lecture. I'm sure it was helpful for you. And if you have any follow up questions you can reach out to me on social media channels, such as Twitter and LinkedIn. And once again, thanks to the Global AI Ethics Consortium for this opportunity.