The Ethical Implications of Using AI for Assignments

Since the public release of ChatGPT in 2022, educators have been faced with a dilemma: how should student understanding be measured when human-esque work can be generated on whim? One study found that 20% of surveyed students directly turned in ChatGPT responses as homework "without thinking about the tasks set and the answers returned"(Valova et al. 5). While studies have been done on how to successfully implement AI tools into education, these all rely on there being some level of "human-in-the-loop" interaction, meaning students engage critically with the output from the AI, rather than using it as an answer machine (Nasr et al. 2). A variety of methods to integrate AI into education have been suggested, but these all rely on the assumption that students use the technology to enhance their critical thinking, rather than completely replace it. Copying and pasting answers from ChatGPT without verifying the output clearly does not fall under this category. With any new technology comes new ethical questions, and the rise of Generative AI has created numerous ethical questions on how these tools can be used ethically in an educational setting. The "one and done" approach that many students use to complete assignments fails to meet ethical standards. Under a moral naturalism framework, using Generative AI to complete assignments is inherently unethical, due to both the environmental impacts of LLMs, and the outsourcing of the uniquely human faculty of reason.

Understanding the ethical implications of AI usage under a moral naturalism framework requires first defining what moral naturalism is. Put simply, moral naturalism advocates that "what is good for humans is established by the facts of human nature"(DeNicola 89). But what are "the facts of human nature"? The answer to this question lies in what makes humans unique. In *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas defines reason as "the guiding principle of human acts," which certainly implies reason is a crucial "fact of human nature"(Aquinas 77). Furthermore, "Aristotle finds that the highest human good is ... the wise use of our reasoning." (DeNicola 93). Indeed, much of Western Philosophy relies on the idea that reason is a uniquely human capability, and one that should be nurtured and cared for. Epicurus, in his letter to Menoeceus, states that "both old and young ought to seek wisdom" and Aristotelian ideals of telos support that "it is permissible to aid [an organ‘s] function, but not to violate or frustrate it"(DeNicola 101;Saunders 49). This means tools that enhance the brain's ability to reason are permissible, while those that hinder it are not. Therefore, if reason is a foundational fact of human nature, and moral naturalism defines the good in relation to these facts, then anything that harms human‘s ability to reason must be unethical.

Tools that degrade the ability to reason may be unethical, but does AI fall under this category? There‘s certainly a philosophical argument for this. Aquinas spoke of reason as a "habit," and developing a habit requires repeated application (Aquinas 76). When copying and pasting an assignment prompt to a generative AI, then submitting the AI response, reason isn‘t practiced at all. Instead, the student "learn[s] what the computer ‘knows’ and let this ‘knowing of knowing’ replace their own conception of the actual object known"(Rinta-Kahila et al. 20). Aquinas further refers to reason as something that man "participates" in, demonstrating reason as something that must be actively practiced, rather than innately known (Aquinas 88). A student continually declining to participate in developing their habit of reason, in favor of relying on the knowledge of an AI, will negatively impact their ability to reason. Indeed, this "use it or lose it" notion surrounding the brain‘s functioning is a key component of modern cognitive development theory, which emphasizes the importance of "productive struggle, independent problem-solving, and direct engagement with intellectual challenges", three things that don‘t occur when offloading assignments to AI (Gulyamov et al. 129).

Outside of a philosophical viewpoint, studies have found links between AI usage and a decline in cognitive functioning. One such study determined that relying on AI "encouraged cognitive offloading" and "gradually reduce[d] critically thinking"; rather than "reasoning for themselves" many students "simply guided AI to produce the wanted answers" (Riley et al. 2). Another study focused on college students found that no student "achieved the full critical thinking cycle" when using AI to assist in homework tasks, and half "showed only minimal cognitive presence"(Nasr et al. 10). When students delegate fundamental cognitive functions like critical thinking to AI, something they do whenever they complete entire assignments with AI, they are directly harming their ability to engage in cognitive functions like critical thinking and reasoning. As their own learned knowledge is replaced by the knowledge of whatever AI provider they choose to use, they also open themselves up to risks, as AI frequently "provide[s] outdated perspectives" and hallucinates information (Essien et al. 875). The risk is two-fold; human cognitive function isn‘t threatened just through lack of practice, but also by the very real possibility of accepting incorrect information at face value. Accepting incorrect information at face value further diminishes reasoning capacity, as future assignments completed by the student may rely on factually untrue information as a basis. Students who submit assignments completed fully by AI without any sort of critical evaluation of the output produced engage in "superficial learning," something that can "negatively impact cognitive effort"(Nasr et al. 19). Not only do they fail to engage their reasoning and critical thinking in the competition of an assignment, but they also fail to engage it to review the assignment. This means a student who submits an assignment by directly copying and pasting from ChatGPT fails to utilize their cognitive abilities at any point in the process, resulting in a paper that neither reflects their abilities nor challenges their thinking.

While AI can harm critical thinking, this isn‘t always the case. Like any tool, AI can be incredibly beneficial if used properly. Two students involved in the previously mentioned college students' study stated that using AI "complements and enhances our critical thinking”(Nasr et al 19). Another similar study found that nearly 70% of participants felt AI had a "positive impact on their critical thinking skills"(Essien et al. 875). Notably, in both of these studies, participants were encouraged to use "ChatGPT as a learning partner" and "as a research tool" (Nasr et al 19; Essien et al. 875). When used in a responsible way, it appears AI can genuinely improve people‘s ability to reason and think critically. However, using AI to complete assignments for you is not a responsible use. AI usage has only been shown to increase critical thinking capacity when it is used as a collaborator rather than a replacement.

In addition to it‘s emphasis on human nature as "the good", moral naturalism, as the name suggests, also recognizes the inherent ethical value of the natural environment. Moral naturalism derives its principles based on what is "conducive to our flourishing," and a healthy environment is essential to human flourishing. Nature isn‘t just something good that should be protected; it "embodies the good" and "yields our special human moral obligations." Put simply, moral naturalism recognizes the natural world around us as the ultimate source of morality, which requires us to "assess even the most precious human purposes and projects for their ecological impact" (DeNicola, 80,90,109). These basic principles of moral naturalism can be easily derived from the "established by the facts of human nature" definition of moral naturalism. After all, it is a fact of human nature that humans need clean air to breathe, fresh water to drink, nourishing food to eat, and a safe climate to live in. As put by Aquinas, "there is in man an inclination to certain more specific ends which he has by nature in common with other animals"(Aquinas 118). Put simply, while human‘s capacity as rational creatures set them apart from other animals, human beings are still, at a fundamental level, animals with natural needs that must be met. Therefore, moral naturalism protects not only unique human qualities like reason, but also shared qualities like the need for nourishment.

Given moral naturalism requires us to evaluate the environmental implications of "even the most precious human purposes", understanding the morality of AI from a naturalist framework requires determining it‘s environmental impact. While the average student may simply access generative AI tools through their browser, the ecological impact extends far beyond any individual device running it. The computational power required to run advanced models like ChatGPT exceeds average consumer processing power, so responses are generated in data centers. For generative AI "hyper-scale data centers capable of handling immense volumes of data storages and computations" are necessary, and these advanced data centers "[intensify] power consumption"(Ji et al 9). Running the computations necessary for AI generation creates a lot of heat. This heat needs to be dissipated to ensure proper functioning of the servers, and data centers generally rely on water cooling to achieve this. According to one estimate, the water demand of AI data centers is expected to be more than the entire country of Denmark by 2027 (Naudé 13).

The power demands and water demands of AI are so extreme that it has been characterized as "an energy and water guzzler"(Naudé 1). The power consumption of data centers in the EU has increased 30% from 2023 to 2026, a time frame that corresponds directly with the rise of generative AI (Ji et al. 10). In a world "facing potentially catastrophic climate change" due to continued use of greenhouse-gas producing fossil fuels, any increase in power consumption is a cause for alarm. And with clean water being a necessity, many people in the world today have inadequate access to, using a country‘s worth of water simply for cooling seems downright irresponsible. A college student using AI to complete their assignment for them is directly reliant on these environmentally unfriendly data centers, and every prompt increases the energy and water used. From a moral naturalism standpoint, AI usage seems nearly unjustifiable; not only are you using a product designed to essentially replace human reasoning, but you‘re directly harming the environment in the process.

Of course, some believe that AI can actually be a net positive for the environment. After all, AI was intended to revolutionize human intelligence, so maybe it can help us develop more environmentally friendly policies. Indeed, AI has "immense potential in mitigating emissions across transportation, agriculture, and energy sectors" and is often "offered as a tool in the fight against climate change"(Ji et al. 10; Naudé 6). Despite this, AI has yet to make any sweeping contributions towards fighting climate change, yet it continues to require more water and more power. Indeed, most supposed "environmental benefits" of AI are based on theoretical applications, rather than concrete examples. One could also ask whether we even need AI to help "solve" climate change. Humans, as rational creatures, possess the ability to come up with their own climate change solutions, and they have. Policy proposals like a global carbon tax, the green new deal, and renewable energy mandates are all ideas that came from people, not AI, and seem to have real potential in reducing worldwide emissions. There‘s no shortage of ideas on how to reduce the impact of climate change, but rather a lack of political will to actually implement them. The idea that AI will somehow revolutionize the fight against climate change seems rather unlikely, given how many human-created ideas have been shot down before even being attempted. Taken in combination with the real environmental impact AI is already having, it seems downright ridiculous. AI, a technology that is actively being touted by some as the solution to climate change, is actively contributing to it through its power and water demands. AI‘s environmental harm is quantifiable, while any positive environmental impacts remain largely theoretical. Furthermore, a student using AI to complete their assignment for them is certainly not utilizing AI to fight climate change, so even theoretical benefits are negligible. Therefore, AI usage on assignments is unethical under a moral naturalism framework because its negative impacts on the environment.

AI has repeatedly been touted as a revolutionary product that has the potential to fundamentally reshape human society. While it's impossible to know what its full impact may eventually be, education as a

field is definitely being reshaped by AI. Students, eager to get work done quickly, can use chatbots to complete assignments for them, and teachers must rely on intuition and questionably accurate AI-detectors to try to determine whether the work actually came from a given student. While AI can undoubtedly reduce the time it takes a student to complete an assignment, it comes at a cost. Dependence on AI can reduce students‘ ability to think critically and degrade their reasoning ability, all while consuming power and water on a planet with a limited supply of both. In spite of any potential benefits of AI, using it to complete assignments is inherently unethical under a moral naturalism framework. Besides, if reason is what makes us human, why would we want to outsource that to machines?

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