http://somatosphere.net/2016/06/web-roundup-ethical-technology-moral-medicine.html

Web Roundup: Ethical Technology, Moral Medicine

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By Emily Goldsher-Diamond

Researchers at MIT have launched Moral Machine, a web project to help gauge human perspectives on "moral decisions made by machine intelligence." The project comes in the wake of a new Science study regarding the complicated tangle of ethics and driverless cars, where the classic 'trolley problem' has been scaled up for new technology. Scientific American, weighing in, writes that real autonomy for new vehicles hinges not on manufacturer issues but on the moral and ethical dilemmas inherent in the new technology. Consumer demand is high and climbing. Mainstream discussions, however, continue to black box the ethical and moral within larger questions about safety systems. The Atlantic traces the driverless car back to the 1920s, where desire was driven by "the promise of improved safety." Similarly, Volvo's ongoing Future of Driving survey, while heavy on questions of safety and trust, makes no mention of whether or not driverless vehicles have ethics or ought to be moral. Today's news, that BMW has secured partnerships with Mobileyes and Intel, ensures that the debates around autonomous vehicles are sure to intensify.

MIT Technology Review has written about Kevin Esvelt's campaign to regulate gene drives in order to avoid "doomsday" outcomes. Esvelt's vision for a safe gene drive is distinctly caught up in moral projects. A safe gene drive–one built around transparency and community input–is "a way to rectify what [Esvelt] considers a larger failing of the universe, which is that evolution itself "has no moral compass."…Gene drives, by giving humankind the ability to fine-tune the battle for survival, could make the world a more just place." Esvelt's gene drive concerns are echoed in many of the related debates over CRISPR, which is touted by many as something of a magic bullet for everything from food scarcity to cancer treatments. Where one might assume that tighter control of gene editing technology is the answer to fostering ethical distribution of its benefits, other geneticists, like Esvelt, say "public engagement is the most important factor in determining how genetic science will and should be practiced in America."

Over at Motherboard, the medicalization of love is on the table in the form

of real-life love (and anti-love) potions. Now that pharmaceutical interventions like MDMA or intranasal oxytocin may prove useful in fostering or enhancing feelings of love, the question becomes whether such practices are ethical. Issues such as consent and overtreatment are valid, and yet the author concludes "sometimes, it's better to just break up." Modafinil, the performance-enhancing nootropic drug, also conjures related bioethical quandaries. If the drug becomes widely commonplace in the workplace, for example, how might one discuss issues of coercion, competition and consent? So-called "smart drugs" also trouble notions of equity, a well-worn criticism of biomedical enhancement measures. Tech Insider argues, "if wealthy people can easily afford cognitive enhancement but no one else can, that's likely to create an even more unequal society."

Finally, technologist Maciej Ceg?owski, in a talk on moral economies given at the recent SASE conference in Berkeley, had some important and timely things to say: "When we talk about the moral economy of tech, we must confront the fact that we have created a powerful tool of social control. Those who run the surveillance apparatus understand its capabilities in a way the average citizen does not. My greatest fear is seeing the full might of the surveillance apparatus unleashed against a despised minority, in a democratic country. What we've done as technologists is leave a loaded gun lying around, in the hopes that no one will ever pick it up and use it."

More links of interest:

"In the Eye of the Coder" – Real Life

"The Ethics of Why You Should Definitely Watch Shark Week" – Wired

"My Four Months as a Private Prison Guard" – Mother Jones

"India's Uber Dilemma: Entrepreneurship or Exploitation?" – Sapiens

"Introducing the Public Anthropology Institute" – Savage Minds

"Pregnant Women are Often Taking Untested Drugs That Could Harm Their Unborn Children" – Pacific Standard

"Bad Intelligence" – The Nation

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