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Humans Strike Back: A Discipline Shift in the Perception of AI

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The ethical dimensions of AI are an ever-increasing arena of discourses. To face the fears of technological advancement, actors need to justify themselves and reassure public perception about AI's safe and fair development and deployment. A public debate, often framed as "the alignment movement", naturalizes phrases such as "human-centered AI" and "AI for good".

Humans - and Humanities - are then back at the center. Philosophers, sociologists, and other experts share this stage with prominent figures from the technical realm. They wield substantial influence in shaping public perception surrounding AI's ethics and prospects through social media, manifestos, and open letters led by civil society entities (eg., Pause···., 2023).

Historically, both mathematicians and engineers (eg., Lighthill, 1973; Minsky & Papert, 1969) and philosophers (eg., Dreyfus, 1992) have also played influential roles in the critique of AI, that time centered on its capabilities. Their accounts were decisive in either convincing or dissuading decision-makers about the feasibility of research and development in AI.

The interdisciplinary nature needed to understand AI is unprecedented in the history of this technology and may be regarded as an important feature of the hype surrounding the subject. This paper aims to test the hypothesis of a shift in the representation and perception of artificial intelligence: from technical feasibility to ethical advisability. While the earlier approach still endures, the latter mobilizes a wider spectrum of actors, who make sense of AI's societal implications beyond engineering and mathematics.

This study draws on Bruno Latour's pragmatism (2003), emphasizing the dynamic interplay between human and non-human actors in shaping the technological development of AI. We employ discourse analysis of documents aimed at policymakers and the general public, such as reports and manifestos. This methodological choice is well-suited for examining the evolution of public and expert discourses over time.

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