

An Overview of the Zagreb Applied Ethics Conference 2023

The 7th Zagreb Applied Ethics Conference, organised by the Society for the Advancement of Philosophy in collaboration with the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Zagreb, took place from the 20th to the 22nd of September in Zagreb, Croatia. From artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies to controversial ideas and mental health, as well as meta-ethical and methodological questions, the conference served as a valuable platform for tackling matters that are popular not only in academia but also in public discourse. It featured a truly diverse and international panel of presenters.

The conference started with the plenary lecture *Mental Interference and Persuasive Digital Technologies* by Thomas Douglas from the Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics of the University of Oxford. Douglas explored the moral basis on which persuasive digital technologies should be regulated, encompassing more innocuous examples such as loot boxes in video games, pervasive cases of microtargetted advertising via social media algorithms, and true mental interferences through the direct alteration of a subject's mental states, such as via psychopharmacological interventions. In addition, he explored what moral rights persons should have against mental interference, as well as the question of when mental influence becomes *interference*, arguing that it is a graded moral right that spans from trivial to more serious infringements. Clearly delineating this right would allow us to explain why those interventions are wrongful despite the lack of bodily interference. In a broader sense, the implication was that persuasive digital technologies might be problematic even when they do not undermine our wellbeing.

The second plenary lecture, titled *The Importance of Controversial Ideas and Academic Freedom*, was delivered by Francesca Minerva from the University of Milan. It addressed threats to academic freedom arising from the lay public and academics struggling with intellectual disagreement, sometimes even resorting to self-censorship. Taking a firm stance against death threats, not being invited to conferences and workshops, journal editors quitting, petitions to de-platform people signed by other academics, and overall general hostility, Minerva argued that academic freedom should be a right of the people, not a privilege of the few. She claimed that suppressing certain ideas only makes them more virulent and irrational, which is not in line with the traditional goal of academia to freely pursue knowledge of what is true. To tackle this,

Minerva offered a series of possible solutions for the current situation, starting from academics themselves, who should stop impeding on their colleagues' research, trying to get them fired and having their papers retracted, but also including the student body, who should cease trying to get professors fired through petitions, as well as university administrators, who should not cave in whenever an interest group complains about controversial ideas being taught, discussed, or published.

Broadly construed, the presentations could be grouped into four major topic clusters¹. The first cluster shed light on the ethics of technology, with a strong focus on artificial intelligence, automation, and enhancement. For example, Rachel Katz (University of Toronto) discussed AI psychotherapy through apps utilising large language models and chatbots to provide help to people in distress, delving into its advantages, such as the objective and non-judgemental nature of AI counselling, as well as its disadvantages, such as the inability to verify and trust such AI agents, privacy concerns, and information accuracy. One option to better conceptualise the problems with AI psychotherapy, discussed during the Q&A session as well, is to consider regulating and presenting such technologies in a more open and honest manner, warning the prospective user of potential key considerations when using such apps. Another example is Joris Graff's (Utrecht University) talk on moral sensitivity and the limits of artificial moral agents, which are artificial systems that can autonomously make moral decisions. Exploring the viability of such agents, Graff argued that, at least currently, they are incapable of full moral sensitivity. Despite that, the conclusion is that they might be feasible in restricted domains of public morality where moral sensitivity is less crucial. This cluster also included the first plenary lecture given by Thomas Douglas.

The second cluster delved into bioethical and metaethical issues with a strong focus on reproductive and medical topics, such as euthanasia, abortion, and antinatalism, as well as on methodologies used by bioethicists. For instance, Friderik Klampfer (University of Maribor) examined whether our moral discomfort with psychiatric euthanasia is justified, arguing that there is no principled reason for categorically denying patients the choice of a 'good' death. Through an analysis of the morally problematic aspects of psychiatric euthanasia, such as the patient's decision-making competence, the nature and severity of the mental disorder they are suffering from, and the gravity of the request itself and what makes it justifiable, Klampfer concluded that nothing

¹ For the sake of brevity, I will not mention every single presentation, focusing instead on representative examples for each cluster. You can find the full conference programme here: <https://upf.hr/en/zaec-2023/program/>

warrants declaring all psychiatric patients incompetent to make such a choice and, as a result, ineligible for such a treatment. In contrast, Tess Johnson and Chloe Romanis (University of Oxford) discussed the more abstract topic of speculation and translation in bioethics, bringing attention to issues pertaining to methodology. While translational bioethics is concerned with real-world issues, speculative bioethics uses speculation through thought experiments, imaginaries, and futuristic scenarios to elucidate both current and emerging concerns. They argued that there is a place for speculative work in bioethics, which may or may not support translational bioethics, but will certainly provide a new lens for considering bioethical issues, serving as a precursor for translational bioethics and preparing us for plausible yet uncertain future eventualities.

The third cluster, in a wider sense, centred on ethical issues relating to cognition, consciousness, and mental health. There was a strong focus on cognitive and moral enhancement, attention, depression, autism, and death. For example, Cian Brennan (University of Glasgow) examined the possibilities of primed cognitive enhancement in connection to the value of achievements, arguing that achievements assisted through cognitive enhancement should require at least as much effort as an agent's best unenhanced effort. Furthermore, he claimed that such assisted achievements should be primarily attributable to the agent's own abilities since it is not the case that any agent would attain that same achievement if they too were assisted through cognitive enhancement. Brennan also outlined different degrees of cognitive enhancement, from moderate to more intrusive options, and related this to the feeling of achievement an agent might experience when accomplishing a task. A further example is Riana Popat's (University of Nottingham) presentation on how people with autism understand morality through the prism of moral hermeneutic fictionalism, which is a descriptive theory of what moral practice ought to be like. Hermeneutic fictionalists hold that, in moral discourse, competent speakers employ vocabulary that links real world situations to truths pertaining to some relevant pretence. However, some people with autism might not understand pretence, so if an understanding of it is necessary for understanding morality, then people with autism might not understand morality at all. As a counter, Popat stated the obvious objection that some people with autism *do* act morally, despite not necessarily understanding pretence or empathy, arguing instead that they might understand moral transgressions as conventional transgressions. Popat concluded that the hermeneutic fictionalist approach is false, emphasising other aspects that must be taken into account with regard to people with autism, to ultimately gain a more complete explanation of morality.

The fourth and final cluster explored political, legal, and corporate issues within the field of applied ethics, encompassing topics such as immigration, democracy, corporate responsibility, and governance through automation. To take an example, Kritika Maheshwari (Delft University of Technology) and Jef Delvaux (University of York) talked about the corporate duty to respond to extremist groups hijacking or ‘hatejacking’ their brand to promote their ideology. The specific example focused on the neofascist Proud Boys coopting the Fred Perry clothing label for political purposes, as their unofficial uniform. Maheshwari and Delvaux argued that brands sometimes incur the moral duty to counterjack their property in a way that prevents reinforcing extremist groups. This purposefully excluded brands that were specifically created by and for extremist consumers, such as the far- and alt-right. Another presentation from this cluster, by Michael Gregory (University of Edinburgh), discussed human discretion in the context of the rule of law through automation. Gregory addressed the argument that automated decision systems in governance promote the political ideal of the rule of law since they reduce the influence of human discretion in decision making processes. Against this, he claimed that such systems fail to satisfy the requirements for the rule of law, such as the condition for the *accessibility* of decisions to the general public, as well as for the possibility of the public holding decision makers *accountable*, going as far as to say that automated decision systems might *violate* these requirements. This cluster also included the second plenary lecture given by Francesca Minerva.

Overall, the conference was a success. Academics had the opportunity to discuss crucial contemporary issues, present new ideas, and examine the methodology of their collective endeavour. Moreover, presenters socialised in a less formal manner during and after the conference, fostering future collaborations and institutional cooperation. The general feedback received was overwhelmingly positive, and we look forward to the next iteration of the Zagreb Applied Ethics Conference in 2025, hoping that this brief snapshot will motivate more researchers to apply.

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