The End of Vagueness: Epistemicism, Surveillance Capitalism, and Explainable Artificial Intelligence

Abstract:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) pervades humanity in 2022, and it is notoriously difficult to understand how certain aspects of it work. There is a movement – Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) – to develop new methods for explaining the behaviors of AI systems. We aim to highlight one important philosophical significance of XAI – it has a role to play in the elimination of vagueness. To show this, consider that the use of AI in what has labeled surveillance capitalism has resulted in humans quickly gaining the capability to identify and classify a majority of the occasions in which languages are used. We show that the knowability of this information is incompatible with what a certain theory of vagueness – epistemicism – says about vagueness. We argue that one way the epistemicist could respond to this threat is to claim that this process brought about the end of vagueness. However, we suggest an alternative interpretation, namely that epistemicism is false, but there is a weaker doctrine we dub technological epistemicism, which is compatible with the possibility of knowledge in borderline cases. Finally, we argue that humans are probably not going to believe what future AI algorithms tell us about the sharp boundaries of our vague words unless the AI involved can be explained in terms understandable by humans. That is, if people are going to accept that AI can tell them about the sharp boundaries of the meanings of their words, then it is going to have to be XAI.