Unmasking Virtual Empathy: A Philosophical Examination of AI-Mediated Emotional Practices in Healthcare

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Abstract : This philosophical inquiry, influenced by the seminal works of Annemarie Mol and Jeannette Pols, critically examines the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on emotional caregiving practices within virtual healthcare. Rooted in the traditions of philosophy of care, philosophy of emotions, and applied philosophy, this study seeks to unravel nuanced shifts in the moral and emotional fabric of healthcare mediated by AI-powered technologies. Departing from traditional empirical studies, the approach embraces the foundational principles of care ethics and phenomenology, offering a focused exploration of the ethical and existential dimensions of AI-mediated emotional caregiving. At its core, this research addresses the introduction of AI-powered technologies mediating emotional and care practices in the healthcare sector. By drawing on Mol and Pols' insights, the study offers a focused exploration of the ethical and existential dimensions of AI-mediated emotional caregiving. Anchored in ethnographic research within a pioneering private healthcare company in the Netherlands, this critical philosophical inquiry provides a unique lens into the dynamics of AI-mediated emotional practices. The study employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews with virtual caregivers and care receivers alongside ongoing ethnographic observations spanning approximately two and a half months. Delving into the lived experiences of those at the forefront of this technological evolution, the research aims to unravel subtle shifts in the emotional and moral landscape of healthcare, critically examining the implications of AI in reshaping the philosophy of care and human connection in virtual healthcare. Inspired by Mol and Pols' relational approach, the study prioritizes the lived experiences of individuals within the virtual healthcare landscape, offering a deeper understanding of the intertwining of technology, emotions, and the philosophy of care. In the realm of philosophy of care, the research elucidates how virtual tools, particularly those driven by AI, mediate emotions such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion—the bedrock of caregiving. Focusing on emotional nuances, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the ethics of care in the context of technological mediation. In the philosophy of emotions, the investigation examines how the introduction of AI alters the phenomenology of emotional experiences in caregiving. Exploring the interplay between human emotions and machine-mediated interactions, the nuanced analysis discerns implications for both caregivers and caretakers, contributing to the evolving understanding of emotional practices in a technologically mediated healthcare environment. Within applied philosophy, the study transcends empirical observations, positioning itself as a reflective exploration of the moral implications of AI in healthcare. The findings are intended to inform ethical considerations and policy formulations, bridging the gap between technological advancements and the enduring values of caregiving. In conclusion, this focused philosophical inquiry aims to provide a foundational understanding of the evolving landscape of virtual healthcare, drawing on the works of Mol and Pols to illuminate the essence of human connection, care, and empathy amid technological advancements.

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