Three tragedies and three shades of finitude that shape human life in the AI era

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This essay seeks to understand what it means for the human collective when AI technologies have become a predominant force in each of our lives through identifying *three moral dilemmas* (i.e., tragedy of the commons, tragedy of commonsense morality, tragedy of apathy) that shape human choices. In the first part, we articulate AI-driven versions of the three moral dilemmas. Then, in the second part, drawing from evolutionary psychology, existentialism, and East Asian philosophies, we argue that a deep appreciation of *three shades of human finitude* can help us mitigate harmful effects of the AI-driven versions of the three tragedies and even transcend them.

The three tragedies

First, is the tragedy of the commons, which is referred to as the '*Us versus Me problem*' by the Harvard evolutionary moral psychologist, Joshua Greene in his book, Moral tribes. In short, the tragedy of the commons is the problem of inner group conflicts driven by the lack of cooperation (and communication) when each individual purely follows his/her own best interest (e.g., raises more cattle to feed on the commons), doing so will undermine the collective good (e.g., the commons will be over-grazed). We can define the *AI-driven tragedy of the common* as short-term economic/psychological gains drive the development, launch, and use of half-baked AI products and AI-generated contents that produce superficial information and knowledge, which ends up harming the individual and collective on the long-term. The long-term harms can be infosphere polluted by misinformation and disinformation, half-baked AI products that have severe security issues, companies with quick AI launches taking over the market without solving intellectual property right issues, etc.

The second moral dilemma is the tragedy of commonsense morality. This moral dilemma is referred to as the '*Us versus Them problem'* by Joshua Greene. Roughly speaking, the tragedy of commonsense morality can be defined as situations in which the moral norms and values one group has developed to deal with the 'tragedy of the commons', i.e., their inner-group conflicts,

is not suitable or directly contradict with the moral common sense of another group. With the rise of AI, the tragedy of commonsense morality has two manifestations. The first AI systems embedded our daily products (i.e., social media news or friends recommendations) amplified group-think and polarization at the expense of nuanced discussions and resolutions of divide among socio-demographic groups. The second is that moral norms and ethical code of conducts developed for a particular group to solve AI-related societal problems contradict the norms and code of conducts of another.

The third moral dilemma might be called the tragedy of apathy, which we like to call the the '*now me/us versus future me/us problem'*. As humans, we often fail to appreciate the effects of small, almost undetectably destructive things that we do frequently on our future well-being, thus we reliably fail to take actions, individually and collectively, to change the status quo with any sort of urgency. Leaning onto the psychology literature, we can think about this problem as a combination of status quo bias, i.e., our deep-rooted preference to shore up the 'business as usual' and the temporal/hyperbolic discounting, i.e., the everyday experience of valuing more immediate rewards over those in the future. Importantly, the tragedy of apathy is also the result of the growing, and almost paralyzing complexity of our lives as social, networked beings. Here, as individual, we often feel the actions we can take on a daily basis are inconsequential for the long-term, diffused, wicked problems such as climate change, terrorism, global poverty, biodiversity loss, education, housing, urban planning, etc.

Indeed, regulating AI developments and implementations can now be added to this list. Regulating AI developments and uses is a wicked problem because it is characterized as consisting of many interdependent factors, which are often incomplete, in flux, and ill-defined. Critically, there is no point in time at which the process of addressing a problem is completed as AI technologies and the ways they are deployed change in non-linear, computationally irreducible way. Worse yet, AI technologies add another lay of tragedy on top as rather than empowering human users to tackle long-term social and environmental problems via timely sharing of information, the way AI technologies are being deployed now tend to result in overconsumption of AI-generated/recommended contents and overhyped AI products which exacerbate information overload, and in turn lead to decision-paralysis and apathy among the users.

Three shades of human finitude as antidotes for the three tragedies

All three tragedies are indeed wicked problems and solving them requires a deep understanding of the stakeholders involved, and an innovative approach. Here, we argue that a deep appreciation of human finitude is the crucial starting point in this unending process of addressing these wicked problems. And human finitude comes into at least three pronounced shades.

First, is the fact that our humanly fragile biology and psychology are deeply shaped by pre-historic evolutionary forces, thus they are ill-equipped to deal with the long-term, diffused,

abstract tragedies presented by modern technological-mediated, and increasingly AI-driven, life. Yet, understanding the evolutionary forces that shape our attention mechanism, our moral intuitions, and their shortcomings provide a firm foundation to (re)design our lives, our AIs, and our ethical codes in ways that align human-AI interactions and cocreations (Ho & Vuong, 2024) with our long-term interests.

Second, is the full recognition of the sheer contrast between our mortality and our infinite freedom in wondering among endless possibilities. As the British journalist Oliver Burkeman (2021) puts it, "we've been granted the mental capacities to make almost infinitely ambitious plans, yet practically no time at all to put them into action." Existentialism posits that we are condemned to be free, and in the age of AI, a new reality emerges with a freedom that extends beyond the self to include our interactions with machines. Yet, humans are also grappling with exhaustion and actively seeking detox from various sources, from food to social media, to the internet. This dilemma reflects Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes our condemned freedom within the finitude of life.

Eventually, humans only have 24 hours a day and on average, each of us has about four thousand weeks to make the most out of this life. To mindfully connect with these facts is to put a break on *the false allure of abundance*, especially as AI technologies constantly capture our imagination with endless possibilities of richer experiences. Rejecting the overwhelming 'supersensoriums,' i.e., a plethora of (entertainment) choices available with a single click, defined neuroscientist Erik Hoel, and grasping the existential importance of making deliberate and proactive choices over how we interact with machines are crucial mental skills to help us transcend the tragedy of apathy.

Last but not least, a deep appreciation of human finitude is profoundly connected to the truth on how bounded we are as humans, the starting point for wisdom and a theme that pervades all world philosophies and religions. For example, Buddhism fundamentally teaches about impermanence (anicca) and the nature of suffering (dukkha). While Taoism emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao（道）, the fundamental principle that underlies the universe. The Taoist ideal of *wu wei（无为）*, or effortless action, encourages individuals to acknowledge the limits of human control and align with the rhythms of nature or the larger reality of the Tao, rather than resist them. Confucianism teaches us the importance of recognizing one's place within the family and society is crucial in achieving an understanding of human limitations and responsibilities. This, in turn, fosters a sense of humility and respect for others, thus strengthen familial bonds and societal cohesion (Vuong et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Recognizing human finitude is the first of many steps in developing ways to live well and ethically with increasingly smarter AI. Perhaps, the next is finding the middle way, a balance approach that avoids both nihilistic technological determinisms, i.e., the tendency to believe

technology will destroy humanity, and unrealistic techno-optimism, i.e., the overzealous assumption that we can entirely delegate everything to machines. One effective strategy for applying AI is The Olympic AI Agenda, launched in April 2024, which centers solely on humans. A key aspect of this agenda is that athletes remain at the heart of every development, with AI serving as a tool to enhance athletic performance. Here, the question is not about what this technology can do, but rather, what AI can do for humans. Facing the new tragedies of the commons, the tragedy of commonsense morality, and the tragedy of apathy in the age of AI, humans need to embrace the humanity in their finitude more than ever.

Data availability

There is no data associated with this study.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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