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Robotics in the EU – A Macroethical Perspective

Most of the time, robots are discussed from a microethical perspective: How do humans interact with robots? What are the ethical consequences of using robots in elderly care? This, however, lacks a perspective on the more wide-ranging effects of robotics and automation on society as a whole.

There is growing evidence, for example, that automation technologies directly contribute to the growing income inequality in the Western world. To inform policy makers, robotics and automation technologies have to be discussed from such a macroethical perspective since these are problems that policy makers can try to address more directly compared to microethical concerns.

Such a macroethical perspective requires a closer look at the current economic and social situation in the EU – and, unfortunately, this situation remains grim: Unemployment is at an all-time high, and almost one out of four young people is unemployed with the situation in Greece and Spain being particularly bad.

More generally, workers have lost out for decades: Since the 1970s, the share of labour costs of the national GDP has declined across developed countries. Ever more income is generated by the top 1%. The share of wealth claimed today by the top 1% of American citizens is back to levels not seen since the roaring 1920s. As a result, the discussions concerning the hollowing-out of the middle class are dominating the political agenda.

In such a climate, it is no wonder that a Eurobarometer survey showed strongly negative attitudes towards robots: A staggering 70% of respondents considered robots to steal jobs from people. More than a quarter of respondents wants to ban robots altogether from healthcare, one of the most promising markets for robotics.

To counter these developments, it is firstly important to do a proper and comprehensive analysis of the micro- and macroeconomic effects of robotics and automation. Some studies actually paint a more positive picture with one coming to the conclusion that positive employment effects will be achieved with more automation.

Secondly, the legal, societal and ethical issues related to robotics have to be addressed more thoroughly. Obviously, there are grave concerns in society about robotics, and they have to be taken seriously. In the European Commission, for example, there is an ongoing activity on how to solve liability problems of ICT-based systems.

Thirdly, outreach to the general public needs to be intensified. People literally need to get their hands on robots and experience this technology themselves. Otherwise, we run the danger of people forming their opinion based on second-hand reports and media images.

Finally, we maybe have to start thinking about a future in which income inequality and unemployment will continue to rise as a result of automation and technology in general. This would require a serious reflection on future social and economic governance models.