



Why Care about Sustainable AI? Some Thoughts from the Debate on Meaning in Life

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The Big Picture: Meaningful AI

The content of this poster is part of the author's project "Meaningful AI," which aims to explore the dimension of meaningfulness in AI ethics. It starts with the observation that AI ethics is predominantly concerned with discussions pertaining to axiological aspects of personal well-being (e.g., happiness, privacy, autonomy, skills, capacities) or social justice (discrimination,

responsibility, distributive fairness, etc.). Although this focus seems promising, it may overlook important normative phenomena typically associated with the concept of "meaningfulness" or "meaning in life." The Meaningful-AI project attempts to investigate this often-neglected dimension in the following sub-projects:

- Meaningful Selves: Self-Cultivation and Individual Meaning
- Meaningful Work: Automation and Outsourcing
- Meaningful Relationships: Friendship and Romantic Love
- Meaningful Future: Sustainable AI

Meaning in Life

The discourse on "meaningfulness" or "meaning in life" has garnered considerable interest over the past two decades within analytic ethics [1,2,3,4]. Recently, the concept of meaning has been increasingly explored across various applied ethics fields, including medical ethics, animal ethics, climate ethics, and ethical considerations surrounding the emerging technologies of AI [5,6,7]

Although differing perspectives on meaningfulness exist, most scholars agree that "meaning" is inherently valuable and exemplifiable within a human's life, and is not wholly equivalent or reducible to standard axiological parameters. Many differentiate meaningfulness from narrow self-interest, morality, or cosmic meaning, yet they often acknowledge at least a weak correlation between these axiological categories [3].

Sustainable AI

The concept of sustainability and its key connotations are largely attributed to the influential Brundtland Report from 1987, which characterized sustainability as "fulfilling the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [8]. This definition encourages equal consideration for both present and future needs, thus framing sustainability as a "visionary and forward-looking paradigm" [9]. Within this context, sustainability can be defined in several ways. One useful distinction within the realm of AI is the following:

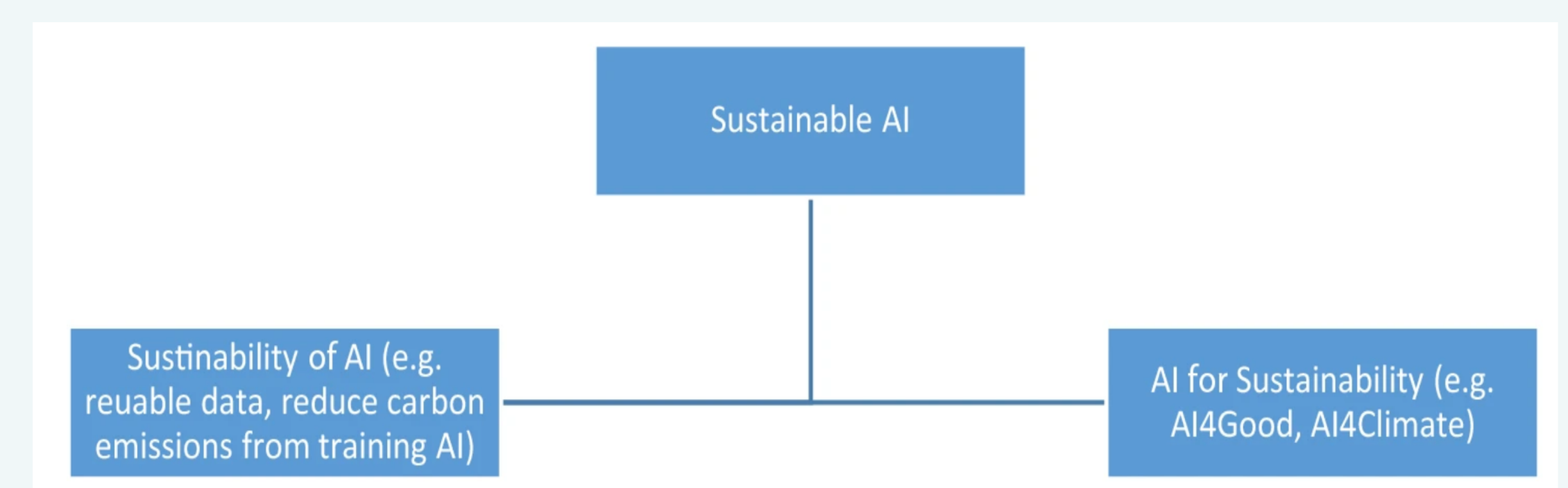


Figure 1. Subdivision of sustainable AI by [16] (sic: "reusable").

How to Connect Meaningfulness and Sustainable AI?

Rationale 1: The Meaningful Action Argument

- There are some actions that aim to promote sustainable AI.
 - With those actions we help future generations.
 - Helping others (e. g. future generations) is meaning conferring.
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- IV. Thus, actions that promote sustainable AI are meaning conferring.

The general schema of the argument is implicitly present in the discourse [3,7,8]. Given the commonly accepted notion of meaning pluralism, however, the argument lacks universality and applies only to those for whom "helping others" is a meaning-conferring element.

Rationale 2: The Afterlife Conjuncture

- The meaningfulness of our own life depends in part on the afterlife, e. g. on the economic, social and environmental status of future generations.
 - If future generations are worse off or may even confronted with extinction (e. g. because of unsustainable AI) our own life may have less meaning or even becomes meaningless.
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- III. Thus, we have very good reasons to care about sustainability (and also about sustainable AI).

The argument draws inspiration, among others, from the works of Samuel Scheffler [10,11]. It is fundamentally sound but requires substantial theoretical development to be operational. Specifically, it must be grounded in a certain theory of meaningfulness that underpins the significance of the afterlife [12,13].

Rationale 3: The Harm Argument

- Creating harm for future generations is a disvalue.
 - If we are acting in a way that creates harm for future generations we are making our life less meaningful, maybe even meaningless.
 - If we are not acting towards (or even against) sustainable AI we are creating harm.
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- IV. Thus, if we are not acting towards (or even acting against) sustainable AI we are making our life less meaningful, maybe even meaningless.

The harm argument, while not explicitly stated in the discourse, is present in many writings [11,14]. With careful development, it is currently the most promising approach to articulating a relationship between meaningfulness and sustainable AI.

Summary & further research

In conclusion, the harm argument is posited as the foremost contender for providing universal reasons to value sustainable AI without the need for a substantive theory of meaningfulness. This argument appears to be compatible with various perspectives on meaningfulness within the field.

However, it is important to recognize that certain presuppositions of the argument require further development. Specifically, the argument is underdeveloped in its delineation of the "currency" and "measure" of harm, the significance and impact of omissions in causing harm, the role of harm within

a theory of meaning, and the presupposition that negative meaning or anti-meaning exists. While some of these requirements have already been addressed [13,14,15], additional elaboration is necessary.

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