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Dr. Galit Wellner, Tel Aviv University and the NB School of Design

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Face Recognition, Multistability, and Morality

In June 2020 IBM announced a withdrawal from the facial recognition business. Its CEO explained¹ this move by the wish to maintain responsible use of the technology, especially by the police. However, this technology is used in other domains which seem to be morally neutral, e.g. in border checkpoints where it ensures the face of the passport holder matches the photograph in the document. If unmatched, the holder of the passport is sent to stand in a (usually) long line for inspection by a human agent. In the queue, the percentage of women is high, as well as of non-white skinned people (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018).

With the postphenomenological notion of multistability, it becomes evident that the same technology raises two sets of ethical-political concerns: one related to criminalization and the right to demonstrate; the other related to equal treatment. The former relies on a well-functioning algorithm; the latter is revealed when the technology fails.

IBM's resolution of abolishing the technology sacrifices the neutral yet biased implementations. Such a resolution condemns any use of the technology, similarly to nuclear energy (cf. Winner 1980). Can we avoid the politics of such systems? Philosophers of technology offer some less-dramatic solutions that aim at both improper use and bias. The proposed paper will elaborate on the various aspects of multistability in terms of usages, the intendedness of the bias and the solutions offered from total abolishment to public intervention (Feenberg 2017) and mediation analysis (Verbeek 2011).

Keywords: Gender bias, AI, ethics

¹ <https://www.ibm.com/blogs/policy/facial-recognition-susset-racial-justice-reforms/>