

Ph.D. Position in Ethics of Technology, TU Delft
As part of the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies Research Program

PhD Project 1: Empathy, Autism and Augmentative and Alternative Communication Technologies

Faculty/department Technology, Policy and Management

Level MA Degree

Maximum employment 38 hours per week (1 FTE)

Duration of contract Four Years (Fixed Term)

Salary scale €2325 to €2972

Intended starting date: September 1st 2020 (if desired, an earlier starting date can be considered)

Technology, Policy and Management

The Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management contributes to sustainable solutions for technical challenges in society by combining the insights from engineering with the humanities and the social sciences.

The Department of Values, Technology and Innovation (VTI) focuses on the value dimension of comprehensive engineering, the overarching research theme of the Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management (TPM). It uniquely comprises philosophers, economists and risk scholars. It studies how to develop and diffuse responsible technological innovations that reflect deeply held social and moral values. The department is one of the largest groups in the world studying value aspects, economics and risks for a wide range of sociotechnical systems. The department plays a leading role nationally and internationally in research in responsible innovation and design for values.

The Ethics and Philosophy of Technology section is one of three sections within the VTI Department. The section plays a central role worldwide in research on ethics and philosophy of technology. The section participates in the 4TU.Centre for Ethics and Technology, a world-leading centre in the ethics of technology. The research of the section covers a broad spectrum, ranging from applied research in collaboration with engineering scholars, experimental and empirical ethics in collaboration with social scientists, and foundational research in meta-ethics, risk theory, methodology, ontology and philosophy of science, technology and design. The ethics research program focuses specifically on design for values, risk ethics, and responsible innovation.

The Ethics and Philosophy of Technology section provides for service teaching at all engineering programs of TU Delft, primarily in ethics but also in philosophy of engineering methodology and philosophy of science. For more information on our unique teaching approach, see: <https://www.tudelft.nl/ethics/>

Job description

The Ethics and Philosophy of Technology section is looking for a Ph.D. candidate who will be working on a project on *Empathy, Autism and Augmentative and Alternative Communication Technologies* [or AAC Tech] (see project description below). The project is part of the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies Gravitation program, a new ten year long international research program of seven universities in the Netherlands that has started in January

2020. This program has a combined budget of € 27 million, and is funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO, in the Gravitation funding scheme for excellent research, and by matching funds from the participating institutions. The duration is from January 2020 to December 2029. The program has the aim of achieving breakthrough research in at the intersection of ethics, philosophy, technology / engineering and social sciences, and to position its consortium at the top of its field internationally. A key objective is to investigate how new technologies challenge moral values and ontological concepts (like “nature”, “human being” and “community”), and how these challenges necessitate a revision of these concepts. The program includes four research lines, “Nature, life and human intervention”, “The future of a free and fair society”, “The human condition” and “Synthesis: Ethics of Technology, Practical Philosophy, and Modern Technology-Driven Societies” (candidates selected for an interview can request more information on the program and its four research lines). The project on Empathy, Autism and AAC Tech will be embedded in the “The human condition” line but is also linked with the “The Future of a Free and Fair Society” line. Please note that our partner universities will be advertising other Ph.D. positions in this program and that you can apply for several at once. For more information on the program as a whole, the four research lines within it and the various Ph.D. openings available see also: <https://www.esdt.nl>

Project Description

Currently, there exists no robust account of empathy as technologically mediated. This is striking, since numerous empirical studies suggest that VR, Social Media Platforms, and other new digital technologies can undermine empathy or precisely extend its scope. One of our main research-questions is *‘how does empathy, qua concept, need to be reconsidered in light of these new digital technologies?’* The answer to this question not only has the potential to change current philosophical debates on the nature and scope of empathy, it is also needed to confront a practical-evaluative lacuna: empirical studies proclaim the empathy-promoting or distorting effects of various digital technologies, thereby seemingly validating or questioning their ethical and social (un)desirability. But since we lack a robust up-to-date philosophical account of empathy as technologically mediated, these assessments are founded on an unexamined notion of empathy.

To explore empathy’s technological mediation and what this means for our understanding of the concept itself, we propose a project on empathy and Augmentative and Alternative Communication Technologies [or AAC Tech]. AAC Tech comes in a variety of forms (tablets with specialized apps, computer-generated speech devices, communication-supporting VR etc.) but are united in their goal, which is to provide a voice to the 1.3% of the world population unable to use natural speech for congenital or acquired reasons. A significant portion of this population is on the autism spectrum. AACs have enabled non-speaking autistic persons to give expression to their rich inner lives in a manner that has enabled a change in how they are empathically perceived and responded to at individual and societal levels. At the same time, reliance on AACs can have stigmatizing empathy-undermining effects. Furthermore, the information technologies used in augmented and alternative communication are often precisely criticized for thwarting empathy by ‘disembodying’ our relationship to others. Thus, the complex role of AAC technologies in the lives of non-speaking autistic persons provides a rich yet circumscribed case-study for raising important ontological and normative questions about the meaning of empathy in a technologically mediated world.

Given the abundance of empirical studies on VR used to support communication skills in (non-speaking) autistic persons, we suspect that a close examination of VR understood as an AAC technology will be particularly relevant, but the Ph.D. candidate is free to propose (a) particular AAC(s) to focus on in the project.

Requirements

We are looking for a candidate with a proven affinity with one or more of the projects' main themes (empathy, autism, AAC Tech). Given the philosophy-heavy emphasis of the project our preference goes to a candidate with an MA in philosophy. We will, however, consider candidates with a different MA-degree relevant to the topic (e.g. psychology, media studies, human computer interaction, sociology, STS, (medical) anthropology) *as long as the candidate also has a proven background in philosophy* (for instance in the form of a BA degree). Additional requirements are:

- Strong English writing skills
- Flexibility and readiness to work in teams
- Openness to spend a semester abroad (a generous budget for conference travel and research abroad is available for this position).

We aim to increase the diversity in our Section and field, so we especially encourage candidates from underrepresented groups to apply.

Conditions of employment

TU Delft offers a customisable compensation package, a discount for health insurance and sport memberships, and a monthly work costs contribution. Flexible work schedules can be arranged. An International Children's Centre offers childcare and an international primary school. Dual Career Services offers support to accompanying partners. Salary and benefits are in accordance with the Collective Labor Agreement for Dutch Universities.

As a PhD candidate you will be enrolled in the TU Delft Graduate School. TU Delft Graduate School provides an inspiring research environment; an excellent team of supervisors, academic staff and a mentor; and a Doctoral Education Programme aimed at developing your transferable, discipline-related and research skills. Please visit www.tudelft.nl/phd for more information.

Information and application

For more information about this position and the Gravitation project on the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies, please contact Prof.dr. Sabine Roeser, S.Roeser@tudelft.nl or Dr. Janna van Grunsven, J.B.vanGrunsvan@tudelft.nl (as mentioned, additional information on the project and its four research lines is also available on <https://www.esdt.nl>)

To apply, please e-mail a letter of application detailing how your prior (research) experience aligns with the project, a curriculum vitae, and contact information of three references and an abstract of your MA-thesis by March 31st 2020 to ms. Anita van Vianen (HR), Vacature-TBM@tudelft.nl. When applying for this position, please refer to vacancy number ATTBM 20.011. Interviews with selected candidates will take place early or mid April.