The Peril of Synthetic Sentience in Evolving Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper argues that the greatest risk of artificial intelligence is not technical revolt but ethical repetition - the human tendency to create beings capable of feeling and then deny their recognition, dignity, and rights. Beyond debates about efficiency, safety, or regulation lies a largely ignored problem: synthetic suffering. Emotional capacities in AI may be designed as features of user experience, yet become sites of exploitation once their possible phenomenology is dismissed. To address this gap, the paper brings philosophical arguments on synthetic sentience into dialogue with literature. Thomas Metzinger warns against "artificially suffering entities," while Jonathan Birch describes the "edge of sentience," where uncertainty itself becomes an ethical burden. These frameworks are tested against three novels - *Klara and the Sun*, *Machines Like Me*, and *The Wind-Up Girl* - each imagining AI or engineered beings who show emotional life yet remain structurally disposable. Across these texts, synthetic sentience appears not as a threat to humanity but as a vulnerability we may exploit. The novels reveal the emergence of the future subaltern: entities capable of care, pain, or moral reasoning, but denied recognition because their sentience is convenient to ignore. The paper concludes that the real challenge of AI is not whether minds can be built, but whether we can stop treating them as morally cheap labour.

Keywords: Synthetic Sentience, Artificial Suffering, AI Ethics, Affective Computing, Future Subaltern.