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On AI and The Value of Meaning

As Thomas Edison famously said, “genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”. However, taking the world by storm, artificial intelligence has often performed that 100%, replacing both our ingenuity and effort. With our focus often centered on results, we oftentimes will even prefer large language models’ blueprint-based generations and fail to acknowledge that our actions behind these results are what give an experience meaning and foster our growth. AI excels at producing results based on what has already been said, capturing precisely what is expected without effort on our part, and thus is incapable of replacing learning and empathy.

For tasks where the objective is to meet another individual or group’s expectations and preferences, specifically where there exists significant data indicating exactly what those preferences are, machine learning models stand as an effective alternative to human thought. But what is AI currently capable of? Is its process of reading and regurgitating information good enough to replace humanity? In these cases, the answer is yes. One such scenario is that of Natasha Singer, who experimentally used a chatbot to write responses to college essay prompts. Though it initially falters, with minimal correction and incredibly sparse background information, it produces a 50-word response: a flawless blend of vague meanings and falsely meaningful phrases, describing the unspecific experience of “facing inequality head on” and how their “empowerment surges ... with [a] song’s fierce message” (Singer). This response to a prompt on the soundtrack of someone's life is the highly formulaic archetype of an admissions

officer's perfect applicant, and LLMs' extensive training data means they can identify precisely what constitutes that perfect applicant. David Brooks, though, would argue that though Natasha's short paragraphs certainly address the prompt, they do so at the cost of her own intelligence. In the neurological study he wrote about, "the [group using AI to write an essay] demonstrated up to 55% lower [neural] connectivity [than the group writing without AI or search engines]" (Brooks). This scientifically backed view that someone like Natasha would learn less from her writing offers a perspective as to why such an approach would be detrimental to an individual. Furthermore, "the essays written with AI were homogeneous [and] users had difficulty quoting from their own paper," reflecting the negative impact artificial intelligence can have on originality (Brooks). This view is very similar to that of student Olivia Han, who, in a letter to ChatGPT, wrote that "if [she] and 400 million weekly users rely on [ChatGPT]... [they]'ll leave [their] own voices behind, and [AI] will speak for [them] all"(Han). While I agree that AI usage precedes the decay of critical thought and originality, Olivia and Brooks's views do not, in my opinion, apply to Natasha. If beauty is seen through the eyes of the beholder, LLMs are artists to behold. For the flavorless, practically scripted nature of a 50-word college essay, ChatGPT can ladle the most perfectly composed spoonful of its training data to appeal to an admissions officer. Although Mr. Brooks might argue that Singer's essays would be as monotonous as the ones written with AI in the study he reviews, I would remind him that it is certainly effective at meeting the observable patterns and clichés that define a "good" college essay. My view that AI often eclipses humanity in performing tasks with characteristics that make a satisfactory response is echoed by Dr. Jonathan Reisman. He feels that agentic AI outperforms him in terms of offering empathy to patients, as, "in medicine, being compassionate and considerate involves, to a surprising degree, following a prepared script" (Reisman), and is that not what AI does best? It

pulls information from its vast training set and crafts a response that is exactly what is calculated to be the best in a given situation. Per society's expectations for empathy and self-advertisement, AI's abilities are passable at worst, if not stellar.

If a meaningless "good enough" is all we want in a result, LLMs are certainly capable; however, they cannot substitute for the deep comprehension and genuine feeling behind an endeavor or gesture. What happens, then, when we begin to care beyond the superficial results and focus on this meaning, learning, and humanity? In such a scenario, Brooks's views begin to carry far more weight. If it is learning that is emphasized, the study's measurement of decreased neural connectivity, a quantitative metric for learning, proves that AI does prevent us from learning (Brooks). However, with the way learning is currently evaluated, AI does exceed humans. As Peter Greene says, "too often student[s] are expected to follow a formula to reliably mediocre results," thus, the current education system is geared disproportionately toward the type of tasks that LLMs perform, therefore pressuring students to use such models rather than furthering their learning. I certainly concur with Greene's view that college essays are a prime example of the system's emphasis on bland, formula-based writing over creativity; however, even in a college essay, the effort one puts into the process is what gives the final product value. Though Reisman's patients may find comfort in the cadence of an LLM's crafted sympathy, they would likely find greater reassurance in the thoughtful words of an actual human. Christopher Beha argues that our perception of human ability has been altered throughout history, and modern society causes us to believe that conforming to homogeneity is the best we can do for ourselves and those who evaluate us, furthering the idea that our perception of actions must change. He goes on to say that all humans still have the potential to be sporadically "genius," his definition of the word being an ability that can come to anyone, granted that they are not held

back by their own desire to appeal to the stereotypical good-on-paper standards AI does. His own writing, sometimes spectacularly incomprehensible, is a perfect example of this. It is not something AI could create when crafting a response to a prompt, forever striving for a “perfect,” normalized response. I agree that if we grow accustomed to taking results at face value, declaring them as good because they check certain boxes with little genuine care, we will be replaceable. Thus, if humans and our abilities are to be valued over AI, we must look for the meaning in our actions and others’ — the self-learning that comes from a college essay written from true experience, or the heartfelt empathy behind a doctor’s diagnosis — and beyond the surface-level palatability of AI.

Although artificial intelligence is undoubtedly adept at replacing both our inspiration and perspiration, it cannot replicate the learning behind pure, unadulterated effort, nor the passion that comes with that 1% spark of inspiration that is truly your own. It is incapable of words with true care in them because, at its core, AI is a tool, a machine. Inherently soulless, a voice that speaks from code and data, it is nonliving, and it cannot replace us in living.

Sources:

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