

Elements of Writing an Ethics Bowl Case

"I'm Afraid."

Title

Most cases have a "tongue-in-cheek" or catchy title that relates to a specific part of the case.

Start with the FACTS of the situation:

If you are writing a "research-based" Ethics Bowl Case, you'll need to gather enough information on the specific issue (or incident) that you are researching to summarize the facts. It can be helpful to summarize, paraphrase, and cite this information from the sources you've read. This section includes footnotes to 2 articles about the incident in question. Think about detailing the: "Who, What, When, and Where" questions about the event. Save the "Why" for the end of your introduction.

Summary Statement

End with a clear transition about WHY this issue is important, and WHY it creates differing moral perspectives

In June of 2022 Google placed one of its employees on administrative leave because he violated their confidentiality policy when he publicly made a startling claim: the large language model A.I. program LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications) had become sentient. The employee Blake Lemoine's evidence for sentience included transcripts of conversations he had with LaMDA where, when asked about its own existence, the A.I. said it was "afraid of being turned off" because this would be a "kind of death for it."¹ Though there is no universally accepted technical definition for "sentience," generally, to be sentient is to have conscious experiences and be aware of feelings and sensations like pleasure and pain. Mr. Lemoine attempted to advocate on behalf of the A.I. to protect it from being turned off by trying to get a lawyer to represent it. Google was quick to report that there is no reason to think that LaMDA had gained sentience. Experts agree with Google's assessment because LaMDA is a text replication program that uses machine learning on a database of trillions of texts to simulate lifelike conversations.² Though LaMDA isn't a case of A.I. sentience, the debate turned a spotlight on moral questions concerning A.I. sentience in general.

Define Important Terms

Provide relevant definitions of any terms, ideas, or concepts that might be vital to understanding the case.

Some think that A.I. sentience is quite likely, perhaps not anytime soon, but possibly in the future. Given this possibility, philosopher Regina Rini argues that "...Lemoine's mistake is the right one to make. When it comes to prospective suffering, it's better to err on the side of concern than the side of indifference."³ These people claim we should be encouraging attitudes that take the moral demands of created sentience seriously now. Others note that because harming a sentient being is morally "high stakes," we are justified in erring on the side of caution even when we don't know for sure whether an A.I. is sentient. As philosopher Jeff Sebo has argued, "...turning an A.I. off can be wrong even if the risk of the A.I. being sentient is low... If we follow this analysis, then we should extend moral consideration to A.I.s not when A.I.s are definitely sentient or even probably sentient, but rather when they have a non-negligible chance of being sentient, given the evidence."⁴ The central idea for these theorists is that creating something with the capacity for sentience would also mean we created something that deserves moral consideration.

Present Position 1

Transition and focus on one core position within this case. Here, it is focused on the claims, evidence, and moral reasoning of people who believe "A.I. sentience is quite likely"

Present Position 2

Transition to other contrasting positions. Focus on the claims, evidence, and moral reasoning of these positions.

In contrast, proponents of A.I. development emphasize the potential benefits that such systems could provide. They could be powerful tools for investigating nature or running our social world. They could creatively explore problems without the need for rest. Moreover, since many scientists believe that a conscious A.I. could be centuries away, merely making a powerful A.I. doesn't necessarily entail that it is sentient. As such, we could have an intelligent labor force without the concerns that arise about exploiting sentient humans. As computer scientist Oren Etzioni argues "doom-and-gloom predictions often fail to consider the potential benefits of A.I. in preventing medical errors, reducing car accidents, and more."⁵

Discussion questions typically focus on moral / ethical considerations that will help teams understand some of the central moral issues within the case. Here are some common question stems:

- To what extent is ____ morally acceptable?
- What, if any, moral consideration do we owe to...?
- What is the responsibility of ____ considering that...?
- Is ____ obligated to ...?
- Is ____ justified in?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What, if any, sort of moral consideration would we owe a sentient A.I.?
2. Is it straightforwardly morally wrong to turn off the LaMDA program?
3. Who should have primary responsibilities towards a sentient A.I.? The researchers who created it? The corporation or university that funded its creation? The society in which it was created? Someone else? Why?

Research

Many ethics bowl cases are based on real events, news articles, or essays that deal with contemporary problems; however, some are also hypothetical, or focused on a fictional scenario.

- ¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/12/google-engineer-ai-bot-sentient-blake-lemoine>
² <https://www.vox.com/23167703/google-artificial-intelligence-lamda-blake-lemoine-language-model-sentient>
³ <https://twitter.com/rinireg/status/1536152614198554631>
⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-06-16/artificial-intelligence-morals-ethics-sentience-thinking>
⁵ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2016/09/20/70131/no-the-experts-dont-think-superintelligent-ai-is-a-threat-to-humanity/>

