

Levi Checketts

Indigence and Intelligent Engines: Toward a Phenomenology of First-World Poverty in the Context of Artificial Intelligence

If general artificial intelligence is a real possibility, would we ever want to program a computer to think like a poor person? While seemingly trivial, the question has critical real-world implications. While many authors have highlighted the gendered or ethnic assumptions of AI programming, few have considered meaningfully the classist presuppositions. If a context-less, disembodied, autonomous calculating machine is meant to be "intelligent," what do we make of the frantic, hegemonized, constrained experience of poor consciousnesses?

Using a combination of poverty studies, the theories of Marx and Bourdieu, and personal experience as a poor white in a first-world country, I outline elements of a phenomenology of poverty in the context of the assumption programmed into General AI. Against the "ideal-type" logic processing upper middle-class software engineers program into sophisticated software, the epistemology of the poor is most often a messy synthesis of survival instincts, habituated behaviors, internalized propaganda and genuine aspiration and ingenuity.

While this work could go on to add to the pile of philosophical anthropology arguments against AI, I rather present this as a moral problem. Following, once again, the idea of Marx's hegemony, I contend that General AI as a technology has the potential to marginalize or alienate the epistemology of poverty. As questions of the moral standing of an "intelligent" computer gain more ground, the inherent dignity of the poor will suffer as their "intelligence" is denigrated. Two solutions present themselves: redefine "intelligence" to be more inclusive or program a computer to be poor.