

Letter

Navigating artificial intelligence's role in suicide prevention: balancing innovation with ethical vigilance

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The recent discovery of a robot civil servant, 'Robot Supervisor', found unresponsive at the bottom of a stairwell in South Korea, termed a robot suicide, raises profound philosophical and technological questions.¹ This robot supervisor was a fully integrated member of the city council, complete with civil service identification and regular working hours. Its final moments preceding the 'suicide' were described as 'circling in one spot as if something was there' and evoked parallels to human behaviours associated with severe distress.¹ The jury is still out on whether this 'death' was an accident or a suicide. However, the notion of robots experiencing despair and contemplating suicide challenges our understanding of consciousness and artificial intelligence. Although animals have also been known to end their life, superficially resembling human suicide, these are generally understood within the context of instinctual, stress-related or environmentally influenced actions rather than a deliberate, conscious choice to end life.² Given the cogent argument against anthropomorphism, it could be speculated that suicide is a uniquely human trait.³ Suicide represents one of the most significant challenges faced by mental healthcare today.⁴ Therefore, one could speculate that the pinnacle of artificial intelligence sentience informed by human behaviour could also integrate similar cognitions and behaviours.

The concept of deeper thinking related to suicide is not unprecedented in philosophy and speculative fiction. This narrative resonates with Albert Camus's argument in *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁵ that recognises the link between the absurdity of existence and deep despair. Frank Herbert's early works also provocatively examine suicide or insanity as artificial intelligence's eventual doomed fate.⁶ Furthermore, this perspective has been explored in mainstream Hollywood movies such as *Star Wars* and *Terminator*, as well as the more contemporary Netflix series *Love, Death & Robots*⁷ which explores a similar theme in the episode *Zima Blue*.

The impulse to self-terminate or regress could reflect an existential awareness that transcends programmed behaviour, indicating a deeper understanding and rejection of one's own existence. This forces us to confront some unsettling questions: If artificial intelligence sentience can assimilate nuanced views on suicide, what implications does this have for the use of artificial intelligence in suicide prevention? The potential is immense for sentient artificial intelligence systems to revolutionise mental health interventions by identifying at-risk individuals and providing timely, personalised assistance.⁸ Conversely, the ethical and practical challenges posed by the possibility of artificial intelligence systems themselves developing a form of sentience that includes the capability for non-programmed suicidal ideation⁹ could pose significant challenges for both artificial intelligence development and utilization in the area of suicide prevention.

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Author contributions

S.S. conceptualised the manuscript, drafted the initial version and coordinated revisions. G.S.G. contributed to refining the manuscript and provided critical feedback during revisions. K.P.M. assisted in shaping the content and contributed to the final editing. V.S.K.R. provided expert guidance and reviewed the final manuscript for approval. All authors have approved the final manuscript.

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Declaration of interest

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