



Intimations of sentience

Description

Something is sentient if it feels or is capable of feeling; having the power or function of sensation or of perception by the senses (OED). Consider the following:

An AI platform that delivers conversational responses to my inputs is sentient.

That's a very bold claim about AI. To *intimate* that an AI platform is sentient would therefore claim, announce, declare, indicate, or signify that it is sentient. But the verb *to intimate* also means *to imply, to suggest, to hint*.

As a verb, *intimate* is an academic weasel word, leaving open the strength of the claim. To restate the fictional quote above:

In some cases, some of the time, it's as if an AI platform is sentient. It's as if you are communicating with a human or other entity that has feelings.

To claim intimations of sentience puts any strong claims on hold.

Intimacy

The verb *to intimate* is convenient. It derives from the Latin *intimus*, which means *inmost, intimate, profound, inward, innermost, secret*. The [online etymology dictionary](#) adds *intrinsic* to the list. These meanings fit nicely with *intimate* as an adjective, as in *intimate relations*, an *intimate moment*, or an *intimate conversation*; or the noun form: *relational intimacy*, *moments of intimacy*, or *conversational intimacy*. The form intimations of shifts attention to the object as revealed by a quick search online.

A web search yields a plethora of word usages related to *intimations* of war, love, gender, sex, justice, and intelligence, but little on sentience. That's convenient if I wanted to use Intimations

of Sentience?• as an original title of a book or chapter.

The title (Intimations of Sentience) implies that sentience is a matter of intimacy, or an impression of intimacy. Some people think that sentience pertains to agency, responsibility, independent thought, feelings and intelligence.

It is useful though to tie sentience to intimacy. After all, the most profound indicators of sentience are that a being with whom we are communicating is empathetic towards us, feels with us, is capable of being intimate, if not physically then in conversation.

I think that intimacy extends to all participants in such an inquiry. To claim, explore or desire that the world and its objects may (or may not) exhibit sentience has dimensions that are inmost, intimate, profound, inward, innermost, and secret for those raising the question: can a non-human entity be sentient? The question, the search, reveals as much about the inquirer and his/her context as it *intimates* about computers.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. AI
2. conversation
3. intimacy
4. sentience

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