

Monotheistic Ethics in *Caprica*: The Consequences of AI Development on Queer Futurity

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“It doesn't concern you sister, that kind of absolutist view of the universe? Right and wrong determined solely by a single all-knowing, all-powerful being whose judgement cannot be questioned, and in whose name the most horrendous of acts can be sanctioned without appeal?” (*Caprica*, “Pilot”).

This is the question asked in the pilot episode of *Caprica*, the prequel to *Battlestar Galactica* and a show depicting both the emergence of sentient artificial intelligence, and the cultural conflict between polytheistic and monotheistic structures of belief and moral values. Detective Duram, a devout man to the polytheistic status quo, stands theistically opposed to Sister Clarice, the headmistress of the Athenian Academy who portrays herself publicly as polytheistic, yet secretly leads a cell of the Soldiers of the One, the militarised terrorism branch of the monotheistic church of the colonies, zealots responsible for the recent bombing of a train. It is with irony that shortly after this, he tells her “Know your enemy,” and she echoes back, “Love your enemy, Agent Duram. That is what we followers of Athena believe.” This black and white commentary on a monotheistic system of ethics is similar to criticism of religion’s treatment of queer communities. Abram Brummett, in his paper on queer reproductive rights and access to assisted reproductive technologies, argues that “conscience claims against LGBT individuals ought to be constrained because the underlying metaphysic—that God has decreed the LGBT lifestyle to be sinful—is highly implausible” (272). Just as the Soldiers of the One

use in their acts of terror, this is also an illogical justification. Yet, as Brummett notes, and as we can see in the current global political climate, queer communities face oppression, for instance with some clinics in the United States using overt policies or subtle methods of limiting access to reproductive healthcare (273). There are also growing political threats to queer rights (Moreau). Which decisions require moral justification to enact? Who decides what's right and what's wrong? Who opts to restrict queer rights? Let me ask you this, consciously at a symposium on artificial intelligence: what systems might humanity use to make those decisions tomorrow?

The AI machines, named cylons, in *Caprica* and *Battlestar Galactica* carry a code of ethics that positions a right and a wrong, an objective good and evil, and in *Battlestar Galactica*, this code of ethics in service of their god is used to justify a simultaneous surprise attack that results in the near-total annihilation of the human race. Agent Duram was fundamentally correct in his assessment of dichotomous ethics. The actions taken by the cylons over the course of *Battlestar Galactica* mirror modern colonial oppressive regimes, and those same black and white codes of dichotomous ethics are used to justify or excuse their actions. At one point in the series, the cylons decide, entirely without remorse, that the genocide was a mistake, sorry! Our bad, oopsies. Well, no harm done, and that it would be just the best idea, really, to live with the humans on a planet called New Caprica, that the humans had believed would be a refuge from the machines. The cylons trespass on this new world, impose their own system of law and order, strip the colonised humans of their rights, abduct and detain or execute dissidents, and commit countless horrific acts in the name of living together in harmony ("Lay Down Your Burdens," "Occupation," "Precipice"). Colonisation is the antithesis of queer identity and freedom. Conversations converging Native studies and queer theory, for instance, recognise the persistency of heteropatriarchal structures wrought by colonialist regimes by imposing a disappearance not only on Indigenous peoples, but on queer peoples as well, and that the queering of decolonisation is an essential step in having such conversations. (Smith; Scott L. Morgensen; Scott Lauria Morgensen; Abu-Assab and Eddin).

This theory was proposed by a scholar named José Esteban Muñoz. His argument was that queerness is defined as something you do, not just what you are, and that there's a horizon in the distance that we're struggling to reach, a point of greater freedom, of a better quality of life (Muñoz). But whenever you take a step towards the horizon, the horizon steps back. The freedoms the LGBTQA community has today might have been a horizon fifty years ago. It's subjective. When Canada had gay marriage and the US didn't, the queer horizon was different in those countries. There's still the death penalty for homosexuality in some parts of the world. A horizon can be distinct to any person, place, or time, and it can apply to other groups experiencing oppressing as well. Futurity is the fight for that horizon, and there is always another horizon. But there's another half to this coin. With every step forward, the tide of oppression carries us back. Our fight for a horizon mirrors another fight against it.

Colonisation is intrinsic, pervasive, and fundamental to the very core of our society, as the cylon pursuit is fundamental and intrinsic to the lives of the humans in *Battlestar Galactica*, post-genocide. The values our world holds against queerness are that of invisibility. The claim so often made, that "I don't care what you do, as long as it's not in my face," reflects societal values. How many advertisements use heterosexual appeal as a selling point? There is a default state that, by its very nature, oppresses the push for queer futurity. It is a deep, ingrained concept even in queer communities, both at the institutional and social level (Van der Toorn et al.). It isn't necessarily that someone is at fault, nor committing willful acts of anti-queering, but the message is so deep, so institutionalised through customs and social norms, that this outcome is inevitable, embedded at the subconscious (Rafanell and Gorringer).

Generative artificial intelligence is a system that emulates the default, and in turn the collective subconscious. Who are the people working to develop it? The majority are extremely well educated and well paid, with positions across all fields at Open AI easily earning hundreds of thousands to millions in annual salaries in 2024 (*Levels.Fyi*). What ratio of developers are queer? How many are Indigenous? How many come from countries not considered part of "the west"? As Damien Patrick Williams puts it,

“We must continually ask, who is in the room when we make the decisions that influence, shape, or even determine research directions?” (Williams 251–52). These questions are essential for shaping our future reality. The perspectives and logics we use to craft AI are just as biased as we are, and not only reflect systems that have created harm through its own biases (249), but will create that harm again. In *Battlestar Galactica*, the outsourcing of public power away from human beings and towards the cylons created a violated space devoid of human-centric rights and legal systems. The exact same outsourcing of queer power to a heteronormative society also deprives queer rights. This is where Detective Duram’s observations hit so strongly. The first sentient AI is modelled identically to her creator, a victim of the train bombing. She retains her creator’s personality, emotional ties, expressions, and innate biases, including religious beliefs. Imposing our own subconscious biases on AI will result in a regime, a new era that, an “AI Empire” built on the very foundations of oppression, which we must redevelop from the ground-up, starting with our core philosophies and innate assumptions surrounding its conception (Tacheva and Ramasubramanian). Yet, “Even the most thoughtful and thoroughgoing intervention cannot come close to confronting its deep roots” (10), which are based in subconscious oppression. Proposed approaches to improved AI developmental ethics include training, policy writing, and the consideration of potential world impact (Xivuri and Twinomurinzi), but fall short in diversifying hiring practices and incorporating non-western codes of ethics. We need these diverse perspectives to have ethical influence. What happens when an oppressive regime backed by religious connotations of sin decides to use GenAI to maliciously pursue queer communities? What happens when an individual, organisation, or nation opts to create GenAI for this exact purpose?

Outsourcing our public power away from human beings would result in a violation of our rights and legal systems (Liu et al.). Isherwood notes that “queer theology with its postmodern roots asks us to distrust any master narrative” (1349), and in this case, the master narrative is not of a divine being, but of a machine god, a purveyor of all our deepest and darkest secrets, our flaws and biases. The development of GenAI itself creates a master narrative. Just as *Caprica* parallels monotheistic ethics

that ultimately justify a cylon genocide against humanity, we must be cautious of single-minded codes of morality in the directional development of Generative AI, where lacking developer diversity defaults in narrow world views, creating a risk of disproportionate impact on queer communities. A single woman's avatar formed the framework of *Caprica*'s cylons and their eventual extermination of the human race. Developer homogeneity creates a disproportionate risk, especially in harm to queer communities, who see impact and oppression no matter their origin. Suggested approaches to AI ethics (Xivuri and Twinomurinzi) fail to address the need for diverse perspectives and foundational philosophical shortcomings.

Schneider's book, "Beyond Monotheism: A theology of multiplicity" notes the archaic nature of this code of ethics. When modern legal and social battles have us fighting for queer rights, the problem lies in our perceptions of AI ethics. We are not anywhere near concerned enough with whether AI could impose a perpetual "status quo," where the only thing that might change it is the will of the ruling class and the decisions made by the individuals with the wealth and power to do so. This is not limited to the ruling class. AI is already capable of profiling, and algorithmic frameworks are used to categorise who deserves or needs help and who doesn't (Williams). Schneider notes the archaic nature of an anti-queer code of ethics, but imperialism forms the blood and bone of society.

AI will one day soon even be capable of the distribution of judgment based on its own concepts of sin, inherited by subconscious imperialism. Non-AI automated systems of justice are already here, such as Alberta's *Provincial Administrative Penalties Act* (sec. 16(1), sec. 18(4)), where legal reviews are held remotely and are not bound by evidence checks. This automated justice forecasts a future where AI is not only involved, but a leader and central figure in these decisions. It's already being used in some parts of the world (Ulenaers). How long before we let it write legal policies that could have a direct impact on queer freedom? Look at the governance by the cylons on New Caprica, or Canada and the United States blatantly ignoring treaties and freedoms made with Indigenous peoples. These are systems of governance influenced by colonisation. A government with AI influence would be perpetual,

an embedded toxin that we can't address or convince otherwise. It would be one with dichotomous ethics, the same monotheistic concepts of objective good and evil critiqued in *Caprica*. Who determines right from wrong? What happens when AI is used as a tool of oppression by groups with pre-conceived notions of sin?

If our society contains subconscious bias and restricts queer rights, and if our biases are passed on to generative artificial intelligence, and if it will one day write our policies, police our streets, determine healthcare access, and judge us in courtrooms... at what point do we realise that the ruling class will no longer be limited to a collective of human beings? *Caprica* and *Battlestar Galactica* embody a colonial oppressive regime that mirrors real life, but this isn't a regime we can fight and overcome. This is an algorithmic one, which can be programmed to think and do precisely what its creators or controllers want it to. Queer rights today exist for as long as we fight for them to exist. Queer rights tomorrow face an existential threat. How long will it be before the people already saying that "god says your identity is sinful," gain the power to command AI to carry out a colonised disappearance?

*Caprica*'s cylons operate at more complex coding than our level of technology can muster. Our GenAI, at our level of technology, is black and white. There is no empathy. No nuance. No understanding. Only an illusion of it, generated to please the status quo, the algorithm generator, and brought to you by our own inner failings. So, do we trust ourselves? Not the version of ourselves that we aspire to be, but the version that we are, the cold, hard reality of the situation. Humans are terrible. Can you honestly trust yourself to not have any bias?

This is not about an innate criticism of any religious god, but rather about how god exists in our society, how divine dichotomous truth is represented in our legal, moral, and social frameworks. Religion offers ethics when we don't have the answers, but the actual applications of those ethics are a large reason for why we need to have conversations about queer futurity, why we need to fight for it. Can we be expected to always know what to do, to always recognise right from wrong? AI offers that

recognition, tainted by both an intrinsic limitation of its coding and a flawed human filter. What makes ethical sense is not a factor here, because AI takes its data from our innate beliefs and biases, from our perceptions of right and wrong, not from any sort of divine objective truth. Does it concern us? To have “right and wrong be determined solely by a single all-knowing, all-powerful being whose judgement cannot be questioned, and in whose name the most horrendous of acts can be sanctioned without appeal?” (*Caprica*, “Pilot”). Is *Caprica* a warning of AI’s relationship with our internal biases? So, the question I want to leave you all thinking about is really quite straight-forward.

Are we building a god?

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