Thinking the Human(ities) in the Age of AI

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THE TERM "HUMANITIES" IS DERIVED FROM, AND CENTERS the study of, the human being—especially the ways she seeks to make sense of her experiences in the world. Attempts to define the human being abound across the history of humanistic inquiry, especially in philosophy. Perhaps the most famous philosophical definition is found in Aristotle, who characterizes the human being as the "rational animal." But what does it mean to be rational?

Reasoning marks the capacity to uncover and analyze logical relations between universal and particular claims—between statements about "all" members of a certain class and those that apply only to "these" instances. Deductive reasoning begins with a universal claim and infers what follows for particular cases. For example, if all humans are mortal, then each particular human being will die. Inductive reasoning works in reverse, positing a universal claim that accounts for a set of given particulars. For instance, many people express admiration for a particular film, therefore this film must be good. Whether we begin at the level of the universal or the particular, reasoning offers conceptuality as a tool to explore these logical relations.

But if harnessing conceptuality to move between the universal and the particular adequately captures what rationality is—and what the human being is—then we find ourselves facing a serious philosophical dilemma. As recent innovations in AI technology have become increasingly mainstream, this apparently "unique" capacity of the human being to engage in such reasoning seems no longer to set us apart.

Given the proliferation of digitized information over the last half century, AI chatbots now hold out the promise of collating and synthesizing more data than any particular human ever could. Artificial intelligence has laid claim to fantastically gigantic quantities of datasets. Machine learning has enabled AI to perform logical operations on these datasets to produce apparently rational claims about this vast quantity of information when prompted.

Has Aristotle's more than two-thousand-year-old definition of the human being lost its salience? Must the human now acknowledge that she is not the only rationally intelligent being, a characterization she now shares with these artificial chatbots? Must the "humanities" be recast as "techno-humanities"? Such a conclusion would be far too hasty. Artificial intelligence undoubtedly offers incredible instrumental value as a technological advancement. However, AI's capacity to engage in logical reasoning may not encompass the meaning of rationality for the human being, who, according to Aristotle, is also an "animal"—a being with literal skin in the game, irrevocably shaped by mortality.

Plato—another ancient Greek philosopher—offered another, rather peculiar definition of philosophy. His understanding of this form of humanistic inquiry does not highlight "rationality" as its defining feature, at least not directly. He wrote that "to practice philosophy…is to practice for death and dying." What could the practice of logical reasoning have to do with the inevitable decline and decay or our corporeal existence? For Plato—and more than a few philosophers who followed after him—the answer is *everything*. Death is something that we both know for certain will happen, but also can never know, since whenever it arrives, we will have departed (either having transitioned to another plane of existence or dissolved into nothingness). As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas puts it: "the end is but a *moment* only of death, a moment whose other side would be not consciousness or comprehension but the *question*, and a question distinct from all those that are presented as problems." The (still uniquely) human requirement to confront our impending mortality means that we must reexamine the meaning of "rationality" for the human(ities).

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that centers lived experience. Though it was initially established to guarantee the certainty of mathematical truths, this sub-field has grown to consider the significance of the "subject"—the one who raises these questions in the first place. The phenomenological subject certainly engages in the forms of deductive and inductive reasoning already described. The conclusions of these logical operations are best described as productive of "knowledge"—facts and figures that can be gathered and stored in written form and, more recently, digitally registered as data. Knowledge is the *outcome* of such reasoning. But is the outcome really the only valuable aspect of rationality? What about the process of reasoning itself, enacted by the subject? Does it matter *who* does the reasoning?

Though knowledge can be mechanically, digitally, and (*now*) artificially produced, thinking cannot— it is an experience indelibly marked by the finitude of the thinker.

Some philosophers have pondered whether everything that exists can be represented or conceptualized as knowledge. What if there are things that exist that are un-representable, but nevertheless significantly shape the world? Take the concept of "nothing," for example. The moment we try to mentally represent "nothing," we convert it into "something"—the very opposite of what nothing is! Or consider the work feeling does to coordinate our experiences. For example, fear is a feeling that is object-oriented— I am afraid of that bear over there—but not all emotions work this way. Anxiety takes no object. Instead, this feeling marks a relation to what *isn't*. The experience of anxiety indicates that there is nothing to fear here, but, at the same time, that something frightful could appear at any moment. When in a state of anxiety, I must remain always prepared to confront what *is not*, at least not yet.

In other words, philosophers—especially those contributing to phenomenological inquiry—have questioned whether what "exists" can always be conceptualized and thereby "known." Even if we could gather every scientific, digitizable fact or figure about the world and provide it to an AI chatbot, it would not necessarily follow that we have represented everything that *exists*. What is "known" captures the *outcome* of reasoning processes, but the process or *activity* that produced this knowledge falls out of the epistemic frame. In other words, we know *nothing* of the subject, the phenomenological "knower." In the race to output measurable deliverables, the importance of attending to what is absent—to what perhaps can never be made present—becomes illegible. This may go to the heart of artistic creativity: noticing what *isn't* there and demonstrating this to others.

The term Artificial "Intelligence" threatens to cover over a pivotal distinction long familiar to philosophers—the difference between knowing and thinking. If intelligence means "knowing" as many facts and figures as possible, then AI is certainly intelligent. But if intelligence further describes the capacity to notice and evaluate the gaps in what and how we currently know, then AI cannot meet this requirement. Philosopher Hannah Arendt calls this "thinking" as opposed to "knowing." For her, what is "known" can be recorded and stored up as facts or figures that contribute to building our collective world. But what can only be "thought" cannot be made visible or legible, as knowledge can be. Instead, thinking is inexorably grounded in the experience of the thinker—the one who chooses which objects are relevant for a particular operation of reasoning and further decides *to act* (*or not*) on the basis of such knowledge.

Though knowledge can be mechanically, digitally, and (now) artificially produced, thinking cannot—it is an experience indelibly marked by the finitude of the thinker. While an AI chatbot may produce rational knowledge by synthesizing and representing accounts of what is already known, the AI chatbot will not engage in action—ethical, political, or otherwise—out of an awareness of its own finitude as a mortal. Because human beings are radically temporally limited, choosing what to think about and how (or whether) to seek out knowledge counts differently. Deciding to spend our time knowing (or thinking) about something— or nothing!—reflects our valuation of that choice as meaningful and worthwhile for the kind of beings that we ourselves are—beings inevitably facing death.

In other words, not all knowledge is equally valuable or meaningful for mortal beings whose time is limited. The choices that face us today, amidst the current tidal wave of knowledge, information, and digital noise, are not ones that can be made by entities that can only "know." They must be made by beings who also "think" about what they know— those who can situate what *is* in relation to what *isn't*. Unless and until AI chatbots become capable of dying—which means to be aware of their impending deaths and evaluate their chosen pursuits on the basis of this finitude—determining the meaningfulness of knowledge remains a fundamentally human project of deciding how to build our collective world. This requires fostering critical, creative thinking for those (human) beings whose finite future remains at issue in the wake of artificial intelligence.

Knowledge itself—as the outcome of deductive or inductive reasoning—is not sufficient for the task of collectively building and reshaping the possibilities of our world. We must come together to *think* and evaluate both what we know and what we don't know—to imagine our planetary future at the advent of these increasingly powerful technological tools. Determining our ethical compass can only emerge in the activity of thinking with one another, of collectively projecting ourselves beyond the facts of the case to generate an interpretative judgment thereof that will guide us in our subsequent choices and actions. This is the role the human(ities) can and must play—even more urgently—in the age of AI. ◢