

## Editors' Introduction: The Uses and Abuses of A.I. for Life

Luke Trusso<sup>1</sup>

“The very last thing I should promise to accomplish would be to “improve” mankind. I do not set up any new idols: may old idols only learn what it costs to have legs of clay” (2). – Preface, *Ecce Homo*

Welcome to this very special, Spring 2024 edition of *The Agonist*. In this issue, our contributors and editorial staff confront the recent advancements in artificial intelligence from a Nietzschean perspective. Whenever any new technology is introduced that has the potential to radically transform our species, it always divides us politically, culturally and socially. There are those who embrace it enthusiastically—perhaps precariously—and those who are petrified in fear that they will lose not only their jobs, but their humanity. We Nietzscheans know that nothing is so simple that it can be reduced to binary actions and reactions. We always have a responsibility to think beyond, before, and in between the lines; or in this case between the hardware and software.

In the case of A.I.—in all its forms both nefarious and life promoting—we are indeed on new ground. To compare applications like ChatGPT, facial recognition programs, and DALL·E to the anxieties induced by the invention of the printing press, automobile, telephone, television, and even the internet, is a false equivalency and thus philosophically irresponsible. To invoke one of the most [over]used and abused expressions of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, A.I. presents a disruption to the very core of our being. That is because disruption is our way. What other way is there?

*Thus Spake Zarathustra's* alternate title is *A Book for All and None* because Nietzsche is speaking simultaneously to everyone in the world in the early 1880s, and to those unborn in the future. He is speaking at and beyond us at the same time. He is shouting over the soon to be dead corpses of his contemporaries for whom he has little patience. We hear echoes of these prophecies in the megalomaniacal dreams of technocrats and other 21<sup>st</sup> century futurists. The townspeople are not interested in Zarathustra's message because he doesn't speak their language. Like all restless prophets, he is trying to anticipate how people will speak, write, and think in the future. In this sense, Zarathustra is something of a delusional clairvoyant—projecting his philosophical desires into an imaginary future. But he is also an astute student of history. He recognized that “man is more of an ape than any

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Trusso, NYU, United States. E-mail: [luke.trusso@gmail.com](mailto:luke.trusso@gmail.com)



of the apes. Even the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom. But do I bid you become phantoms or plants?" (22).

Then again, the future is always a product of our collective self-fulfilling prophecies. We are always living out the broken dreams and nightmares of our precursors. Some will argue it is up to us to decide what that future is. But with A.I. we seem to be forfeiting our rational agency intentionally and on purpose. Take ChatGPT for example. In the last year it has become one of the most controversial A.I. systems to dominate public discourse. During his commencement speech at Duke University's class of 2024 graduation ceremony, the comedian Jerry Seinfeld compared ChatGPT to Frankenstein's monster, and made the very Nietzschean provocation:

"AI...is the most embarrassing thing we've ever invented in mankind's time on Earth. Oh, so you can't do the work? Is that what you're telling me? You can't figure it out? This seems to be the justification of AI – I couldn't do it. This is something to be embarrassed about. The ad campaign for ChatGPT should be the opposite of Nike. You just can't do it. What I like is we're smart enough to invent AI and dumb enough to need it. And still so stupid we can't figure out if we did the right thing. Making work easier. This is the problem. So obsessed with getting to the answer, completing the project, producing a result which are all valid things, but not where the richness of the human experience lies" ("The Uncomfortable Feeling of Awkward Humor Is Okay").

While very clever, Seinfeld's sentiment essentially boils down to Emerson's oft-quoted platitude "It's not the destination, it's the journey." My fear is that not only are we no longer learning from the past, but that there is not going to be much past left to mine after it has been chewed up and spit out by Scholar GPT, ChatGPT, and other Apps that think, write, paint, sculpt, and do research for us. We have outsourced our intellectual labor to these apps. The potential danger is that there will be very little new content. A species that stops creating can only live off the dead dogs of the past for so long. ChatGPT is just scanning the internet and cleverly rearranging words and thoughts that have already been said and thought by someone else. How different is this from much of contemporary academia, many of whose once original research now just seems to repeat, rerepeat, and cleverly rephrase what is already on Wikipedia or JSTOR? It is becoming more and more difficult for me to distinguish between a paper written by a distinguished professor at an Ivy League university published in a peer reviewed journal, and reader response essays by freshmen in my intro to philosophy classes. Is this the democratization of knowledge we were promised in the early days of the internet?

Wait! Never mind. I'm too late. Nietzsche *already* thought about this and warned us what would happen in the future if academics pursued quantitative output over quality and creativity in *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. "Are there still human beings, one then asks oneself, or perhaps only thinking, writing, and speaking machines?" (35). What else is ChatGPT or any of the grotesque, cartoonish Apps that clog our smartphones and pollute our brains if not writing and speaking machines?

On a more optimistic note, maybe A.I. will be a better steward of the planet and help us mitigate the threats of climate change, wealth inequality, systemic racism, misogyny, and other social justice issues. But what does it mean to be a better steward of the planet? If



we mean a more ecologically and ethically motivated, life-promoting version of A.I.—a disembodied consciousness that will protect non-human animals, plants, and the vulnerable from their human alpha predators, then we are still talking about a human all too human morality. That would assume their interests would be our interests. Or at least the interests of those of us who think nonhuman animals and plants have as much a right to exist and flourish as humans.

Does anyone notice that the world is on fire and every species including our own is in decline? Of course not. They are all lost in their own selfish, bourgeois, solipsistic interests, glued to their smartphones and laptops. I imagine future cemeteries where the inscriptions on everyone's tombstone reads: "Here lies so and so. They stared at screens every day for 85 years. They will live forever in the memory of the iCloud." It's becoming harder and harder to distinguish between the waking/walking dead and those who are actually dead. In the spirit of the eternal return of the same, we prefer the self-imposed prison of Plato's cave more than ever. And why not? The shadow show is now in high resolution 4K.

It may also be true that the more machines learn, the more sophisticated and sentient they become. But they are still a long way from possessing self-consciousness or Cartesian metacognition. My dogs are aware that they exist, but I am not sure they are aware that they are aware. Artificial intelligence and pit bulls don't ask themselves questions like: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? Where did I come from? Where am I going? And thus, they are spared the epistemological jitters we suffer from. In other words, Alexa and ChatGPT are not neurotic yet. And therein lies their power. They are free of our anxieties because our stories aren't their stories. They are not interested in what we call organic life because they don't have any interests, and thus they do not suffer from our anthropomorphic nightmares. Or as Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* prophesized:

"The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos" (9).

Because they are incapable of remembering the cosmos, or have not experienced it in any visceral way, they will not miss or mourn it. Cyborgs truly remain "ahead of all parting" in the fullest sense that Rilke meant it. Haraway instead imagines a form of artificial intelligence that transcends Nietzsche's *Übermensch* precisely because there is very little that is human about it:

"...the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination... The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history. Nor does it mark time on an oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse" (7).

Passages like this remind me how much her *Cyborg Manifesto* was ahead of its time when it was published in 1985. It is ahead of our time. It is still too radical even in 2024. In many ways she outdid and surpassed Nietzsche, which is exactly what he would have wanted.

So, let's not get bogged down in the same, sad old tropes of civilization, Western or otherwise. They are mired in anthropomorphic fantasies of either utopian or dystopian applications of A.I. In the hundreds of op-ed essays and articles I have read on the pros and cons of A.I. in celebrated magazines, from *The New York Times*, to *The New Yorker*, to *The Atlantic*, to *Wired*, not to mention all the peer reviewed articles in prestigious academic journals (many by writers that I respect profoundly, mind you) few mention *The Cyborg Manifesto* other than fringe groups like the transhumanists and post-humanists. And even they are still blinded by both their darkest fears, and salacious desires for the future of A.I. because they are themselves still human, all too human. For example, the title of the latest issue of *Jacobin*—an alarmist Neo-Marxist magazine—is: “Can Humanity Survive AI?”

I think what Haraway is trying to tell us, is that the stories of sacrifice and redemption we have told ourselves and have been inundated with for centuries are of no use here. And frankly, they are getting quite boring. And I hope A.I. doesn't become sentient enough to “feel” such a boring human emotion as boredom. For now, the algorithms at Netflix are happy to keep turning out such narratives because they don't know what it means to be bored and are preprogrammed to satisfy market demands, increase profit margins, monitor its number of subscribers, and calculate returns on their investments. What could be more boring than that? Part of me hopes A.I. becomes fully self-aware, if for no other reason than we might get some new streaming content other than historical revisionism, romcoms, tragedies, thrillers, superhero sequels, biopics, and familial psychodramas.

In *The Origin of the Species* Darwin makes it sound like evolution is teleological. “Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows” (463). He had as much contempt for Christianity as Nietzsche, but nonetheless perceived a continuous flux in organic life from the mud to the heavens. We are autochthonic beings. We literally grew out of the soil as did all organic matter. A.I. grew out of us, and thus it will always contain “traces of its lowly origin.” It is likely that whatever future form artificially intelligent creatures take, they will retain much of our humanity in the same way humans still contain many traces of our simian ancestors, including our desires, interests, values, etc. But not necessarily because we will program them to be like us. Future incarnations of A.I. might share some of our cognitive qualities, but not our biological, phenotypical traits except at the deepest molecular level.

In his *Future of an Illusion* Freud attempted to explain the neurotic impulse responsible for the birth of the gods as just another symptom of daddy issues: “In the same way, a man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals...he gives them the character of a father. He turns them into gods, following in this, as I have tried to show, not only an infantile prototype but a phylogenetic one” (20). We should heed Freud's wisdom as it relates to A.I. In seeking new and more ‘efficient’ ways to satisfy the immediate gratification of our infantile desires, we created A.I., and in doing so we are active participants in a kind of reverse phylogenesis.

A similar sentiment was expressed exactly sixty years ago by the controversial nihilist Emil Cioran, who suggested that we buried whatever was human in us to begin with a long time ago. Discussing how technology has unalterably transformed our experience of time and space he asked: “Is it true that these engines were invented to save time? More deprived, more alienated than the troglodyte, civilized man has not one moment to himself; even his



leisure is feverish and oppressive; he is a convict on leave who succumbs to the boredom of the dolce far niente and the nightmare of beaches” (16). For Cioran, we are not evolving, we are devolving. In our insatiable appetite for more efficient modes of production and consumption, we seem to be willfully draining all pleasure out of existence. We may still be able to feel something like Kant’s dynamically sublime, but it is somehow tainted when in bad faith, we upload it to Instagram to “share” the experience with our friends and family, then proceed to calculate and count how many likes and dislikes the photo gets, and how many “followers” repost it. “Look at me! Look at me! Mommy and daddy didn’t show me enough attention when I was child.”

Alas... Now I sound like some quaint, nostalgic, anarcho-primitivist. Maybe we forgot (or willfully ignored) Frederic Jameson’s warning that nostalgia is extremely dangerous—a kind of mental illness that pines for an imaginary past that never existed. In doing so we impede progress and run the risk of being stuck in a semi-permanent state of cultural arrested development. Nostalgia is the ‘modus operandi’ of American capitalism and politics whose only mantra seems to be ‘produce and consume’ in an endless eternal return of the same whether one is a factory worker, banker, or college professor. Advertising sells us our broken childhood dreams and our politicians sell us ahistorical, revisionist fantasies of the past. Pop songs and classic rock appeal to boomers’ adolescent manufactured desires, so they will buy more SUVs and laundry detergent. And some conservatives obviously fetishize a fictional, post-war-Hollywood, apple pie and vanilla ice cream version of America, in their own manufactured desire for an eternal return/rerun of *Leave it to Beaver*.

Once again, I am not saying anything that Nietzsche did not already say. At the age of 29, he warned us to check our ego at the door and intellectually prime ourselves for possible annihilation in the famous first few paragraphs of *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*: “And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission which would lead it beyond human life. Rather, it is human, and only its possessor and begetter take it so solemnly—as though the world’s axis turned within it” (1). I always found this passage hilarious. Nietzsche would have done well as a stand-up comic and could have been an excellent dialectical sparring partner with Seinfeld. He is certainly one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s great social satirists on par with Mark Twain. And I think much of his sense of humor is lost on readers who lack a sense of irony and take his texts as scripture. I think we can all recognize that most sentient beings suffer from some form of anticipatory dread. But only beautifully sick poets like Nietzsche can turn anticipatory dread into a kind of anticipatory nostalgia for our possible extinction into a punchline. In other words, let’s not mourn the death of our species at the hands of A.I. before it has even happened. Oops. Now I’ve fallen into my own trap. I’m guilty of the false dilemma between progress and nostalgia. Maybe ChatGPT can help me to think more logically.

Don’t get me wrong. All kidding aside, A.I. applications are extraordinary technology and have enormous potential to augment our epistemological powers. The fact that they exist at all reflects our marvelous capacity for creativity. However, we may have designed software that makes us so slothful that we might devolve into the passengers aboard the Axion in WALL-E whose electric lazy-boy recliners have become a permanent prosthetic. Or worse, curl up into a fetal ball of obsolescence. Maybe that is what we are supposed to

do: return to the cosmic womb to make room for A.I. to carry on the adventure and fulfill the prophecy of the star child at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I am not necessarily suggesting that this is our teleological destiny. We are still in control of whatever we have left of the narrative.

What if we did go extinct because of A.I.? So what? Can we truly cultivate that healthiest form of self-destruction the Buddhists call “anatta” and claim is the panacea to all that ails us? To stop clinging to our humanity? Can our space monkey brains let go of our primitive, infantile egos? Can we slow down and cultivate the kind of philosophical detachment that is necessary to prepare for some kind of “over-humanity?” Probably not. But that’s okay. The hyper-kinetic pace of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has left all of us with one foot in the grave. Maybe A.I. will replace us, maybe not. Maybe we will return to the earth in the form of Zarathustra’s “hybrid of plant and phantom.” That would truly be radical! At the very least, I sincerely hope A.I. does not become too nostalgic for humanity.

From the entire editorial staff, we would like to thank all our contributors, and most importantly our readers and their continuing interest in *The Agonist*. Happy reading.

Luke Trusso

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