

Natural and Artificial Stupidity

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What is the opposite of artificial intelligence? Natural stupidity. If artificial intelligence is about machines learning to think (an early goal - Strong AI) or machines imitating thinking (the current state - weak AI), then natural stupidity is about unthinking humans.

The Chinese room thought experiment proposed by Searle is a tale foundational to contemporary artificial intelligence (Searle, 1980). Here is its frivolous interpretation. I push a letter in Chinese (note the ignorant use of the language's name) under a door to the locked room. After some time, a reply is pushed back out. It makes sense. There could be a Chinese-speaking person inside or the room could be stocked with dictionaries, visual guides and instructions, and there is someone or something inside, without any knowledge of the language, who matches the shapes of the ideograms with their meaning, follows the rules of grammar and produces a response using statistically-likely combinations of phrases. The moral is that as long as it works, it doesn't matter what is inside: a human who knows the language, an equipped human who doesn't or a program. Contemporary forms of artificial intelligence, including those having a capacity to learn, are capable of information, image and language processing and reasoning in tasks that are narrowly defined. Everything they work with: datasets, models, libraries - are what we give them. We design and stock the Chinese room. Their intelligence is formed not only by our intelligence, but also by our stupidity.

There is sizeable philosophical commentary on human stupidity. Most agree that stupidity is not the opposite of intelligence. Intelligent, knowledgeable fools exist in abundance and are the most dangerous kind. Ronell, synthesising a critical line of reflections on stupidity from Schiller to Arendt, describes stupidity as a "mute resistance to political urgency", an ethical hiatus, and overall, a condition that "consists in the absence of a relation to knowing" (Ronell, 1992, 3-5). It is what Arendt called "thoughtlessness" when describing the war criminal Eichmann (Arendt, 1963). Stupidity here can be described as thoughtless thinking.

Racism and sexism, colonialism and xenophobia are extremely stupid. Yet, these are what we feed artificially intelligent machines. There is nothing natural about this kind of stupidity. Datasets that contain racist words (lexicons used in image recognition that result in people being labelled with racist terms) or reflect historical discrimination (via neighbourhood, incarceration, insurance data), proxy data habits (i.e. using postcode as a proxy for wealth), prediction, which generally uses proxy methods to infer future behaviour, carrying bias, and the purposes (inferring ethnicity from names in order to influence voters by exploiting racial tensions), are few items in an endless list of the newest AI deployments sustaining inequality and discrimination (Angwin et al., 2016; Noble, 2018; O'Neil, 2016). The stupidity of Google who fired Timnit Gebru, the co-leader of its own Ethical AI team, for pointing out the bias and environmental costs of computationally intensive language models dwarfs Google's intelligence as a tech developer. The stupidity of letting the planet scorch in the on-going climate catastrophe, rather than terminate the few large companies that benefit, raises the question of whether intelligence actually exists.

Artificial intelligence is perhaps all about human stupidity. Engineers and psychologists developing self-driving cars have to come to terms with the fact that humans are stupid drivers. From the stupid user to the stupid creator, to the stupid CEO and shareholder, AI is encased in human stupidity, natural and studied, historical, practical and political. Stupidity is an ontological condition of human existence (von Boxsel, 2004), inexhaustible and unknowable, a vast, bottomless pool surrounding little islands of thoughtfulness and intelligence. AI, stuck in the Chinese room, is as much a product of intelligence as of stupidity, and the only question that remains is what kind of stupidity is AI's own.

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