

Stephen CAVE, Kanta DIHAL, and Sarah DILLON (eds.), *AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 14,4 × 22,3 cm, 448 pp., ISBN 978-0-1988-4666-6

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plutôt une pratique adoptée à travers le temps et l'espace pour des raisons éthiques, religieuses ou philosophiques.

De plus, la filiation entre la considération de l'animal des philosophes de l'Antiquité grecque et la défense de l'animal des militants antispécistes contemporains doit être nuancée. Les motifs métaphysiques des philosophes grecs, basés sur la croyance en la transmigration des âmes, sont différents des motifs éthiques des antispécistes contemporains. En effet, la croyance en la transmigration d'une âme humaine dans un corps d'animal humanisait l'animal aux yeux de ces philosophes, mais fondamentalement, le mépris de l'animal demeurait. Platon considérait l'animal comme inférieur à l'humain, jugeant l'âme humaine supérieure à l'âme animale. En outre, la philosophie platonicienne, qui prône l'ascétisme et la domination de l'esprit sur le corps, peut logiquement mener à une déconnexion de la nature, y compris de l'animal et du végétal. Il est donc important de ne pas confondre la considération de l'animal des philosophes de l'Antiquité grecque avec l'antispécisme contemporain, qui se fonde sur des principes éthiques égalitaristes et qui vise à remettre en question la hiérarchie entre les espèces et à réduire la souffrance animale.

Enfin, l'ouvrage ne souligne pas suffisamment que le véganisme ne va pas sans controverse, certains affirmant que ces régimes ne sont pas suffisamment équilibrés sur le plan nutritionnel ou qu'ils sont trop coûteux. D'autres soutiennent que la consommation de viande et de produits d'origine animale est nécessaire pour maintenir une bonne santé, ou qu'elle fait partie de la tradition culinaire et culturelle de certaines régions.

Dans l'ensemble, *Que veulent les véganes?: La cause animale, de Platon au mouvement antispéciste* est un examen approfondi et stimulant de l'histoire et du développement de l'éthique animale. Il constitue une ressource précieuse pour toute personne intéressée par le sujet et offre un aperçu important des considérations éthiques entourant notre traitement des animaux. Contrairement à d'autres ouvrages dans ce domaine, le livre soutient que le véganisme et le mouvement antispéciste ne concernent pas seulement le bien-être des animaux, mais aussi la remise en question des structures sociales et politiques qui perpétuent l'exploitation animale. Il défend avec force l'interconnexion des mouvements de libération humaine et animale et soutient qu'une société juste doit accorder une considération morale à tous les êtres sensibles.

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Stephen CAVE, Kanta DIHAL, and Sarah DILLON (eds.), **AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines**. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 14,4 × 22,3 cm, 448 pp., ISBN 978-0-1988-4666-6.

I begin with an old story from ancient Egypt, about an “ushabti” (a servant statue, made from wood or clay, but magically animated to do labour for souls in the ancient Egyptian afterlife). Commanded to carry out a simple repetitive task (in this case,

drawing water), the *ushabti* in the story does its duty *too* well, flooding the home of its master.¹ This tale, thousands of years old, reminds us that people have always imagined artificial ways to make life easier (whether magical wooden servants in ancient Egypt, or assembly line machines in our time). Stories like this show how human beings have always used fiction to explore such ideas, long before it was possible to make them reality (and today's speculative fiction/sci-fi does the same job). Stories such as this one also suggest that artificial solutions to problems often result in new, unexpected problems; *AI Narratives* does not reference this story of the *ushabti*, but it carefully considers all the ideas just mentioned.

AI Narratives is a collection of essays exploring the relationship between human storytelling and the advancement of technology, with (as the title makes clear) an emphasis on artificial intelligence (AI). The implication is that, across time, there has been a conversation or dialogue unfolding within human activity, between storytellers and the builders, dreamers, and doers; those who imagine and those who make the world we live in a reality. This has not been a simple or even a focused conversation; there are many storytellers, many voices, many ideas being expressed (and the human imagination remains unlimited). And as time has moved forward, ideas have moved back and forth between imagination and reality, inspiring creators, whose works inspire even more incredible stories.

In considering this conversation, *AI Narratives* looks at speculative fiction, from ancient Greece (Homer's *Iliad*) to twentieth century cyberpunk sci-fi (William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, and later stories inspired by it), in order to explore how ideas of technology have evolved, and how concepts such as "artificial" have changed. The book also covers a wide variety of global perspectives, in addition to the voices it considers from across time: humanists, feminists, political theorists, and African American perspectives are among the voices describing (and pointing out the missing narratives) that could (and should) be listened to by those developing AI technology today.

One important idea, conveyed throughout the "narrative of narratives" presented by the book, is how our vision of what AI is shaped as much by science as it is by culture; humankind has entered into a kind of dialogue with itself (and its artificial extensions), as our expectations, dreams, hopes, and fears shape our creations, leading us to reevaluate our thoughts and ideas once again. This dialogue has been unfolding since the beginning of recorded history, in the first literature penned by human beings, and continues until today.

As each era of human progress is considered, three pivotal questions were raised for me in each chapter of the book, with a different answer provided by each generation which tells stories and builds technology (thus offering an interesting insight into human progress, the evolution of ideas, and our own self-understanding). These questions, as they occurred to me, were: First, who creates? Second, why do creators create? Third, through whose authority do creators create? A fourth question emerges in the later chapters of the book, as AI is depicted mimicking human behavior more and more accurately): What (or *who*) is being created, and why? These questions often

1. Bob BRIER, *Ancient Egyptian Magic: Spells, Incantations, Potions, Stories, and Rituals*, New York, Quill, 1980, p. 44.

overlap; for example, the identity of the creator and the reason for the creation are linked, and there are times when the creation holds up a mirror to the creator's face, allowing us to see who the creator really is, by virtue of its function, purpose, and the need it was created to fulfill.

Consider the examples provided in the earliest chapters, covering classical Greece (specifically, the writings of Homer) and medieval European legends – the creators of these early stories are gods (Hephaestus) or legendary geniuses (Daedalus), then, as the centuries pass and stories change, wizards, and then scholastics (St. Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, etc.). The authority of those earliest, mythical creators comes from their own divinity; later, as creators become less legendary and more historical, it is their education or status in society that offers them the opportunity and/or ability to create. The inventions of these creators are initially tools (mechanized slaves, like the Egyptian *ushabti*, mentioned at the beginning, or the god Hephaestus's automatic tripods) that serve a strictly practical purpose, namely, doing manual work for human convenience. But as time passes, and as the world loses its magical aspect, in light of a more rational and scientific understanding of the world, our creations become showcases for human ingenuity, seemingly holding tight to the idea that there is something divine about human reason and imagination, and its powers to create from raw materials a new reality. (There are the stories of both St. Albert the Great and Roger Bacon's legendary metal talking heads, which could be characterized as medieval "chatbots," or the alleged "Mechanical Turk" from 18th century, which, though most certainly a hoax, was presented as a possibility, and prefigured the chess-playing computer programs of today). As imagined possibilities, such creations testify to the ingenuity of the human beings who made them, identifying human beings as creators and builders of new realities, filling in for the gods and sorcerers who faded away into myth and legend.

But then, in still later narratives, even human beings are dethroned from their positions, as stories told in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries (perhaps beginning with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) present a more fallible image of ourselves as creators motivated by hubris and selfishness, and prone to making imperfect creations (a memorable example would be the HAL 9000 in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)). Other stories hold to the theme of human weakness or vulnerability, and imagine us turning to technology as a means of attaining salvation in a world that science and technology have rendered godless. As fallible human beings, rather than perfect divinities (or even bearers of holy reason), stories written closer to the present day recognize that our creations pose the risk of killing us, if we are careless, or at the very least, of rendering us obsolete: see again HAL in Clarke's *2001*, or the technology in the world of Kurt Vonnegut's dystopia of automation, *Player Piano* (1952).

The last part of the book looks to science fiction to explore the possible results of technology, with regard to all the questions considered earlier: of human beings, our power (or lack of it), our role as creators, our vulnerability to our own creations, and our aspirations (many of which have not changed since the dawn of history).

Editor Stephen Cave's own chapter, (Chapter 13, "AI: Artificial Immortality and Narratives of Mind Uploading," pp. 309-332), was especially interesting in regard to this last idea, for it essentially brought the human story to a full circle – from the

ancient ideas of immortal souls made in God's image, to our loss of that divinity as reason and science came to dominate our understanding, to our hope of reclaiming that divinity with new technology. Cave's chapter, like Homer's imaginative poems from the days of ancient Greece, explicitly returned to the realm of fiction to explore the possible future uses of technology to attain immortality. In his chapter, Cave refers to Canadian author Robert J. Sawyer's 2005 novel *Mindscan*. I was already familiar with *Mindscan*, having read it this past year, and had noted its troubling look at the balance between technology's tantalizing promise to grant immortality (copying the human mind into a computer software), as well as the potential problems which might arise from such immortality (the loss of some of the most fundamental aspects of human existence such as the organic body and the bodily identity that comes with it).

Finally, Cave's chapter offers an interesting anthropological insight into the perennial desires that have inspired human beings to create and imagine since before the beginning of recorded history. The desire to live beyond death (which gave rise to concepts such as reincarnation and the immortality of the soul) *itself* lives on, as evidenced by stories such as *Mindscan*, Greg Egan's *Permutation City* (1994), and other books on that same topic. Through our fiction, then, our desire continues to be expressed.

Cave's chapter, situated among other chapters that reflect on our identities as creators, our visions for our creations, and our tendency to impose our expectations and identities onto our creations, serves well in showing the unforeseen problems and complications that always seem to result from the development of technology originally intended to help us by making our lives easier. This leaves the reader to reflect on the inevitability of problems, and of how they will always arise to replace the ones which technology is constantly being created to deal with. As technology becomes more complicated, so do the problems themselves, and history moves forward to correspond with each new series of them, along with the next set of accompanying solutions that inevitably emerge from human thought. But while human beings cope with these changes and problems, our basic nature remains the same (evolution moving at a much slower pace than technology's development).

Therefore, the desires we collectively possess, that inspired us to imagine the technologies we would eventually develop, and the religious aspirations that lead us to look beyond this life, remain firmly in place, continuing to form our hopes, dreams, and fears as human beings. *AI Narratives* is indeed a record of our ideas regarding technology, and of our expectations of what it might do for us. It is also a meditation on human nature which reflects those very same human desires. Thus, it is as much a reflection on human nature as it is on our creations, whether real, in development, or only imagined, and a worthy reading for futurists, students of philosophical anthropology, or even sci-fi fans looking for answers to questions explored in speculative fiction.

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