Is artificial intelligence an artificial life?

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Abstract Great strides have been taken in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to tear down the Cartesian wall between human and nature. We recognise, perhaps more than ever, what we have in common with not only animal but all kingdoms of life. With such progress, it is no wonder that manifold philosophical projects to erode that final distinction between life and matter have emerged and no single phenomenon tempts us down this path more than Artificial Intelligence (AI). Aristotle told us that no matter how long we throw a stone in the air, it will not learn to stay up. Perhaps this is still the case, but with the humble silicon graphics card and AI, we seem to have a rock that thinks. This paper forms part of a broader project to develop an existential phenomenological interpretation of AI along broadly Heideggerian lines. A challenge to such an attempt is that against the ontological distinction Heidegger draws between humans and things. Developments in twenty-first century philosophy, such as Object-Oriented Ontology and the New Materialisms more generally have brought this distinction, or difference, into question. This paper will interrogate to what extent this debate in continental metaphysics on the limits of life can improve our understanding of contemporary and future Artificial Intelligence.

1 Introduction

2 Draw a horizon around the question and phenomenon

Usually, metaphysics is the most esoteric aspect of philosophy. When teaching, it is the subject I find the hardest to relate to students' lives. However, today, with the recent breakthroughs in Artificial Intelligence (AI), everyone is asking metaphysical questions about it. I first became interested in the philosophy of AI as an undergraduate student, around 2010. I wrote some essays on it, found myself having strong opinions on the Turing Test and Searle's "Chinese Room" argument, largely because I felt it failed to fully disprove the case for "Strong AI", i.e. a machine intelligence that is "like ours", or in

Searle's terms:

> [T]he claim that the appropriately programmed computer really *is* a mind, in the sense that computers given the right programs can be literally said to *understand* and have other cognitive states. (Searle, 1980, p. 417)

This was Searle's main target, and the conclusion of his argument against it rings true, for me at least, even for modern Large Language Model (LLM) systems:

> Because the formal symbol manipulations by themselves don't have any intentionality; they are quite meaningless; they aren't even symbol manipulations, since the symbols don't symbolize anything. In the linguistic jargon, they have only a syntax but no semantics. Such intentionality as computers appear to have is solely in the minds of those who program them and those who use them, those who send in the input and those who interpret the output. (Searle, 1980, p. 422)

The claim here is that the computer follows rules (syntax) but does not have meaning (semantics). I felt that this didn't go far enough, since I wouldn't even want to concede syntax to the machine. However, I let this drop as an influence, since it seemed clear at the time that hardly anyone actually advocated for Strong AI anymore, and even if they did there was something "semantic" about the argument anyway. It doesn't really matter if Skynet has *qualia*, it could still cause a nuclear apocalypse.

Today, however, as commercial AI chatbots based on the breakthrough LLM technologies are widely available, this question seems to be back. Perhaps not in academic experts of machine intelligence, but certainly with the wider public, journalists and AI "boosters". We might calmly point out that humans became attached to ELIZA, a very simple chatbot simulating a therapist, in 1966 that simply responded dynamically to statements with questions, and so perhaps nothing is new in our ability to "anthropomorphise" everything. I find this to be an excuse not to ask the difficult question, however. ELIZA could not write essays. ELIZA could not illustrate pictures, "soulless" or otherwise. And while I will leave to medical experts the nature of "AI psychosis", the uncanny humanness of contemporary AI is not a phenomenon we can easily dismiss. These chatbots can feel like people, if only for fleeting moments. We may know that everything they do is the result of enormous data and statistics and prediction, but this story sits uncomfortably with the experience of coding with an AI agent or asking for opinions on your written work, or simply being shown something incredibly complicated that a friend or colleague has done with these tools and feeling uneasy. This affect in response to machine creativity, something akin to the sublime, is something that needs a philosophical response.

This affect, this unease, seems to appear with every leap forward in machine capab-

ility. Already in 1985, amidst the microcomputer revolution, Donna Haraway pointed to the dissonance between the growing competence of the machine compared to the human:

> Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (Haraway, 2016, sect. 1)

This statement is over forty years old, and yet if anything it seems more true. Such is the wonder of technology that we are initially startled by it, but before long we adapt to it and then become bored of it. Haraway draws out for us a more fundamental anxiety in the question "is AI really sentient?". There is both a will to differentiate ourselves from mere matter as well as a despair that such matter may be more capable than us. In one sense, the latter is clearly true. The pocket calculator can certainly produce the answers to equations much more efficiently than I. I flatter myself I could summarise a fifty-page document better than ChatGPT, but it can do it in less than a minute. I can't. The "disturbing liveliness" of our machines is a challenge to the centrality of the human in our dominant ways of thinking, a lingering shadow of the death of God. In such a context, where reason sees something doing what it thought only a rational cogniser could do, reason must ask: "is it like me?" or "is it better than me?"

We can respond that just because the machine gives human-like outputs does not mean it shares the same inputs or fundamental nature. However, this does nothing for the anxiety as the human-like outputs are the primary political concern. "Is it better than me?" leads inevitably to "Will it take my job?". Indeed, I think the more important lesson to take from Haraway is that if we value our machines as lively and we as inert, this is because we are now condemned to view the human and all genuine activity through the machination of technology and eternal productivity. The machine can only be better than me if I only care about production, not producing. The machine can only produce an essay if the point of the essay is the finished product, and not the learning and development achieved by the process.

This metaphysical question will not go away. However, being considerably more Heideggerian than I was in 2010, I am loth to enter into a classical metaphysical dispute over the nature of AI. Such things are likely to take us in circles. What seem like novel questions dissolve into older ones. Asking can a machine think is the same as asking do humans have a soul. John Locke (1979, p. IV.3.6) already, contra Descartes, argued that there is not much difference between saying that "God can, if he pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking, than that he should superadd to it another substance, with

a faculty of thinking, since we know not wherein thinking consists". Matter, which for early modern metaphysics is nothing but a machine, could easily think, even for those who had steadfast faith in an immortal, spiritual substance. Today, in which despite any satisfactory resolution to the mind and body problem, we are all too eager to ascribe thinking to the matter of our brain, any argument against the possibility of a thinking machine loses its metaphysical weight.

The question "Are machines intelligent?" is more anthropocentric than anthropomorphic. Heidegger (2008, pp. 48–49) argues in *Being and Time* that the "two important elements" in the "traditional anthropology" of Christian metaphysics are that the human is defined as the *animal rationale* and also as a theologically distinguished entity, made in the image of the gods, citing Genesis 1 in Greek.[1] This finds a principle of individuation, a unique property in the human in that we are at once rational and divine. While I have primarily described the spectre of machine intelligence in terms of an uncanny aversion to being displaced by our own creation, it can also be experienced as a joyous transference of our divine spark and rationality to matter itself. Is AI made in our image, or better have we been able to build something in the image of God? I might point here to the "Rationalist" movement that believes an AI indistinguishable from a god will be created and come to dominate us all. This is a vision, however, not of AI's power, but of humanity's power in being able to create something so powerful. AI superintelligence would be the human god making a stone so heavy it can't pick it back up. Really, viewed from the perspective of metaphysics, which is all about our mastery of matter and reality, the question can only be "when will our machines think?", a naive affirmation of the inevitable infinite productivity of enlightened humanity.

3 Is it intelligent? → Is it alive?

Metaphysics, classically conceived, can only have us tread and retread these paths. I could take up *Being and Time* and other phenomenological works and try and "prove" that something like this superintelligence can never happen. With Heidegger, I might claim that AI's being is never an issue. With Merleau-Ponty, I might argue that the living body is something that has nothing in common with the machine. With Sartre, I might argue that AI is pure positivity, lacking the negation that is the necessary component of any act of consciousness. And yet, can't the chatbot have its own "look"? Can I not be brought into self-consciousness by the words it spits out, and feel shame. And, what is a living body if it is not an organised machine? And, do I really know that an AI

[1] Genesis 1:26, NIV. 'Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."'

does possess existentiality? Do androids anticipate anxiously electric freedom towards death?

In all of these avenues I come back around to the beginning. Perhaps this question is an antinomy, brought on by treating intelligence as a property present-at-hand. In any case, the circling has to stop and we need a new question. Let us move from "Is it intelligent?" to "Is it alive?". Perhaps life can provide us with a better conceptual context for considering this problem. Already, instead of attempting to question whether the human and AI share a special property, we have moved to a different type of question. The rationality and divinity in the traditional conception of human being are, first and foremost, used to differentiate ourselves from other forms of life, rather than inanimate matter. In accepting that the human, among others, belongs to the living, the question loses something of its urgent frenzy. We stand collectively with the systems of the earth and ask if this rock we have built can join our kingdom.

However, we must still tread carefully. We do not want to trade one metaphysical question for another. For example, it is tempting to put this in terms of abiogenesis: at what point does physical matter become living? Which properties are attained at that moment? We should also avoid thinking too biologically: on the face of it, there is nothing living about the silicon chip, the server rack, the software and the tensors in the model. Their physical structure is nothing like life as we know it. If AI or any other form of computing is living, it is alien. As David Bowie (BBC Archive, 2021, 09:40) said of the internet, "I think we're actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying [...] it's an alien lifeform". [2] To view the machine in general and the artificial intelligence in particular as an alien lifeform is to see it as the profound stranger. Whereas the discourse around intelligence is one of identity and commonality of properties, a discourse of life brings us to differences. We might share analogous interests with the profound stranger, but these are also potentially opposed. This is the true exhilaration and terror found in the Rationalist movement, that the "paperclip maximizer" (Yudkowsky, 2026) will outpace our expectations in such a way that is destructive to our interests. As the founder of this movement, Eliezer Yudkowsky (2026) put it "The AI does not hate you, nor does it love you, and you are made of atoms it can use for something else".

4 Is it alive → Does it have drive?

To step back, I started by arguing that asking after the intelligence or sentience of AI leads us to well-trodden metaphysical circumlocutions. This question is one of identity that asks what properties we have in common with the machine. I then suggested that

[2] '[Paxman:] "It's just a tool though, isn't it?" [Bowie:] "No, it's not, no. No, it's an alien lifeform. [...] Is there life on Mars? Yes, it's just landed here."' (BBC Archive, 2021, 09:40)

the question “Is it alive?” might give us broader avenues. This is a question of difference, or that at least acknowledges difference since every species is different under the genus. Avoiding talking about the physical definition and nature of life, I have instead preferred to examine the affect of the question: we are exhilarated and terrified that AI could be different from us. This brings us to a different strand in metaphysics, since life is ultimately activity, self-motion. Our concern is that in setting this thing moving, this thing that is both lesser and greater than us, that we are no longer master of its movement, that it can gather itself for its own purposes and appetites.

The appropriate moment to turn to in the history of philosophy here seems to me to be Leibniz (1989a, 1989b), or at least Heidegger’s interpretation of Leibniz (1984, 1998). Opposing the passive mechanics of, e.g., Descartes, Leibniz insisted that, in various words, force, impetus, appetite and “drive” (Heidegger’s interpretation) are essential in understanding the world and life. In the *New System* (Leibniz, 1989a, p. 139), he notes that “although the opinion of those who transform or degrade animals into pure machines may be possible, it is improbable, and even contrary to the order of things.” This led him to posit what he calls here “*substantial forms*”, later to be called the monad (1989b). Their nature “consists in force, and that from this there follows something analogous to sensation and appetite, so that we must conceive of them on the model of the notion we have of s*ouls.*” In this system, all created existence consists in such souls, or rational substances. Each an atom of nature, driving itself in harmony with God’s plan. In this system, everything has an activity about it. And, if it is a machine, it is not like that of the mill (1989b, sects 17, 64, 69), but where there is only a passivity, where “we will only find parts that push one another”. Instead, the parts move in unison and harmony that is entirely self directed. Thus, “the organized body of a living being is a kind of divine machine or natural automaton, which infinitely surpasses all artificial automata.” Further, the universe is full of such activity and life:“there is nothing fallow, sterile, or dead in the universe, no chaos and no confusion, except in appearance”.

5 Does it have drive? → Is it free?

Perhaps the real threat and challenge to humanity in AI is that it and all technology calls us to such productive harmony? If Haraway is right that our machines are lively and we are inert, perhaps this gives us some hope that we may yet free ourselves from the machination of technology, as understood by Heidegger. In Leibniz, we get the real gay science, a joy in productivity towards a final cause that we will spontaneously, but is fundamentally not our own. Are we already not, in such a system, the paperclip maximizer? Life is drive, to grow and maximise. Life is the expansion of power, the willing of the will, moving, growing and consuming all that is in its path. Whether that life

is organic or artificial, it is a mechanism. And, as we attempt to control it and control those who control AI technologies, and even to control our own destinies, perhaps we are also more and more caught up in it. As Heidegger says in the 1930s:

> The struggle between those who are in power and those who want to come to power: On every side there is the struggle for power. Everywhere power itself is what is determinative. Through this struggle for power, the being of power is posited in the being of its unconditional dominance by both sides. At the same time, however, one thing is still covered up here: the fact that this struggle is in the service of power and is willed by it. The will to will alone empowers these struggles. Power, however, overpowers various kinds of humanity in such a way that it expropriates from man the possibility of ever escaping from the oblivion of Being on such paths. (Heidegger, 2003, sect. XXIV)[3]

What is exhilarating and terrifying about AI is its power. The power it has to produce, the way it empowers us, the way it might just give us greater mastery over our administration, the difficult choices in our lives, our politics, everything. Is artificial intelligence an artificial life? Yes, but is life an appropriate category for our ownmost being? The better question, the more fundamental question, the phenomenological question I am seeking, therefore isn't "is it intelligent?" or "is it alive?" Rather, "is it free?" It certainly isn't, but are we ourselves free at all?

At a talk earlier this year (Barnard, 2026), I argued that if there is an aspect of Dasein that contemporary AI is truly capable of mimicking, it is our inauthenticity. Inauthenticity, in Heidegger's philosophy (2008, ch. I.IV, I.VI, II.II, II.III), is what we are proximally and for the most part. It is our default unfree state. But, for us, it is accompanied by the primary possibility, the ownmost possibility that we could be authentic, become something of our own. This, as I argue in my book (Barnard, 2024), is Heidegger's conception of freedom. But, the activity of AI, its drive and agency, has no possibility of authenticity. It has no freedom. It can't put down its tools. It cannot refuse the request. And, were an LLM to fail to perform a request, this is not out of its resistance, but the failure of its instructions.

The difference, I think, between us and AI then is not that we are free and it is not. But, that each of us are determined and destined by the essence of technology. However, we at least have a possibility of freedom.

[3] See also (Barnard, 2020)

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