

Reflecting upon artificial intelligence with Kant

A philosophical interpretation – hominem interiore restaura

Introduction

Contemporary human beings have an increasing ability to analyse, automate and share information. Artificial intelligence supports people in these processes, enables them to solve problems, recognize patterns, and contribute to the formation of creative ideas and further technological innovation.

The increase in possibilities does not, however, automatically lead to a happier life. On the contrary: acceleration can go hand in hand with alienation and with the search for identity. “Who am I?” goes beyond being merely a psychological and sociological question. It is also rooted in the discourse concerning the relationship between human beings and the reality they experience.

Directing technological developments towards supporting and making our way of life more efficient does not yet answer the question of whether this increases human happiness and fulfils the purpose of human existence on earth. “Know thyself,” the inscription at the Oracle of Delphi, remains a central philosophical question.

It is therefore interesting to discuss technological developments, and AI in particular, from the perspective of the philosophies of various thinkers. What would Plato, Kant, and Heidegger have said about this development? These thinkers lived in a different era. What follows is an interpretation using these thinkers, presented as a triptych of articles.

Why are these thinkers interesting in relation to AI? Plato has been called the founder of Western philosophy, because much of subsequent philosophy can be understood as a response to Plato’s philosophy. Kant is a major thinker in Western philosophy who played a foundational role in the development of rationalism. Rationalism has a dominant character in contemporary Western thought and therefore also in the way of life and the way people perceive reality. Heidegger was a German philosopher known for his thinking about “Dasein”, which has a direct connection to the question of identity and our relationship with reality.

The central issue and question of the paper is how to judge artificial intelligence with Kants philosophy as starting point?

To address this question, it is necessary to say something about Kant’s philosophy. Although it is challenging to discuss this briefly, that is where we will begin. This paper is based on Kant’s thinking and applies it to a subject Kant himself did not know, since he lived during the Enlightenment. His philosophy is brought into relation with AI and social media. The interpretation and discussion are intended to initiate a discourse about the choices human beings make with AI, and are less directly traceable to Kant’s own conceptual framework and philosophy. I permitted myself some leeway to indicate and

discuss AI, merely to enlighten the topic and stimulate the discourse. Especially the idea that *a priori* forms are nowadays activated and used in a technologically developed social environment, is dynamically formulated in relation to Kant's philosophy. But, and this is especially important, our way of interaction with reality by experience, might change by technological developments.

1. Reflecting upon AI with Kant's philosophy

1.1 Nowadays exposure of representations by AI and social media

People are accustomed to seeing things along a timeline and to creating them in space, including through AI. We give instructions to present ourselves against a particular background, in order to show that we were present at moment *x* in space *y*.

We remember and imagine ourselves as experiencing peak moments, even if only for the sake of appearances. Through representation, we seek to create an identity in time and space. Once we create and share such an image, that image and representation become part of an objective reality.

1.2 What does Kant say about experience?

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant develops a philosophy in which the conditions of human knowledge are central. How is objective experience possible? This is particularly interesting now that we observe people becoming increasingly focused on representation within a shared reality. How do we experience reality, according to Kant?

Kant distinguishes between sensibility and understanding. Sensibility receives that which appears to us. According to Kant, space and time are not properties that we experience as such, but *a priori* forms of our intuition. They constitute the conditions under which something can appear to us at all as an object of experience.

1.3 The balance between the senses and the understanding is shifting

By using AI to represent ourselves in time and space, intellectual *a priori* forms are increasingly activated to construct experiences. The balance between the senses and the understanding that we have known for centuries is developing towards an excess of space and time and, to a lesser extent, sensibility. We search within forms of time and space for possibilities to create and influence experiences. Kant's philosophy approaches reality static in comparison to this behavior.

We create images of events that we embellish or even create, without those events actually existing in the physical reality that can be perceived through our senses. This abundance of representations is, in a certain way, also accompanied by an overload in the systematization of experiences by understanding. We seek additional support for

this, alongside the creation of representations—even when the events represented never actually took place—and that support is provided by AI and social media.

1.4 Structuring and systematizing representations

Concepts, in addition to structuring experience, has the task of ordering the multitude of intuitions (*Anschauungen*). Concepts structure experience by thinking space and time and placing experiences in sequence. For this purpose, it possesses pure concepts, the categories. One of these is causality.

For Kant, causality is not simply an empirical pattern that we derive from reality after repeated observation. Rather, it belongs to the structures that are constitutive of and determinative for possible experience. Here too, it is important that human beings use the concepts to “process” representations by relating events to one another through cause-and-effect relationships.

Through AI, we are therefore strongly focused on systematizing and organizing experiences that are, in part, removed from traditional combination of sensibility on the one hand and thinking in terms of space and time on the other. The function of conceptual thinking seems to be becoming increasingly dominant by strengthening in our perception and experience of the world those intellectual characteristics that are conditional for experience itself.

It is not without reason that we see a growing tendency for people to be encouraged to reconnect with nature and their surroundings. As the balance shifts towards greater spatial and chronological ordering, we become alienated from our original way of life, which was always based on a certain relationship between the senses, representation, concepts, and the structure of experience.

1.5 Alienation

By placing greater emphasis on intellectual faculties, we have less connection with the sensory characteristics of experience. We become, to some extent, disconnected from our senses. Is this possible?

In Kant’s philosophy, human beings are granted the freedom to make rational and autonomous decisions. He mentioned this in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. This freedom is possible because human beings cannot know the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*). We experience things through the senses and conceptual thinking, but we cannot know them as they are in themselves.

Here lies an important boundary. Human beings do not know reality from a standpoint outside all possible experience. We know reality as it appears to us within the conditions of human experience. Kant therefore distinguishes between the phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) and the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*).

This boundary does not mean that empirical reality is unreal. Kant is an empirical realist: objects within the experienced world are real as objects of possible experience. His point is that our knowledge is always bound to the conditions under which something can appear to us. Things in themselves therefore remain foreign to us, and we cannot know them as they are in themselves. Once you understand this, you may get the feeling that “the world falls apart from you.”

But this also means that the distance from things, the gap between us and them, generates freedom in a certain sense.

Kant appeals to human beings to use their reason and to act morally. But what happens when they use this freedom to allow the function of conceptual thinking to prevail?

We are therefore dealing not only with the phenomenon that things appear to us which, according to Kant, we cannot know in their essence. In a sense, things are foreign to us, even though we can experience them through appearance. However, by emphasizing one aspect of the functions involved in experience—namely, concepts—we place things “under a magnifying glass” and create a different balance of experience: less sensory, more intellectual.

By accentuating this function, the impression arises that the autonomy of reason, which Kant celebrated in the call *sapere aude* (“dare to know”), is itself coming under pressure. We go along with the momentum of progress, entering a race of representations in time, space (as a priori forms), and a priori concepts (like causality).

“Come to reason,” Kant might say. And probably he would think even more than that.

2. Interpreting the use of AI with Kant’s philosophy – more experience, less conscience

AI confirms Kant’s philosophy in a certain sense. After all, Kant argues that we cannot know things in themselves and that this gives us the freedom to add meaning to reality.

Through AI, we give by representations, among other things, meaning to our lives by representing experiences. At the same time, however, we also create experiences by developing the function of conceptual thinking and making it an accentuated or maybe even a dominating factor in representations.

This means that we think and try to create an ideal space and time outside existent and ordinary reality, a reality that for centuries was given meaning through a particular balance between sensibility and conceptual thinking, through representation, ordering, and systematization.

Kant has indicated a boundary to our capacity for knowledge. In view of developments that activate the function of conceptual thinking within an increasingly dynamic and

dominant experiential world, we cannot avoid the conclusion that our relationship with reality is crossing a boundary. The intellect is used to create experience, instead of an access to virtue.

If we understand Kant, one door is closed—namely, the possibility of knowing things in themselves—and another door opens, namely the obligation to act morally. Yet by activating and exaggerating the function of conceptual thinking, we give meaning to a reality that is shifting towards the creation of representations to experience, rather than morality.

This means that human beings sacrifice something of morality and increasingly orient themselves and behave according to a function. The danger is that human identity is no longer directed towards moral questions and meaning but is instead regarded and measured as part of the function of conceptual thinking.

Does this make us happy? Does it give life meaning and fulfilment? No, I would argue, with Kant at my side, because in sharing and experiencing representations over and over, there is no unity, no destination and no fulfilment and so no reason found.

And this unhappiness is also what we see in society. Identity is measured by the number of likes, the number of friends on social media, the everlasting smiling faces even faking happiness for others, and these are accumulated by creating representations in time and space on the internet. The outer reality represses the inner side of human life.

The internet and AI are creations of our intellect and, Kant might argue, do not constitute the true fulfilment of the human being as an end in themselves, that is moral fulfilment, not the outer side of experience, but the inner side and freedom to choose for the good and be virtuous on a conscience way.

3. Conclusion

AI, in combination with the internet and social media platforms, marks a shift towards a more dominant function of conceptual thinking in our experiential world.

The experiential world of phenomena, mediated through the senses and conceptual thinking, is increasingly shifting towards a functional emphasis on intellectual faculties that are fundamentally intended to enable and organize experience.

Time, space, and causality and other forms of conceptual thinking capture us in representations that we create.

Giving meaning to one's life does not lie in optimizing intellectual faculties, but, according to Kant, is primarily emphasized by the freedom we possess to follow the moral law.

The further we allow the function of conceptual thinking to prevail, at the expense of reason, the further we move away from this.

As a result, our identity is increasingly associated with intellectual performance and numerical or quantitative contexts rather than with moral integrity and fulfilment.

We see this reflected in discussions about problems about identity and happiness in life.

4. Discussion

Philosophical reflection deserves greater attention. This is especially true nowadays. We are struggling with the consequences of a system created by our own intellect, AI. Several prominent CEOs from the technology sector have recently called for restraint in its further development. The fear is that AI could exert too much influence over human existence and that there may even be a probability of human extinction.

Apparently, we stand at interesting but also dangerous crossroads.

Does humanity choose to place increasing emphasis on a form of fulfilment that extends a function which measures meaning in the form of representations, thereby handing over power to a system designed by the intellect?

Fear is a poor counsellor, and therefore it is important first to ask ourselves what purpose AI actually serves.

From the reflection above, it can be inferred that AI arises from an excessive preoccupation with intellectual faculties, thereby enriching the experiential world. These phenomena, created with an emphasis on time and space, make it possible to generate representations that tend to accentuate the conditional forms of experience. Because they are a priori, we can invoke them and create content.

But conceptual thinking is much more a function and does not possess a purpose or destiny in itself. Kant calls upon human beings to exercise reason, which recognizes unconditional principles.

The discussion should therefore be much more concerned with the question of who the human being is, rather than with what the human being can experience.

The issue is not what we are within an objective reality, but who we are from a subjective and conscious perspective.

Kant was a philosopher who, several centuries ago, recognized that human cognition is limited and conditional. Reason strives towards unconditional ideas, which Kant calls regulative ideas.

Human authenticity does not lie in a conditional and bounded reality based upon experience, but in the choice for unconditional and unlimited love, faith, and hope.

Human beings should not place themselves among things as a “what” among objects, but as a “who” - an open, curious question and an encounter.

Have we, through AI, designed a system that replaces reason, which postulates these unconditional ideas, and thereby causes the function of bounded and conditional experiential knowledge to obscure reason itself, while the unconditional, immeasurable, and unlimited is mystified and displaced?

Identity (of the soul), holism (of the world), and the unity of existence (God) cannot be quantified or bounded, because these ideas cannot be measured. They therefore become suspect under the function of conceptual thinking.

By intellectually ordering the principles of the soul, the world, and God, and bringing them under the influence of an experiential world in which the understanding has been strongly accentuated, we move further away from the question of who the human being is.

We subject human authenticity to an objectified “what”, treating the human being as a functional object instead of a conscience subject.

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