Being Human & Artificial Intelligence

2. Unidirectional Contact vs. Bidirectional Contact

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Have you ever admitted to someone something you would rather have kept secret, because you are not proud of it? Or – even harder – because you really feel ashamed of it. And have you done the same thing with an AI agent? Big difference. At least for me and for those people I work with. This is one example of a thing I am sharing in this short text, which is about contact.

If you haven't read the introduction to this series of articles, please do so. In short: I am sharing my personal and professional experiences and thoughts about a weird relationship, which is that of AI and us human beings. This is not a scientific article, and I don't claim to be right. My view might seem "abstract", but it draws on very real experiences. I am sharing this as a possible inspiration for finding your own stance. I am not entering the debate about pros and cons, about euphoric utopia or depressing dystopia. Even more important: these thoughts may have come to me while I was processing the world around me. But they may not be "mine". Others might have shared these ideas before me, and others will for sure have contributed to me processing all of this. I probably won't name them. Simply because I process the world intuitively, and I often can't remember who contributed what. So, all of this is rather common property. Please use it in any way suitable for you, just not from the perspective of being right or wrong. If you would like a dialog about this (not a discussion or debate), feel free to contact me.

Having said all that, let's get started with the topic of this article: Contact.

Now, in my line of work[i] as well as on my personal growth path, there is one very blunt and real thing. Things I am ashamed of[ii] and I haven't told anyone get stuck in my system. And not only that. These things use up a lot of energy: emotional, cognitive and often physical. I also constantly have to watch that they don't come out by accident. Honestly admitting and communicating them to a real other person frees me from all of that. This also is one necessary step of real remorse. Here are some well-known examples: Part of one of the 12 steps of AA is "admit […] to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs". Many therapeutic interventions rely on exactly that.[iii] The Catholic Church relies on it in confession.

Now, the important part in all that is: "to another human being". Why is that? Because one takes the risk of being devalued, excluded, even of losing a relationship. Because the one receiving it shares all the potential of experiencing similar feelings. So, it's not just "out there", but it is "received" in its full potential range. Only by taking this risk and being fully received do I allow liberation to happen, and with it healing and growth. Again: my stance towards this.

Admitting the same things to an AI agent isn't quite the same. It's something, but it's not the same. One of the differences apparent to me is contact. When you are in truthful contact with another human being, it's bidirectional. Meaning that you "give" contact to the other one, and the other one gives contact to you.

I could go into a theoretical discourse now on what I mean by contact, but I'll spare you. Put simply: giving contact means making oneself completely visible to another one and at the same time being completely open to see the other one as who and what they really are[iv]. There are shelves filled with books on this topic. Yet I will – for now – stick with this definition.

In reality contact never fulfills this ideal. In my experience, only a few of us can give contact in this "perfect" way. After all, we are human and for me that means that we are not perfect and absolute. So, no real contact possible? Well, the honest intention to give real and truthful contact to another human being is sufficient. It doesn't have to be perfect, but one must mean it.

If two human beings intend to give each other truthful contact, there is mutual contact. It flows in both directions. It's bidirectional. It allows reactivity in the contact. It allows both human beings to be touched and moved by the other one. It allows being hurt or learning things about the other one or oneself that might be painful or beautiful. It is a risk, as both might come "out of that contact" as a different person.

To avoid any misunderstanding: I am not saying you should offer this kind of contact to anyone in any situation. You might end up being hurt, abused, put down, and/or overwhelmed. In everyday life, you probably will trust only the people closest to you this deeply.

But when it comes to healing, personal growth, or inner evolution, this kind of contact is indispensable. It has to be both ways. When you share something, there must be another real human being to receive it. Ideally, that person does not comment on what you share. But that's another level of being in bidirectional contact. If you haven't experienced any of this, my suggestion is: go and try it out.

Here is why an AI agent receiving something that is risky to share is not the same as a real person receiving the same thing. To this day, AI agents are made to "serve" and support people without judging. They are simply there, no matter what.[v] They won't break the contact. They won't be embarrassed. They won't be hurt. There is only one human being involved in this AI-human-interaction who can give truthful contact. And that's you. An AI agent may "behave" much like a real person. Still, "sharing" something with it is not the same as sharing it with a real human being.

This doesn't mean that there is no benefit in using an AI agent as an "opposite" for "getting something out". Some things inside us want or need to be acknowledged and accepted by ourselves, so that they get "out of our way" and we can move on. Here are some ways to stop "ignoring" them without yet sharing them with another person:

- Admitting it to yourself. This, for example, is another part of step 5 of the twelve steps of AA.

- Admitting it to something outside of you. Journaling or talking to a pet would be an example.
- Admitting it to an AI agent that emulates human behavior. Still, no risk of really being seen and/or being judged[vi].

As already mentioned, in all of these ways there is always only one human being involved and that's you. It's unidirectional contact. You don't take the same risk as with another human being. And you don't make yourself visible, or get perceived, at the same depth. There still might be great value in this, as you at least have to admit to yourself whatever you are admitting. However unpleasant it is. And admitting something to yourself is a first necessary step. Only then can you acknowledge it and admit it to a fellow human being in bidirectional contact.

So, in this first step a well-trained AI agent that acts like a fellow human being really might be helpful. You might practice putting unpleasant things into words. By practicing a truthful dialog with an AI agent, you might even learn what it feels like to hold space for someone who shares something with you. But all of this happens IN you. It does not happen BETWEEN you and another human being, out in the shared world of your species.

What you still avoid is the risk of letting another human being truly witness what you share: someone who experiences the world the way you do, with the same inner depth and self-awareness. Someone like you.

If you use an AI agent as a substitute for a fellow human being, you simply are achieving two things:

You are training behavior on a risk-free level. You learn how to "act". No "real" risk involved. It's a bit like training on a flight simulator as compared to flying a real plane. In the end you know what to do and how to behave. But you have not taken the real risk. And you don't have to take responsibility for the real outside world.

And you are training yourself to let everything happen inside of you. The AI agent might give you the cues that another human being would give you, but you are creating all the rest yourself. You imagine the inner life of the person the AI agent is emulating. You imagine the contact between you and this imagined person. All within you. You don't get the real thing. On top of that, you have to "create" the part of the relationship that a purely reasoning- and behavior-based machine cannot provide as an opposite: another human's inner life and contact on that level.

In other words, you use a behavior-based machine to learn how **not** to get into truthful and bidirectional contact.

Even if the AI should ever develop something like a personality with something like an inside world, it's still not a human being. It might be a living being.[vii] But it simply will never experience the world in the same way as your fellow human beings do.

As autonomous individual human beings, our inside is untouchable. And this is what I am talking about. It's this and the vulnerability that we are exposed to in contact with other human beings that makes another human being a unique opposite in contact;

and that makes the contact bidirectional. Be visible and be perceived in it in its full depth. And see and perceive another one a hundred percent.

You may use an AI agent for your personal growth in many ways. But in the end, you may just be projecting your humanness onto a machine that behaves like a human. This makes the contact unidirectional. It forces you to create inside yourself[viii] what the outside world could give you. Plus: with an AI agent it's pretty much risk free on a personal level. It might take you only so far in realizing who you really are, but it will always be your projection that you meet, not a real other. And this puts a limit on your personal and social growth.

All of this is not an objective judgment. I am just sharing this, in case you are one of the people wanting to grow in the field of true, risky and yet loving contact. For me it always is helpful to remember this, whenever I am interacting with a well-trained AI agent. If there are emotions involved, it's me constructing them and using a behavior-based machine as a projection canvas; as a triggering mechanism.

Here is something else: I don't know where our social interactions will be even in a couple of years from now. I don't know what good there will be in taking risk out of contact by making it unidirectional. I don't know what growth looks like when it's not happening in the field of bidirectional contact between human beings. Imagine a society of more rational, less emotional players who don't act out of trauma, hurt, immaturity or lack of love. AI agents would be such players. Humans who have pulled out of bidirectional contact and use AI agents as partners in their personal relationships would be such players. I don't know whether that society would be the "better" one. That's not for me to judge. But I do know that I want to have bidirectional contact for many different reasons. One being the potential for personal growth. And I know that AI can support me in this personal growth, but only up to a point. Some human processes need the risk of bidirectional contact with fellow human beings. I know that I want to have shared this aspect of the co-evolution of human and machine, so it is not overlooked. I wanted to share this perspective on us humans as autonomous individual beings, who can still decide how we shape contact and with whom or what. I want the liveliness in the risk of bidirectional contact. And I want others to be aware of this choice. But I will never judge anyone who decides to go for less risk. Why should I? What do I know?

And here is a last aspect. This article focuses on the unpleasant things. The things that stand in our way until we share them with another human being in bidirectional contact. For me the same thing holds true for the beauty and the joy I experience. I want to share them, and I want fellow human beings to see me with them. For me it makes all of that more "real"; more "alive"; truer. I don't have that with an AI agent.

It was Martin Buber who conveyed the idea that human identity is not formed in isolation, but strictly through relationship.[ix] I want this to happen on all levels. AI can offer the behavioral, rational, knowledge-based and problem-solving level. But that is only a fraction of what being human has to offer. Which means that I need fellow human beings and bidirectional contact.

[i] I am working with groups and people supporting them as a coach and facilitator through their crises, processes and questions, on a vertical as well as on a horizontal level.

[ii] The same thing applies to everything that wants or needs to be shared, communicated, or expressed. I am using things that we are ashamed of in this text for one purpose: the difference between keeping them in and sharing them seems to be "bigger" than with anything else. And the risk of sharing them seems to be much higher.

[iii] Rogers, Berner, IFS, Focusing, just to name a few examples.

[iv] Not as who or what we want them to be.

[v] This might change, or might have changed already without us knowing, but for now, this is what AI agents that you communicate with are made for.

[vi] There is no real risk involved on the level of relationship between two individuals. This doesn't hold true if collectives or societies use AI to control co-existence. Which is already happening in various countries. If you are admitting something that is illegal or banned to such an AI, it will have real consequences. So, there is a real risk involved, but not for the inner world of the involved human being. One such example is the Social Credit System in China. Yet, in this case we are already in the realm of AI and its influence on society. And we are in the realm of contact between an "I" (individual) and a "We" (collective). The AI in these instances aids the "We". Which – as I have written in the introduction – is not the focus of these texts. They are about the individual and the consequences of using AI as another opposite "individual".

[vii] There is a lot to say about that, but not here. The question about AI being alive raises a theoretical and philosophical debate. And it touches the question of how much AI already influences the human social process on various levels. Which, just as a reminder, is not what I am trying to cover here.

[viii] Another valuable personal ability that I am not judging as good or bad. Yet something that might stand in the way of bidirectional contact when you need it. Everything created by imagination on the inside is something that impedes your free view of the outside world.

[ix] One of his most quoted sentences is: "I become through the relation to the Thou". So, the "Thou" I choose has a crucial impact on the "I" that I become. It can be AI, another human being, and anything else. You have a choice. Read Martin Buber's "I and Thou" for more on this topic.