Being Human & Artificial Intelligence

3. Human-Machine-Co-Evolution

Author: Thomas Tiller
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I think by now it is clear that these articles draw from my personal experience and my personal process. They are meant as impulses for your own inner process rather than being objective, well researched scientific or journalistic contributions.[i]

I am interested in the state of being human. Interested in the uniqueness of the path that every single individual has. In a way I have been doing action research on this for the last twenty years. On this and on contact and relationship. In addition, I have always been more interested in the first-person perspective and the “experiencing” rather than in “thinking about” the state of being human.[ii]

These articles are meant to start a dialog. An inner dialog as well as dialog between human beings. They are not about knowledge, facts, answers, or problem-solving, as mentioned in the text on “holding questions”. In a way they are not even about AI. They are about the experience of the condition of being human and the choices it brings. The more self-aware and conscious we are, the more choices we have.

What does that mean for the evolution of machines and for our evolution as human beings? With the arrival and rapid development of AI came an inevitable new reality. This reality forces all of us to ask: What makes being human unique? At least it does if we are aware of the choices we have as individuals. Another way to put it: AI is taking over rational problem solving, and it does this far better than we ever could. So, what remains for us? What is the exclusive characteristic of being human? Many of us saw rational thinking as this essential characteristic. If machines take this over, what is left that only humans have?

In this way the appearance of AI forces us to make decisions about various things. For example, how to interact with it. Or: What place do we give AI and what does it offer in our inner world?[iii] If we are using it as a canvas for our projections: what do we project onto it? Where do we decide to replace fellow humans with AI and why? And many more such questions that turn out to be very individual and personal.[iv]

Now, here is the thing: These questions aren’t new. They actually are really old. They were asked every time machines with a certain characteristic were invented. These machines would be able to fulfill a task that so far only humans had been able to do, and they did it much better. Want an example? The Chinese philosopher and poet Zhuangzi tells the story of a gardener, who carries water out of his well by hand instead of using a well sweep. Zhuangzi asks him why he does not use a machine that would make his work much easier. He gives a very clear reason for not using this mechanical aid. He explains its consequences, and why he chooses not to accept them.[v]He calls the attitude of people using machines “Machine Heart”. Or read

Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology", to name a more recent example. A whole essay about the choices we have when we approach technology. Even though he wrote it in the 1950s, it's a real pleasure to read it with AI in mind.

The co-evolution of human beings and machines has been ongoing since humans started exploring and creating. The simple dynamic is: Human beings invent technology to make life easier. In doing so, they hand over tasks that used to be exclusive to humans. Until then, these tasks were part of their identity as human beings. So, humanity had to rethink its self-image, and this inevitably makes humanity evolve. This cycle happens again and again. In this dynamic of Human-Machine-Co-Evolution, AI is just another technology; just another machine.[vi]

Yet some things in these cycles do change over time. The first is how long a technology stays the leading innovation. New technology in machines lasted multiple generations until the 18th century. Then a fundamental change could be seen in every generation. Since the 1950s the appearance of fundamentally new technologies has happened multiple times within a single lifetime. The cycles become shorter.

The second big difference is more recent. About 70 years ago, we moved from mechanical machines to machines that do rational tasks and "think". And within the last 10 years machines have started to act like human beings; almost indistinguishably.

Still, structurally, the process of Human-Machine-Co-Evolution hasn't changed a bit. And all I am trying to point out is: There is a choice in it for every one of us. The choice is not so much whether to use AI. It is how we assess it and how much space we give it, inside ourselves and in our relationships with other people.

Just to make it clear again: all of this is not me being for or against AI. All I want to do is to point out that we can choose whom or what we interact with, and for which purpose. This is me going for the "and" instead of the "either or". This is me showing my love for the uniqueness in being human. I sincerely hope that as many fellow humans as possible think along the same lines: AI is a huge evolutionary step on the machine side of co-evolution. Let us use it to understand more clearly what it means to be human. Let us not just join the race to become better "AI operators". My point is this: It is neither about humans serving machines nor about machines serving humans.

Instead, I believe we keep our dignity, as humanity and as individuals, by staying aware of different things. First, we stay aware of ourselves and of all our fellow humans.[vii] Second, we watch how machines evolve without clinging to a positive or negative view. We see it as one side of a co-evolution, and we are the other side. Third, we use this co-evolution to become more aware of our own evolution as humanity.

Evolution is inevitable. Let's be a conscious part of it.

[i] Please read the introduction to this series.

[ii] I still love reading books “about” the state of being human, about contact, about consciousness and about self-exploration and personal growth. But rather to get impulses and information for my own path, not so much to get an “objective” understanding from a third-person perspective. There is nothing wrong with this; it’s just not my path.

[iii] Again: All these thoughts are not meant as contribution to a debate about consequences on the collective or the social level. They are about the state of being an individual human, the respective individual path and the consequences of the appearance of AI in all of that.

[iv] And should even the tiniest voice in you say something like “but I don’t have a choice as AI is omnipresent, and I can only survive by letting its presence dictate my inner world”, then you have made another choice. The choice not to have a choice. I am not judging this. I am not even saying that every individual is aware of this choice (which translates into “not having this choice”). But what good does it do to avoid naming one of the possibilities still unique to us humans and making it transparent? In the end this brings another obligation to decide. Answering the question: Do I want to be a “victim” of the machine or do I want to take responsibility for the (perhaps only) remaining terrain that I have absolute sovereignty over: my inner world and my thinking and experiencing.

[v] Here is the full answer: “The gardener flushed with anger and then said with a laugh, ‘I’ve heard my teacher say, where there are machines, there are bound to be machine worries; where there are machine worries, there are bound to be machine hearts. With a machine heart in your breast, you’ve spoiled what was pure and simple, and without the pure and simple, the life of the spirit knows no rest. Where the life of the spirit knows no rest, the Way will cease to buoy you up. It’s not that I don’t know about your machine—I would be ashamed to use it!’” (From “Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings”) Important: I don’t necessarily share this conviction. All I am trying to point out is that these questions and choices have been around since human beings started exploring and creating “machines”.

[vi] Just to remind you: I am not sharing this to take a side in the debate whether it’s good to use machines or not. I am talking about it, to hopefully give an impulse to the age-old questions about who we are as human beings, if machines take over tasks that were considered exclusive to humans for centuries; and to hopefully set a reminder about the choices we have, where our inner world is concerned.

[vii] Instead of losing sight of our own kind.