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Self and Other: Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Human Self-Understanding

At the sidelines of the 4th stars Singapore symposium in February 2017, **Luciano Floridi, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, and Faculty Fellow, Chair of the Data Ethics Research Group, The Alan Turing Institute, London, United Kingdom,** shared his insights into the future of artificial intelligence (AI) in an exclusive interview conducted by David Erne, Director Asia at stars.

Erne: AI has recently turned into a buzzword in science, business and the media. Its possibilities hold great promise, as well as great peril. How smart do you think AI can really get and what inherent characteristics of AI do you see as putting a limit on its application in the future?

Prof. Floridi: Smart technologies, overall understood as including AI, robotics and machine learning, really don't have a particular limit in terms of tasks they can perform. They can cook your pasta, they can drive your car and one day they will cut your hair. They may replace someone who shuffles documents in an office or they may be able to repair your motorbike. The sky is the limit, it's our imagination. Having said that, these are all examples of agency which do not require any intelligence when performed by a machine. These apps, these systems, these smart technologies, they will take over more and more tasks which can be made automatic: playing chess, playing golf, flying an aircraft or driving a car. That's fantastic. If we perform those tasks, we need to be intelligent. If a machine performs them, it can be as thick as a plank. And that's why we are succeeding. I don't think that there is a particular limit, something that machines will never ever be able to do. That is silly. How they will do it, that is the difference: not intelligently, but successfully, practically, in an engineered way which one day we will invent. Therefore, we need to decouple what machines can do and how they do it. What they can do: endless. How they do it: stupidly.

As an ever increasing number of tasks will be automated and handed over to machines, will AI put more and more people out of work or rather have a stimulating effect on the economy and society by creating new opportunities?

I think both things will happen. A lot of old jobs will disappear in the same way as today we no longer have jobs shoeing horses. Jobs like preparing webpages for a website, that can be automatic, it already is in many cases, and it will become even more so in the future. But that will also open up a huge amount of jobs that today we don't even imagine or which we cannot do because there is not sufficient demand.

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We will see new jobs as well as a relocation of jobs because some work is already taken by robots or AI. I imagine a world very different from what it is now, but not one in which there will not be enough to do. The question is whether the people will be able to be paid, and that's another story.

Could a universal basic income be part of the solution?

The universal basic income has different roles. One is to redistribute the enormous amount of wealth that thousands of generations of human beings have accumulated over millennia. We are living as the happy children of rich parents, the parents being billions of people who lived before us, people who invented the wheel, who discovered iron, who built cities. All that means being able to enjoy the fact that we live in the 21st century and not five hundred years ago and not a thousand years ago. That distribution is one thing. The second point is that it could also be a bit of a buffer towards increasing innovation which is going to be ever more disruptive. As we are enjoying the legacy of wealth left by past generations, we can be more innovative because that wealth being distributed means we can take more risks. I can be unemployed for six months without running any risk. In fact, if there was a universal basic income, I could even be unemployed for a longer term. Welfare and a universal basic income should be used as a means towards supporting innovation, not as a way of coping with the bad consequences of innovation.

As humans and robots will both inhabit the same infosphere, where do you see potential areas of conflict? Who will have to adapt to whom?

I think there will be a lot of adaptation by humans towards artificial agency. We will adapt to the robots because the robot, the AI machine learning system, is more rigid, less flexible. We will adapt around the contours of artificial agency as opposed to artificial agency serving us. Whenever we are told that that's the only way that a computer can do something and therefore we adapt, we know that we are moving one step towards an infosphere that is for AI, not for us. This is a risk and we should resist it and should not indulge in adaptation because that's the easiest way to do it. It should rather be the other way around. Eventually, there will be some kind of symbiotic balance.

In the long term, how do you imagine AI to impact our self-understanding as human beings?

The impact will be huge. We come from a long tradition of understanding ourselves in terms of our jobs, in terms of our agency instead of our way of detaching ourselves from what we do, our reflection, our intelligence. That will have to be regained. It is in our own tradition and in our philosophical understanding of the world, but it has been underestimated during modernity. Modernity is the age of employment, of people being defined by their jobs and job-related roles in society. That will change because those jobs will be replaced. If I identify myself as the one who can drive a car, like a

taxi driver, surely that is being challenged enormously by the fact that that can be done by a robot better than me. If I identify myself as a chess player, well, what happens when my iPhone plays so much better than me? But that's good news, because it was a bad idea to define myself in terms of what I do as a job. It is always a good idea to define myself in terms of how much I can reflect about who I am, my meta-approach to the world. Not just being engaged but knowing that I am engaged and that is the difference.

Winston Churchill once said: "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." In your view, how should we shape the foundations of the information society before it is too late?

In a very brief statement, which I know is ambitious and maybe preposterous: I think the modern age has overemphasized consumerism and it was not in favour of a culture of care and cherishing the world. If we want to build a good future it is a future where our society is a caring society as opposed to a consumer society. We will be taking care of ourselves and of the world. That's the task for our current and future generations. Human history is open. We will have other tasks and other projects in the future but the human project now and for the foreseeable is to take care of ourselves and the world: the natural, the human built, and ourselves as micro-universes. We have to mind the world because the world needs us. We've been guests - mindless guests - for too long and the biological world, the digital world and the human world are in great demand of nurturing and stewardship. It is the kind of stewardship that the gardener has towards the garden: take something away, plant something else, make sure that everything flourishes. The gardener is at the service of the garden, it is not the garden at the service of the gardener. I hope that one day we will be at the service of these three worlds: the human, the natural and the artificial. Caring is the next chapter of the human project. We have a chance to build that and I would love to see that happening.

Disclaimer: The views expressed here are solely those of the interviewee and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the stars Foundation.

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