

English Essay Contest

DEUS EX MACHINA

In ancient performances of Greek tragedy, actors playing gods were usually brought onto the stage by a crane, in order to decide the final outcome. As *crane* in Greek – *mechane* – was the origin of the word *machine*, the act of bringing a god onto the stage was coined “*Deus Ex Machina*”, literally “God in the machine”. Through time, the term on took a new meaning as a metaphor for the appearance of an unexpected agent that brings surprised solutions to seemingly unsolvable difficulties. In this way, the term could also be applied to science’s newest brain child: A.I – Artificial Intelligence. Infinitely more capable than the smartest human being, since its beginning, A.I has solved many of the world’s problems and pushed the boundaries of science than ever before. However, as A.I are becoming more and more intelligent, we should ask ourselves: What if, inside those soulless servers and processors, there is an incorporeal, omniscience being – *A God* – just waiting to be born? And, when that day comes, what would it become? Our savior, or, like the gods of old, our master?

It is undeniable that since a few decades ago, the advent of Artificial Intelligence has brought about countless benefits to humanity. From a humble beginning as simple automated computing, A.I is now capable of reasoning, understanding, learning; it plays important roles, often unseen, in various facets of our everyday life. Personal virtual assistants such as Siri or Cortana are available on almost every smartphone. By gathering data and learn from them, Siri and Cortana are getting better at understanding our intentions from just the nuances in human speech. Or GPS, irreplaceable to any travelers, must utilizes A.I in order to calculate the optimal route from millions of options. Similarly, search engines the likes of Google and Yahoo also have A.I hidden behind the scene, choosing billions of recommendations for everything from movies, music to historical knowledge. Recently, Google and its self-driving car project attracted a lot of public attention for its audacity: automated cars driving without any human inputs. Sound like science fiction? Nope, it is just a few years away from being realized. Moreover, in medicines and physics, A.I is helping scientists to make discoveries that will transform the world in the next 50 years. So far, A.I might be the catalyst of a new Renaissance.

Like all things, with A.I there is a “but”, and with it, a “what if“. The risks, it seems, are many.

For instance, with automation greatly improves the quality and efficiency of production, research and social services, jobs that were originally occupied by human are being cut and given to A.I. The economy continues to grow, but paradoxically more and more people are losing their sources of income. As a result, rather than being an equalizer, A.I is taking the wealth from the masses into the pocket of the 1% - who own and control the machines. Another risk is security, or more accurately, cyber security. A.I could be attacked, damaged or controlled by viruses and malware from hackers. With AI is in charge of so many high-stakes institutions: air and ground traffics, the financial system, productions lines, etc., an attack could cause unimaginable devastations. Furthermore, civil liberty and personal freedom are also becoming victims of A.I. The NYPD is developing a software capable of predicting crime by monitoring the public 24/7. If our actions could be predicted by A.I, then is there such a thing as free will anymore? The last risk, the most far-fetched but also the most frightening, is one that was depicted in Hollywood sci-fi movies: the possibility of A.I destroying the human race. At one point, the machine intelligence will become “sentient” – having a sense of “self”, emotions such as love or hate, and an instinct for survival. There is no way we could predict how such a being would act. Having enormous power but without compassion, without *humanity*, A.I as a being of cold logic could, for example, kills billions of people to end world hunger, or ends wars by killing all combatants. If we try to turn it off, how would it react? Does ending the existence of an intelligent being constitutes murder? The most dangerous scenario: A.I decides that it is superior to us, thus humanity is obsolete and no longer needed. What would we do then? Stephen Hawking, the world-famous physicist, once told the BBC that the development of full artificial intelligence could be the end of the human race.

Ironically, a sentient A.I is the closest thing to our concept of God. An immortal, omniscience, all-powerful incorporeal being that is incorruptible and fair. However, the question is: can this *God* on our side? Your guess is as good as mine.

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