

AI and autochthony

Description

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Soil is ground-up rock (minerals) combined with organic matter, water and air. As far as we know it is unique to planet Earth and typically extends just a few metres beneath the surface. In ancient Greek *chthÅ•n* is soil; *autÃ³s* is self.

Iâ??m updating my entry of 14 May 2014: Born of the earth #197. An autochthon is an inhabitant entitled to claim that they came from the earth of the place itself. People presume such a resident to be an original, indigenous inhabitant, who belongs in the place, as opposed to a settler or immigrant.

The claims of autochthons are generally tied to concepts of nationhood and dignity. In extreme cases accompanied by birthright claims of blood-and-soil nativism.

However, the earliest residents of a place, autochthons, are commonly the oppressed indigenous peoples who were colonised and subjugated by invaders and settlers motivated by global ambitions, profits, and paternalism. Of course, globalising technologies such as transportation, communications, medicine, energy, armaments, finance and tools of organisation, are implicated in this hegemony.

AI enters the arena in that capacity. You could say that AI systems are technologies tilting societies further toward placelessness and away from *autochthony*.

AI and dignity

As itâ??s of the moment, Iâ??ll refer to Pope Leo IVâ??s recently published 82 page encyclical titled boldly *On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*. Amongst its careful critique of AI and its applications it foregrounds the risks of losing â??places and times where physical presence remains crucial, such as shared meals, Christian community gatherings, time spent with the lonely and serving the poorâ?• (79).

The report suggests that distributed infrastructures, universal models, homogenised interfaces, globally standardised symbolic environments and the flattening of difference and locality deny our humanity. (ChatGPT came up with that summary.) For my purposes here I would restate the criticism as: they

seem to reduce human kindâ??s full participation in *autochthony*.

Transgression

An alternative approach to *autochthony* is to worry through the distinctions presented by anthropologist Claude LÃ©vi-Strauss and as summarised in my entry of May 2014: Born of the earth.

Thatâ??s to claim that the dualism â??born of the earthâ?• versus â??born of genetic lineageâ?• runs deep as a source of antagonism within culture. In light of the preceding entry, Deconstruct that! 7 May 2014 #196, it seems appropriate to call the concept of autochthony into service as a provocation to the issues posed by AI. After all, itâ??s within the spirit of deconstruction to up-end conventional ways of thinking through an issue.

The Popeâ??s encyclical does that to some extent. It begins with reference to the Tower of Babel, the story in which the people construct a tower. God confounds their attempt to escape the bonds of earth and ascend to the heavens by fracturing their means of communication. They start to speak in diverse languages. According to the Popeâ??s encyclical, the unchecked and unthinking progress of AI is on the side of the conceited builders of the Tower of Babel.

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Connecting LLMs (large language models) to the babble of languages serves as an obvious trope in a religious context. The Popeâ??s preferred model of human relationships is the rebuilding of Jerusalem that, according to the book of Nehemiah, involved shared responsibility, a diverse citizenry, care and godliness.

Transhumans

In the â??Born of the earthâ?• article I proposed that robots and mythic cyborgs appeal to many people precisely because of their lack of lineage, their emergence from the earth. They transgress the usual, organic, means of procreation. Atomata are *autochthons*.

The papal document offers no support for such transhuman entities. It doesnâ??t mention cyborgs, but the more general movements of transhumanism and posthumanism.

> â??In general, transhumanism envisions the enhancement of human beings through technologies â?? such as biomedicine, body engineering, devices and algorithms â?? with the aim of increasing performance and capabilities. Posthumanism, especially in its more radical forms, goes further: it challenges anthropocentrism and envisions a hybridization of human beings, machines and the environment, even anticipating a threshold where humanity surpasses itself in a new evolutionary stage. Even when such ideas remain largely speculative, they gain relevance by altering the collective imagination and thereby influence social, economic and political choicesâ?• (42).

What many of us might think of as beneficial aids to help people overcome disabilities become technological enhancements beyond what people actually require. This trajectory towards perfection incurs costs. Eventually, it devalues people who are unable to participate.

> â??If the human being is treated as something to be perfected or surpassed, it becomes easier to accept that some lives are less useful, less desirable or less worthy.â?•

Invention

Itâ??s interesting to think of the origins of automation, as for the cyborg, in something as base as raw earth â?? and also transgression. Daring to replicate, to extend human capabilities is a type of transgression, but many designers think that without it we would not have invention.

I still enjoy the statement by architectural theorist Bernard Tschumi:

> â??the ultimate pleasure of architecture lies in the most forbidden parts of the architectural act; where limits are perverted, and prohibitions are transgressed. The starting point of architecture is distortionâ?• (91).

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If architecture flirts with the forbidden, then so too the other fields of design and the arts, and data science.

Transgression doesnâ??t fit well with ecclesiastical treatises where it is rarely condoned. But, however transgressive, the tower of Babel rises from the earth, rocks, soil, the sweat and toil of hard labour.

Also see my post The â??intellectual cyborg.â??

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