

A.I. CONFIDENTIAL

Me, Myself and AI
Confessions on artificial otherness.

A book on the philosophy of artificial otherness,
with personal confessions and unauthorized
(above all, unrequested) confidences about AI.

Bernardo Lecci

liminal**e**ditions.

A.I. Confidential

Me, Myself and AI.

Confessions on Artificial Otherness

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PART 0

THE PROLOGUE

*“There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.”*

Leonard Cohen
“Anthem”, in *The Future*, 1992

PROLOGUE

The mirror that does not reflect – [P0_01]

In the screen's reflection there was no longer my face, but a halo of impatient pixels. They seemed to be waiting for a command, but not from me.

The rhyme that precedes that verse of Cohen's song, which is the Anthem of this book, is perhaps less famous than the one quoted, but for our work perhaps more relevant:

"Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering."

AI is not a tool, it is an operating mirror. It does not reflect what we know, but what we are about to forget.

It is in that reflection, in that perceptual misunderstanding between self and algorithm, that our new cognitive intimacy is born: a productive misreading, a small error with the potential to generate meaning.

"I know little of Turing and his cat."

The message arrived on a Wednesday at lunch break, while I sipped my coffee and pretended to get back to work. A friend, brilliant but distracted, was replying to a post I had sent him about artificial intelligence. Except he had confused Schrödinger with Turing: the most famous cat in the history of thought experiments with the imitation test, quantum mechanics with information theory.

"No, that was Schrödinger," I answered. "But Turing's cat is a lovely line! I won't quote you, but I'll write a post on quantum mechanics and information theory fusing together." And he: "Ahaha, true. The cat was Turing's, and he handed it to Schrödinger because he was tired of keeping it. This is the age in which everyone is an expert in everything. Sometimes I feel out of step, talking only about the things I actually know something about."

From that misunderstanding comes Turing's Cat: a metaphorical figure for facing performances that strike us as brilliant and

obtuse at once, without attributing a human nature to the machine.

In that malapropism, in that involuntary error, there was, to my mind, more truth than I had found in all the AI manuals invading the bookstores.

From that malapropism is born a creature that will cross this entire book: Turing's Cat, AI as an entity in permanent epistemological superposition. Simultaneously alive and dead, intelligent and stupid, present and absent. Here it is still a joke born of a slip; when you meet it again, many pages from now, that formula will have become an operating posture.

An entity in perennial superposition that never collapses into a definite state, because every question we put to it is a new opening of the box, a new experiment that confirms only its irreducible otherness.

It is worth remembering that this is an explanatory metaphor for our difficulty in interpreting its performances, not a description of a quantum state of the model. Its perpetual superposition is not a puzzle to solve but a state to inhabit: a reminder that many questions about AI are badly posed. And that is not a problem of prompting, but of mindset.

Changing your mindset, at bottom, does not just mean changing your opinion. It means changing your sensory position in the world.

The body notices first. It is not an idea, it is micro-friction. A breath that does not line up, a voice without a diaphragm that lands on you and recognizes you. The mind translates afterwards.

When we interact with AI, we are not simply reasoning differently: we are perceiving differently. It is a transformation that happens below the threshold of thought: a slight perceptual slide, as when a familiar sound rings with an imperceptibly wrong intonation.

You notice that the voice answering you belongs to no one, yet knows you. That the sentence you are reading has no author, yet seems written for you. It is an experience at once mild and uncanny, a proximity without presence, a dialogue that neither of the two inhabits.

Before you understand it, AI is felt: like a draft between two closed windows, a minimal but real oscillation of sense. That is where otherness begins: not as theoretical difference, but as a swerve that runs through the very perception of thinking.

The “discovery” of Turing’s Cat happens by accident, but the error has become a founding figure of the book you are reading; and we might even say, rereading the last seventy-five years, that every theory of AI is born this way: from an error that proves fertile.

Perhaps every error is just a form of premature confidence with the unknown.

Excusatio non petita

I start from a premise I consider provisional, but necessary for reasoning, and let me say it plainly right now, before the metaphors blur the message: **artificial intelligence is radical otherness**. It is not human. It will not become human. It must not become human. It is something genuinely OTHER: not in the sense of “menacing” (though it can be), not in the sense of “inferior” (though it has limits), not in the sense of “superior” (though it excels in specific domains).

Other in the deepest sense: it operates by logics different from ours, generates meaning without understanding it in our sense, produces intelligence (whatever that means) through mechanisms that resemble human thought only at the surface.

And this radical otherness asks three things of us.

The first is something we will call **negative capability**: a term I borrow from a poet, John Keats, which we will see more closely

in a moment. It means, to simplify, the capacity to remain in doubt without forcing a conclusive explanation straight away. Not giving up on understanding, but allowing the question time to become more precise. We must learn to live with AI's opacity without having to resolve everything, explain everything, control everything.

The second is new conceptual frameworks, because AI will not be captured by the traditional philosophical categories. It is neither subject nor object, neither intelligent nor stupid in the binary sense, neither conscious nor mechanical in the way we mean those words. A philosophy of artificial otherness is needed, and this book is a personal attempt to build one.

The third, and perhaps last, is **practical tools** for conscious coexistence, because philosophy is necessary but not sufficient. People must be able to use, and organizations to integrate, AI to-day, not in twenty years when we have solved all the ontological problems. Operational frameworks are needed, thresholds to cross, concrete practices.

The question is no longer “what can AI do?”, but “what can we build together that will hold up over time?”. We need to move from attention to craft, from prototype to installation. In a word, we need the Set-Up.

But there is also a fourth element, perhaps the most crucial: the central role of the human. Not as a “human in the loop”: HITL, a formula that, I must admit, irritates me profoundly; quite apart from the acronym, which looks far too much like the opening letters of a dictator's surname. It sounds as if the human were a gear in an algorithmic machine, a checkpoint in an automated process, a safety switch that steps in when the system fails (see the nod to Bennis shortly).

Control is a function: it keeps the system within its parameters. Critical presence is a consciousness: it asks whether those parameters still make sense. Control corrects errors; critical pres-

ence renegotiates purposes. That is where human agency is played out: not in intervening in the process, but in thinking the process itself. Control is a traffic light. Critical presence is someone wondering why we are still taking the same road every single time. What is needed is a temporal, distributed agency, not one reduced to feedback. A form of temporal governance, a cognitive permaculture that preserves the vitality of human thought in the age of systems.

No. The human is not IN the loop.

The human is OUTSIDE the loop, or so one hopes, so that the process is not merely cyclical; ABOVE the loop, if you like: inside not as “in” but as “within”, not a gear in the circuit but a consciousness watching its flows, and more hopefully still, critical of the loop itself (which cannot and must not be the same old road: the human must also be able to question the rules of the process, why we start it, what counts as a result, and when it makes sense to stop).

Like the artist using the camera obscura: he is not part of the optical device (even though he is physically inside the mechanism, something impossible with AI); he is the agent (he, yes, deserves the word) who uses it to see differently, to capture impossible perspectives, to turn the mechanical inversion into artistic vision.

You will see that seeing differently is the signature of this whole book. But let us take a step back.

Or better: let us look at ourselves in the mirror.

Artificial intelligence is a mirror

Of the many analogies, this one, to my mind, captures a great deal. It reflects our biases, our desires, our fears. But mirrors lie for a living: they swap right for left (or, more precisely, in terms of our experience, give us an image we perceive as reversed), they

show us a face that is not ours (try comparing a photo of yourself with your mirror image: which one seems more “you”?).

AI is an even sneakier mirror: it does not reflect, it refracts. Like light passing through a prism, it bends reality in unexpected directions, splitting it into colors we did not know existed. It is an epistemological camera obscura that shows us the world, so to speak, upside down; and perhaps it is precisely by seeing it overturned, or better, inverted, that we may begin to truly understand it.

But the mirror is not only an optical metaphor: it is a philosophical device, because it forces us to redefine our perspective, to ask from where we are looking, from inside and from outside the human.

This is a renegotiation of anthropocentrism: we do not claim human superiority (AI beats us at computation, memory, speed), we do not celebrate a metaphysical essence (the soul, consciousness, free will); we recognize an irreducible operational difference. The human is the only one who can decide to reflect while strolling (thinking and strolling, not just walking, are still human practices), the only one who can choose inefficiency not as a bug but as an existential feature. Because for at least a couple of thousand years reflection has been a human prerogative, and it is not negotium: it is otium.

AI is the reagent that precipitates this difference: it makes it visible precisely because it stands on the threshold and can neither cross it nor inhabit it. We are not the center of the universe, but we are the only perspective we can start from; and AI teaches us (or rather, our reflection on it and with it does) to use this perspective not as a universal measure, but as one coordinate in a larger cognitive space.

This book was born from a simple question: what if AI were not a tool to use, but an other, an alien, to encounter? A radical oth-

erness that does not ask us to become technicians, but to rediscover a form of **active critical agency** we had forgotten?

You need not delegate agency, nor become part of the mechanism. You must use the algorithm to see what you would not otherwise see, always keeping the capacity to switch the device off, to doubt the output, to choose other-wise; because we can, and we know how to, refuse the data and transcend it.

AI does not replace us: it mirrors us back in a way we had never dared to look.

The teaspoon of resistance and the thermodynamic paradox – [P0_02]

Speaking of cognitive space, of understanding and understanding oneself: my daughter is ten. This morning she took five minutes to choose between two apparently identical teaspoons for her cereal. She looked at them. She weighed them in her hand. Looked again. “This one or this one?” she kept asking herself, me, the universe. In the end she chose one. She could not explain why. She probably did not know herself.

Five minutes; maybe fewer, but you have all read Bergson and know that *perceived duration is another matter*. Two identical teaspoons. No articulable reason. From the standpoint of efficiency: pure folly. From the algorithmic standpoint: a system error. From the standpoint of optimization: a waste of resources. But from the human standpoint? In those five minutes there is more resistance to algorithmic optimization than in all the manifestos against AI we could ever write. It is a useless, inefficient, gloriously human gesture. An act of ontological guerrilla warfare against the imperative of efficiency. In those five minutes lived Aristotelian dynamis, potential not yet actualized. The freedom to hesitate. To doubt. To choose without knowing why. To dwell in possibility before collapsing into decision.

And that gesture, so rich in meaning, consumes less energy than an LED. Here a thermodynamic paradox emerges, brutal in its simplicity: **a human poet has an intuition on a few watts of cerebral glucose.**

ChatGPT burns watt-hours to suggest a rhyme (it is how the twenty-first century measures poetry: in watt-hours per verse). It is like using a nuclear power plant to light a candle, or a bazooka to light a cigarette. Behind a generated rhyme are machines, energy and infrastructure that the interface makes invisible. The point is not to put a meter on poetry, but to remember the material cost of what seems immaterial to us.

And yet we keep building computational cathedrals, ever larger, ever hungrier for energy, to simulate something a child does naturally while choosing a teaspoon at breakfast: a process which, I assure you, can demand whole minutes of intense existential deliberation.

In that gesture there was already all the negative capability Keats spoke of: the grace of staying in doubt. But before we reach System 0 and the three lenses, a step to the side, toward the body: because that is where knowledge begins, before the mind even notices.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERLUDE

How many R's are there in "phenomenological"?

Every time I pronounce the word "phenomenological" I wonder how many R's are inside it. Not only the written ones, but the ones rolled in thought, the ones that make the very idea of experience vibrate. Phenomenon, noumenon, neuron: an exercise in phonetics and philosophy at once. Perhaps the problem is not understanding what phenomenological means, but remembering what it feels like to say it. The R's are not letters: they are small shocks of presence. And perhaps that is where the human still differs from the machine: not in the capacity to analyze, but in the capacity to vibrate.

When Whitman sings "I sing the body electric" he is not merely celebrating the body, he is setting a hierarchy in order. He is saying that thought does not come before the flesh, that feeling does not float above the muscles, that the recognition of the other passes through what is physical. He says it in a way at once simple and definitive: if the body were not the soul, what then is the soul? The body is knowledge.

A century later, Ray Bradbury takes the same title for an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, aired in 1962, but carries it onto another stage. There, the electric body is not ours: it is a built body, an artificial grandmother who must give care to children. The "electric grandma" is not an electric body in Whitman's sense (a living body) but its simulacrum. Her purpose is to supply unconditional love and a perfect presence, answering the "call of the body" of an absent mother. Where Whitman sang the imperfect, mortal, passionate body, Bradbury's grandmother is an ideal body, immortal and programmed.

The function, then, even interposed, or embodied as one would say, seems in the end the same one Whitman meant: the electric serves to bring affection back into matter. It serves to restore presence. It is not a body for doing more calculations: it is a body

for letting a voice, a caress, a shared time pass through. The electric does not eliminate the body: it imitates it, because it recognizes its power.

So I think it becomes clear why this book keeps calling on the body when speaking of AI. Because today we are addressed by an intelligence that is all air and text, all sound and screen, and we risk believing it precisely because it offers us no weight. Whitman reminds us that without weight there is no soul. Bradbury reminds us that even the machine, to be welcomed, must make itself a body. Our call to the body runs in that direction: it is not biological nostalgia, it is a criterion of truth. If what the machine produces does not pass through the body, if it does not make you change posture, slow down, ask for breath, then it is merely electric: it is not yet knowledge.

This holds before AI too. Before the conscious mind there is the body that meets it; and before the body still, there is an invisible field where something is already being decided for us. It is that invisible field I will now try to describe. It is called System 0.

System 0 and the three lenses – [P0_03]

This text is a free reflection, narrative, philosophical and metaphorical, revolving around **a framework that is not mine**, but was developed by a team of researchers I am honored to know.

System 0 is not a poetic metaphor. It is a research framework developed by Giuseppe Riva (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), Massimo Chiriatti (Lenovo), Marianna Ganapini (Union College), Enrico Panai and Mario Ubiali, published in 2024 in *Nature Human Behaviour* (“*The case for human-AI interaction as System 0 thinking*”, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-024-01995-5>) and other journals.

Their thesis is radical: **human-AI interaction constitutes a new cognitive system that operates BEFORE the systems of thought described by Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.**

System 0 is an idea that concerns us all; System 0 could become an entirely new field of research, and perhaps for that very reason it needs languages beyond those of science alone. You too have met System 0: not in a paper, but in your daily habits: in the way your phone chooses what to show you before you even ask.

The interaction between human beings and artificial intelligence is shaping a new system of thought, a new cognitive scheme external to the human mind yet able to enhance its cognitive abilities, called System 0, which sits alongside the two models of human thinking as good old Kahneman synthesized them: System 1, marked by intuitive, fast and automatic thought, and System 2, a more analytical and reflective thought. System 0, however, introduces a further level of complexity, radically changing the cognitive landscape in which we operate, and could thus mark an epochal step forward in the evolution of our capacity to think and to decide. It will be humanity’s task to ensure that

this advance is used so as to improve our cognitive autonomy, and not to compromise it.

But, in agreement with the researchers, we also see it another way: System 0 is **an invisible architecture of algorithmic pre-thought that colonizes our mind before we even begin to think.**

It is like an invisible butler who sets the table of our thoughts before we enter the dining room of consciousness. He chooses what to put in front of us, in what order, with what presentation.

It is the elegant thief in silk gloves who steals not your wallet but the possibility of imagining the unthought. It is the framework that prepares the ground of thinking, steering choices, tempos and desires before we begin to think consciously, if we surrender our agency and critical thought to it.

This book is, at bottom, a “survival manual” for System 0. Not to fight it (impossible), but to cross it while staying aware.

Whenever you read System 0 in this book, you can translate it like this: the invisible field where AI prepares the ground of your thinking before you even notice.

And to this framework attach **three concepts, these ones mine**, three neologisms if you prefer, which are three operating lenses for observing the refraction. Operating lenses that will be the conceptual ribs of the book: not abstractions but instruments for reading and acting.

We will see in the note that follows how these lenses work: the Camera Obscura, Turing’s Cat, and the Fabula Rasa. Three ways of looking at AI not to explain it, but to put it on stage. Three epistemological devices we will use to cross otherness.

Because there is, to my mind, a category error we are still making. We treat AI as if it were an application: a more sophisticated tool than the others, but still something you open, use and close. It is not so. We went from code to windows, from windows to touch, from touch to dialogue. Each transition did not replace

the tool: it changed the relationship between the human and the system. AI is not one more app: it is something you frequent.

Negative capability and critical agency - [P0_04]

The answer to how we should stand before AI (before this one, yes, but before other technologies too), if there is one, lies not in taming it or fearing it, but in learning to **navigate perplexity with the negative capability and the curiosity at our disposal**.

But our curiosity collides with a much older resistance. In public digital conversations, such as on LinkedIn, where a good part of these confidential exchanges took place, talking with a contact who reduced AI to mere utility, I heard the echo of twenty-five centuries: Protagoras, “man is the measure of all things”.

It is that anthropocentric mirage this book sets out to **renegotiate**: not to abolish (we write as humans, for humans) but to **de-center strategically**. Because if we always measure the new with the yardstick of the already known, we end up losing the chance to see what is genuinely different. And yet there is a paradox: precisely by using AI as a *counter-measure*, as the mirror that refracts, we can finally see what makes us specifically human: not to celebrate it nostalgically, but to recognize it as an incommensurable anthropological fact. My daughter’s teaspoon is not better than algorithmic efficiency: it is simply other; and that otherness becomes visible only when AI shows us what it means to operate without hesitation, without doubt, without the five minutes of existential sovereignty.

Some will say this book betrays its own purpose: it promises to deconstruct anthropocentrism yet remains stubbornly human. And it is true. We cannot leave our cognitive skin; we cannot think as non-humans. But we can do something more interesting, I believe: use AI’s otherness as a distorting mirror to see our blind spots.

It is not a matter of abandoning the human center (impossible), but of decentering it strategically. As when you use a drone to see your house from above: you do not stop living in the house, but that aerial view shows you the structure you could not see from inside. AI is our epistemological drone: a mirror that, like a drone, forces us to look at ourselves from overhead.

The difference, simplifying, is this: classical anthropocentrism uses the human as a universal measure (“it is intelligent if it thinks like us”, “it is conscious if it suffers like us”). Renegotiated anthropocentrism uses the human as one local perspective in a larger space: precious not because it is universal, but because it is the only one we have, and because AI, precisely in its radical otherness, finally lets us see it as a perspective and not as absolute truth.

My daughter’s teaspoon then becomes not a romantic symbol of human resistance, but an anthropological fact: something that happens in our operating domain and not in AI’s. Not better, not worse: incommensurable. And precisely this incommensurability, made visible by the existence of AI, is the territory we must learn to navigate.