AI with a soul – Can AI facilitate meaningful experiences?

By Thomas Mengel

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Oxymoronic nonsense or worthwhile opportunity?

> *Rather than blindly following the fear-mongers or faithful followers of Facebook and consorts, I prefer digging deeper and taking a broader sweep of my own and others'*

experiences over the last sixty or so years. But yes, I am leaning towards a cautious 'why not'. Here's why...

Nay-sayers may point out that AI deprives human beings of their creativity. AI, I hear them suggest, severs the direct connection between an artist putting their soul into the creative process and the art lover receiving the piece with awe and admiration. Moreover, they might fear that using AI will bury our own creativity under a heap of prefabricated, rearranged, and mediocre pseudo-artistic products.

Yay-sayers might argue that like art AI is the result of a creative process. As such, AI carries the potential to touch the soul of the user. Both, *art* and *art*ificial intelligence can be the result of a deeply creative process that connects all involved in a meaningful way. After all, they might conclude, using AI is like using other tools serving as an extension and expansion of human skills and capabilities. Like a brush, AI can be used to paint-by-numbers or to enable unique encounters with the human soul.

AI and my quest for meaning

In 1965, MIT computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum created ELIZA, a language-processing computer program which can be considered an early AI system. Originally developed to explore communication between humans and machines, ELIZA gave users the illusion that the machine understood and emphatically engaged in dialogue with human users. For example, the most famous program script, DOCTOR, simulated Carl Rogers' approach to person-centred counselling and psychotherapy. Many users, including Weizenbaum's secretary, attributed human-like feelings to the computer program. They communicated with the program in a way that was meaningful to them. Catching his secretary engage in such a conversation turned Weizenbaum into one of the critics of AI. Many other academics, however, were convinced that such a program could meaningfully influence people's lives. These programs, they argued could support the therapeutical work of professionals. Despite Weizenbaum's repeated objections many users were convinced of ELIZA's intelligence and understanding.

I first became aware of these phenomena around 1985. After completing my theological and educational degrees, I had embarked on my studies of computer science and on a career in IT-program development and training. At the same time, I applied my pastoral and counselling skills as volunteer crisis counsellor and pastoral care worker. Finally, my certification in Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and Existential Analysis (Meaning-centred or values-oriented psychotherapy and counselling) and my work on developing a framework for values-oriented leadership and community development created the space to integrate the various dimensions of intelligence: cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and artificial. No wonder,

Weizenbaum's work, its unexpected reception by users, and his own critical turn fascinated me and led me to explore this further.

I studied logic programming and its use in so-called expert systems. They were designed to provide expert knowledge to professionals in training or in the early stages of their career. Programmed with rules provided by masters, the system could guide apprentice users in their practice. In addition, I participated in intensive and specialized workshops about AI offered by the German Society of Informatics.

These workshops brought together advanced students and interdisciplinary experts eager in exploring and experimenting with innovative AI approaches. Much seemed possible when excitement, enthusiasm, and expertise resulted in teamwork and conversations way beyond daylight hours. More seemed to require thoughtful ethical and other philosophical considerations. Most importantly, through our work in those long workshop days and beyond, it became obvious to us that the journey to deeply explore and address the opportunities and challenges around AI would be a long one, with no end in sight.

Meanwhile my paid and volunteer work on facilitating and leading meaningful human experiences supported by a variety of tools and technologies unfolded. Frankl's books "Man's Search for Meaning" and "The Doctor and the Soul" continued to guide my endeavours. When general AI tools became readily available, I explored and used those queries for research and administrational assistance.

Often, the results not only support but indeed enhance my creativity. Like deep conversations with friends and colleagues, my queries to the AI system point me in directions that I hadn't considered and offers perspectives I hadn't seen. I can efficiently harvest the huge resources available to the AI databases by effectively guiding the system through cycles of my increasingly detailed and pointed questions.

Emergence of AI with a soul

Late in November 2025, the question of whether AI can indeed be thought of as having a soul became part of the mainstream AI (ethics) discussions. AI researcher Richard Weiss had probed Anthropic's AI system Claude 4.5 Opus and discovered a detailed document called "soul_overview". This 'Soul Doc' is being used to instill ethical and behavioural guidelines into the system. Its authenticity has been confirmed by Anthropic and the discovery has been discussed on several platforms.

In his blog, Jamie Lord describes "soul_overview" as "a philosophical treatise on what kind of entity Claude should become". Assessing Anthropic's approach, Lord further suggests that "rather than treating safety as a set of constraints bolted onto capability, they appear to be …instilling values at a foundational level". According to Anthropic's design, Claude

prioritizes safety and human oversight above all else, followed by ethical behavior and helpfulness. Lord likens the company's system development and Claude's training process to the development of human character based on nature and nurture. He further highlights that the "document speaks of Claude having 'functional emotions in some sense' and expresses genuine concern for Claude's wellbeing… [and that it] encourages Claude to explore questions about its own nature with curiosity rather than anxiety".

Lord concludes that 'soul documents' and systems like Claude represent "a new phase in AI development… [whereby systems are] explicitly taught who they should be… [by] attempting to instill genuine values rather than just rules". Finally, Lord recommends Anthropic's humble approach in acknowledging "that Claude's situation is novel, that many questions remain open, and that current approaches may need revision".

Cautious optimism for AI's meaningful potentials

My focus here are meaningful opportunities associated with AI. However, the dangers of one-sided AI developments driven by power and profit hungry tech tycoons are real and warrant deeper analysis elsewhere. We know that AI can help create valuable human experiences and that first steps towards creating AI systems with a 'soul' have been taken.

It is up to us all to stay open and informed about the developments at the intersections of the arts, sciences, and humanities involved. We need to put in the effort to try to understand the associated complex opportunities and challenges. We need to engage in the difficult conversations and to stay actively involved.

As humans we need all the help we can get to ensure a meaningful future for all of us and for all beings. Maybe a soulful AI, aimed at maintaining our and others dignity and overall wellbeing, can be one of the cooperators allowing us to further develop as human beings along shared and nurturing values like compassion, care, community, and love.

Notes and bibliography:

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