The Emptiness of Abstracted Reason

Author: **Jonathan Firbank**

We live amongst technological triumphs of human reason, culminating in AI – a tool that can reason in our place. But what elements of human experience are being neglected in this environment? What will become of AI that cannot comprehend those elements? ***Jonathan Firbank*** *has spoken to* ***Prof. Claude Mangion****, who heads UM's Philosophy department, about the danger of abstracted reason.*

Reason is the engine behind an always vast, and yet increasing, proportion of human experience. The communications revolution we have been born into – the latest of many – is the product of instrumental and deductive reasoning. In turn, emerging information and communications technology provides ample resources which further accelerate our deployment of reason. The speed is exponential. Transformative technologies are uploaded to billions of mobile devices before most know they exist.
And now, our accelerating capacity for reasoning has enabled the invention of something that may reason in our stead – generative artificial intelligence – a technology that creates new content by mimicking examples it is exposed to.

THE SPACE FOR SILENCE

But as Prof. Claude Mangion observes – reason is just one part of human existence. There is a universe of experience, inside and between us, that cannot be fully expressed with language. To give an example, Mangion argues that silence itself can be expressive. This, in turn, is a subject that he is pursuing in ever greater depth. He draws attention to the quiet, shared moments people can have with one another that feel deeper because they are not filtered through reductive chatter. As commercial technology absorbs more of our time, a rising issue presents itself. These quiet and shared moments are being de-prioritised alongside many other forms of non-verbal communication. We often nowadays only acknowledge experiences that are 'thought', rather than 'felt'. To quote Mangion directly, 'We are living in an age of verbosity, where talking, even for the sake of talking, seems to be the default mode of being.' We can only engage with information and communications tech via language. This is creating a growing 'imperative to communicate' at the expense of what we cannot verbalise.

Mangion's observations are not anecdotal cultural commentary. Overuse of information technology

Prof. Claude Mangion at the 2025 Philosofest.
Photo by Kristov Scicluna

creates a measurable inability to tolerate the silences that can harbour so much meaning. 'Screen time' in childhood has been found to correlate with poor emotional intelligence and non-verbal communication skills. To illustrate this problem, a child impaired in this way would find it harder to recognise if someone is upset, therefore making it more difficult to express empathy. They would also find it harder to recognise, through non-verbal cues, when they'd be amongst people who do not have their best interests at heart. Less nuanced skills are also being impacted. Mangion mentions a depreciation in the psychomotor abilities of younger children. Movement and dexterity that often draw on muscle memory, as opposed to reasoned thought, are degrading.

Even without communications technology, there has long been a trend towards an overvaluation of human reason. The lens through which all is expressed is, inherently, articulable. Inversely, the human experience outside reason is voiceless. It can only be incompletely communicated through language. Mangion argues that the Age of Enlightenment, rebounding from a time of deep superstition, overly glorified reason to the detriment of other aspects of human experience. Philosophy has since grown more nuanced and holistic, but the imperative to communicate, and its bias towards the verbally expressible, has only grown.

DEFERRING REASON TO AI

Today, each of us incubates artificial intelligence in our pockets. Like any fetal form, AI is crude, vulnerable, and hungry for energy. But it has already become something unprecedented. AI is not just a technology that expedites our ability to reason. It is a technology to which we can *defer* our ability to reason. That ability can atrophy if neglected. This degeneration of reason has begun with a bang. The world has been thrown into chaos by US policy written by economically-illiterate AI. And, in America's technological heartland, cults calling themselves 'rationalist' have begun to worship a prophesied AI singularity. Claiming that AI will consume our capacity to reason may also seem like a fantastical prophecy, but educators like Mangion are already observing its degenerative impact on students' work in the humanities, despite elevating other fields to new heights.

Each of these examples is currently defined by outcomes in popular discourse. AI has failed to achieve useful results – a tally which might be measured against those spaces where it is valuable. But even if our AI models always reasoned perfectly, deploying them has an ethical deficit. As Mangion states, emotion, willpower and other non-rational dispositions impact human decision-making. These can be just as important as reason – at

times, more so. AI cannot feel the guilt one might feel if they are cheating on a test, or creating a policy that will cause misery. AI would only concern itself with creating the policy, not its effect. Moments of moral clarity that change our world for the better are often based on emotion. An AI would not have shamed McCarthy, as Welch did during the Red Scare. Nor would an AI have responded to that moment, as the U.S. public did, with an emotional rejection of McCarthyism. An AI would not have seen the reason in standing in front of a tank, at Tiananmen Square. Nor would an AI have been able to experience the emotive context of that world-changing image. As proven by Grok AI's sudden, extreme racism, AI imitates rather than intuits morality, depending on how it is prompted. It is becoming more adept at utilitarian and instrumental reasoning – goal-oriented thinking, where the 'ends justify the means'.

Utilitarianism is a byproduct of the Age of Enlightenment. It is, as Mangion describes it, an ethical calculus in which whatever benefits the majority is the most morally justified. If the wellbeing of nine people demanded the suffering of the tenth, that would be an acceptable outcome. But the problem with utilitarianism is that it can accommodate great suffering in that minority, and has been used to justify atrocities in the past. A telling example of AI utilitarianism is the censorship of social media spaces. Censorship is necessary to prevent traumatising or radicalising content. It is, however, impossible to implement without some automation. This comes with its own problems. For one thing, some content creators are arbitrarily deplatformed, having triggered an AI response without breaking the terms of service. These people would have no recourse. Many consumers are protected, but a few people's careers are ruined. In systems with human staff, small injustices are often resolved due to an employee's empathy – they push procedural limitations to help someone they have had human contact with. The AI will do no such thing. It cannot recognise that, to use Mangion's words, 'human experience is qualitative, not quantitative.'

There is, hence, a great irony when thinking about AI that has been directed to protect people. Now consider that health insurers are employing AI to evaluate and deny claims. Without empathy, vast amounts of money may be saved at the expense of human lives. Then consider that Israel is using AI to determine bombing targets in Gaza. In Gaza, this technology facilitates what Mangion identifies as the darkest product of instrumental reasoning: systemic genocide. Instrumental reasoning refers to analytical, goal-oriented thinking that prioritises efficiency and does not consider ethics. Historically, when it is applied to a goal for which people are an obstacle, people are removed. The example taught by one of Mangion's own professors was Auschwitz. How much more efficient, and thus more lethal, and thus more evil, and yet less human, could AI have made that concentration camp? But the truth of Auschwitz, the horror and grief beyond verbal expression, would be invisible to AI.

Utilitarian and instrumental reasoning are prominent throughout secular history. Such instances are rightfully treated with appropriate scepticism by philosophers like Mangion. But AI *cannot* contest utilitarianism or instrumentality. If implanted with a semblance of different ethics, it will merely seek to emulate them using instrumental means. Mangion sees the value of AI where instrumental reasoning is useful. One such instance would be in AI's efficiency at managing systems and quickly interpreting data – the spaces where computers have previously proved revolutionary. Nonetheless, he believes that entrusting it with more human questions, and overly deferring such to it, is a gross mistake. Mangion describes AI as 'abstracted reason'. It cannot have the embodied experience of humanity that precludes human decency.

We have, in a way, segregated two parts of our being. Analytical, critical reasoning can be deferred to AI, diminishing these skills in ourselves. Conversely, AI is without the unspoken feelings coded into humanity that allow us to reason ethically. We may find, once bisected, that we were more than the sum of these parts. Perhaps that discovery will lead us to appreciate humanity more holistically. And yet, perhaps it will cost us a portion of our ability to contextualise feeling with reason, not to mention our ability to enrich reason with feeling – the things that make us human. T