
A Sociology of Machines?

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This draft is a note on Steve Woolgar's paper 'Why not a Sociology of Machines? The Case of Sociology and Artificial Intelligence' Sociology November 1985 vol. 19 no. 4 557-572. It was written soon after the Woolgar paper was published but was not developed for publication.

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The discussion of 'artificial intelligence' and its possible relationship to sociology is likely to become much more common in the near future and Steven Woolgar's paper, 'Why not a sociology of machines?', is clearly designed to provoke discussion on this point. The topic of 'artificial intelligence' is one of those which is likely to draw us into taking sides before we have bothered to seek much clarity about what we are taking sides on and why we are drawing up the battle lines as we do. Though we respond to Woolgar's provocation to take up the issue, we do so by taking a more reflective attitude to the issues, turning attention to the assumptions underlying the controversial issues, rather than addressing those directly. Particularly, we pay attention to the main problems which Woolgar's paper but which have, in our submission, little specifically to do with the question of artificial intelligence, and much more to do with the relationship of sociology to philosophy. Woolgar expects that sociology will settle some questions that philosophy has been unable to answer. He expects that sociology can settle some philosophical questions. It is this assumption which Woolgar shares with many sociologists, including those with whom he would otherwise have nothing in common. Woolgar thinks that sociology can play a role, through the topic of AI, in settling the question of the distinctiveness of the human mind. This is, we shall try to show, a distinctively philosophical question and not one to which, it seems to us, sociology brings any solution.

Let us be plain. We have plenty of doubts about 'artificial intelligence' and think that, at the very least, it is misleadingly named in a way which, no doubt, contributes to its institutional prosperity and prestige, but which also maximises the confusion of issues. Calling it 'artificial intelligence' suggests that it is about the study of 'intelligence' and, thereby, about that characteristic, the capacity for intelligent behaviour which is alleged to be distinctive of the human mind. Karl Marx had little compunction about calling an organisation with a tiny handful of members (and perhaps none of them workers) a Workingmen's International, having a keen eye to the advantages of giving a grandiose name to a small business. Contemporary academics show themselves no less perceptive than Marx of these advantages. A sceptic was, after all, recently moved to define artificial intelligence as that expression whose use gets funds out of the Department of Defence. AI is, now, big business, but it is, by and large, that business of designing, building and programming computers and computerising various (especially military) operations. This should not be presumed to have any connection with or to offer any direct advantage toward the understanding of the human mind.

Insofar as the suggestion is that AI will enable us to understand the nature of the human mind and to settle questions that philosophy has long had about these, then there is certainly one respect in which AI and sociology are alike. Their discussions are conducted largely in the 'hopeful tense', i.e. they are arguments about what they will be able to do and about the

implications that their being able to do this will have, when they are able to do it. Of course, the point of such arguments is often to bring forward the credit for those promised achievements, so that these disciplines can lay claim now to the import and position that possession of such implications would entitle them to. The actual achievements of AI and sociology, though we would not ourselves sneeze at them, are pretty small limited to the scale on which some people project the ambitions of these disciplines. We are of course substantially impressed by the achievements of those who build and programme computers, are appreciative of the mathematical, engineering and programming skills which are involved and quite willing to believe that work on computers may progress to an extent and level which would astonish us, but the impression which such achievements and possibilities make upon us is not such as to make us think that we need to revise our assumptions about the nature of human beings or about their distinctiveness from machines. We are, therefore, prepared to say that we do not see that AI has yet made any beginnings at the construction of a 'thinking machine' nor do we expect to see any progress being made in that direction. Of course, if we want to start calling computers 'thinking machines' we have no objection, so long as we recognise what we are doing in doing this. The expression 'thinking machine' in such a usage is like that of 'bowling machines'. Such machines are useful to cricketers in practice, shooting balls at them with the speed and trajectory that a fast bowler might deliver them, but the machine doesn't deliver the balls by bowling them in the way that the bowler does. Hence, our respect for those who can construct computers does not translate into an acceptance of claims made on behalf of artificial intelligence. The fact that computers can already do remarkable things and promise to do even more remarkable things in the near future, leaving us all guessing as to what they can manage in the long run does not speak for itself, does not tell us what lessons can be drawn - if any - from the character and development of computers. The issue with AI is not over the putative power of the machines, but of how that possibility is to be read.