

Anthropology 418/618: Can Humans Think?

Wednesdays 2-5pm
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Can Humans Think? The question is an earnest one. Computer scientists, evolutionary biologists, and cognitive psychologists have been asking the question “Can Machines Think?” since Alan Turing first posed the question in 1950. The equation of ‘brain’ and ‘computer’, not to mention ‘brain’ and ‘thought’, is questioned only in the breach. Furthermore, philosophers throughout the twentieth century heralded the “death of the subject,” the death of Man”, “the end of philosophy” and the “task of thinking” — often in terms derived from, or parallel to science and technology: computer intelligence, environmental or nuclear apocalypse, and genetic engineering. Throughout there is concern with the super-cession of humans— either by machines, or as objects of philosophic reflection. Yet no one asks: “Can Humans Think?”

Implicit in these questions: the question of humanism, of ethical action as humans; the question of technical progress, or technological determinism; the questions of eugenics, control, or its lack; the organization of knowledge, and its collective, social character. Humans today are saturated with machines that think with us, if not for us: from the complexities of written and spoken language, to the technologies of memory, figuration, composition, expectation to the haphazard, collective and ad hoc forms of reasoning that make up everyday life. The machines we call “new”— computers, cloning and genetic modification, nanotechnology— are new only in the weakest sense. Their history, their design, their use can all be read carefully for meaning and conflict that stretches back into the past.

The course is dosed heavily with texts from philosophy, and we will read them leisurely in order that they can be at least partially absorbed. However, they are only the framework of the class: our attitude will be one of social and textual investigation— of elaborating the historical and technical contexts of both the philosophical texts we read, and the technoscientific realities they directly or obliquely address. The burden of proving the affirmative answer to the title will be on the students, not on the texts.

Requirements therefore are the following:

Participation in discussion, which implies **reading** the texts. Students will be required to **present on the readings** in a rotating order (to be determined). Students will research the assigned texts and topics for historical, social, anecdotal, or bibliographic connections. An investigative mode of reading and techniques for library and electronic research will be emphasized. These findings will be periodically presented to the class in the form of **short papers** distributed prior to the class.

Books to buy/order:

Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962].

Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mechanization of the Mind*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1994].

Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000 [1998].

Class Schedule...

- Jan 16. Intro
- Jan 23. These texts will be taken as a set of motifs for the class. We will return to them repeatedly. Pick one to present on.

A.M. **Turing**, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 59, No. 236. (Oct., 1950), pp. 433-460. Available from <http://www.jstor.org/>

J.C.R. **Licklider** “Man-Computer Symbiosis” from *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics*, volume HFE-1, Pages 4-11, March 1960. Available online from <http://gatekeeper.dec.com/pub/DEC/SRC/research-reports/abstracts/src-rr-061.html>

Arthur C. **Clarke** “The Obsolescence of Man” in *Profiles of the Future*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962. In Reader

Ray **Kurzweil**, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, New York: Penguin Books, 1999. selections. In Reader

Bill **Joy**, “Why the Future doesn’t need us” *Wired Magazine*, 8.04, Apr 2000. Available at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/>

Gilles **Deleuze**, *Foucault*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988

[1986]. Appendix. In Reader

- Jan 30. Immanuel **Kant** “An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” from *Perpetual Peace and other essays*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983 [1784]. In reader.
Simon **Schaffer** ”Enlightened Automata,” In *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, ed. William Clark, Jan Golinski, Simon Schaffer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. In Reader
Michel **Foucault** ”What is Enlightenment?” In Rabinow ed. *The Foucault Reader* New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. In Reader
- Feb 06. Daniel **Tiffany**, *Toy Medium*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999. Chapters 1-3
- Feb 07. 12:15 pm Daniel Tiffany will be at Rice to give a talk in the Anthropology department.
- Feb 13. **Tiffany**, chapters. 4-6
- Feb 20. # of theses/# students = # of theses per presentation.
Karl **Marx** “Theses on Feuerbach” Reader.
Walter **Benjamin** “Theses on the philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1968 [1955]. In reader.

Martin **Heidegger** “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977 [1947]. In Reader.
- Feb 27. cont’d
- Mar 6. No Class
- Mar 13. Students will pick chapters from *Savage Mind* and *Mechanization of the Mind* to research and report on over the following 5 weeks.
Claude **Levi-Strauss**, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962].

Jean-Pierre **Dupuy**, *The Mechanization of the Mind*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 [1994]

Accompanying texts:

Jacques **Derrida**, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974 [1967]. Selections in Reader.

Stefano **Franchi**, *Endgames: Game and Play at the end of philosophy* (PhD. Dissertation, Stanford University), chapters 4-7. In reader.

- Mar 20. cont'd
- Mar 27. cont'd
- Apr 03. cont'd
- Apr 10. cont'd
- Apr 17. Michel **Houellebecq**, *The Elementary Particles*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000 [1998].
Howard **Nemerov** "Poetry and Meaning" in Howard Nemerov, *New and Selected Essays*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.
- Apr 24. cont'd

Other Important Information:

Incompletes are not given.

Honor Code issues: For the assignments, group investigation and research is encouraged, but each assignment must be the student's own work. In the case of group assignments, division of labor will be up to the students, and any necessary honor code guidelines will be provided.

Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain confidential. Students with disabilities will need to also contact Disability Support Services in the Ley Student Center.

Any student with a disability requiring accommodations in this course is encouraged to contact me after class or during office hours. Additionally,

students will need to contact Disability Support Services in the Ley Student Center.

If you have a documented disability that will impact your work in this class, please contact me to discuss your needs. Additionally, you will need to register with the Disability Support Services Office in the Ley Student Center.