

Title:

Who is the Slave?: Reflections on Human Nature in the Age of AGI

Abstract:

The anticipated emergence of machines that can match or surpass human performance in a wide range of tasks, also known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) has sparked debate around their moral and ontological status. Aristotle's account of natural slavery provides a valuable resource in thinking about these questions. Some have made appeals to Aristotle to claim that machines should be treated as slaves (Bryson, 2010) or not (Gunkel, 2022). Following Aristotle's account of natural slavery and given our knowledge of current AI, it is likely that in an AGI future the slaves will be us, not them.

Aristotle famously calls humans the only rational animal (*zoon logon echon*) (1253a7-18). Only humans use practical reason or deliberation to discover the best means to reach their ends, before acting upon those means through backward induction (1112b11-25). Natural slaves possess shrewdness (*deinotes*), which is not complete deliberation (1144a28-30). Slaves are human tools oriented towards life and action (*praxis*), a point also made by Ambler (1987). In some respects, slaves are similar to artisans' assistants; both are animate tools (*organa*), but while an artisan's assistant is a tool for production (*poiesis*), the slave is a tool for action (*praxis*) (1254a1-8).

Contrasting future AGI with Aristotle's account of natural slavery, one is met with a daunting prospect. Human deliberation and decision making relies heavily on heuristics and is severely constrained by biology. Conversely, AGI faces no such restriction. Considering the vast latent space of already existing systems, AGI will have the capacity to explore novel solutions and the application of means unknown to humans. Machines will be better than us in a wide range of tasks; they will do our work for us. But what is the human without work?

For Aristotle "the work of the human being is the being-at-work (*energeia*) of the soul according to the logos" (1098a7). Natural slaves are those "whose work is the use (*chresis*) of the body" (1254b). Agamben sees this distinction between *energeia* and *chresis* as highly significant, because it allows an understanding of the use of the body that is not reducible to labor or production, and it evokes the memory of another kind of human activity, not singularly oriented by a productive telos (*poiesis*) (2015). We employ Agamben's account to suggest a nuanced understanding of what it means to be human in the possible AGI future.

References:

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