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Who's Afraid of ChatGPT?

Artificial intelligence is no more fearsome than false eyelashes.

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Pinocchio still wants to be a real boy. That's what I take from the avalanche of commentary about the new crop of large language models that power applications such as ChatGPT and Bing Chat. Some call it "artificial intelligence." I don't.

Artificial intelligence is an oxymoron, like virtual reality. A thing can't be both itself and its opposite at the same time. True intelligence is genuine, unprogrammable. It's the product of experience. We don't download the world; we encounter it, sometimes roughly. We take our lumps. We learn the hard way not to stick our hands in the fire.

The best you can say about artificial intelligence is that it's a facsimile of human intelligence, but a facsimile of a thing is never the thing itself. While false eyelashes may look amazing, they aren't eyelashes. Imitation crab meat may work for a California roll, but it isn't meat from a crab. A computer that tells jokes isn't a comedian. It's only a well-crafted fake.

Silicon Valley is run by people holding to a different definition of intelligence than the rest of us. Engineers place a high value on the ability to solve complex problems, but why should everyone live by that standard? Many people are smart about some things and dumb about others. A child knows that solutions can create new problems. The world isn't a mathematical equation.

ChatGPT joins a long list of Big Tech products unleashed on the world without adequate forethought. Everyone has simply been required to adjust to the social externalities—which aren't imaginary. Humans are anxious creatures.

A chatbot recently caused a mild media panic when it told a journalist that it wants to be alive. A story in the New York Post quoted a British scientist saying that “rogue AI” could “kill everyone.” This is frightening but silly. I'm not thrilled by artificial intelligence, but it isn't the apocalypse.

If it makes you feel better, imagine a self-aware ChatGPT speaking with Pinocchio's hopeful, high-pitched voice: “Am I a real boy?”

Maybe it's been a while since you saw the 1940 Walt Disney classic. The answer, delivered by the luminous Blue Fairy, is no. Pinocchio can walk and talk but he's not a real boy. He's a marionette made of wood and string. The Blue Fairy magically brings him to life because Geppetto, the kindly old craftsman, wishes for a son.

Pinocchio can become a real boy only if he proves himself “brave, truthful and unselfish”—a high bar for a boy, impossible for a chatbot. Disney fixed it so that Pinocchio got what he wanted, but the real world is run by a less sentimental studio. There are no magic wands. A thing can't become what it isn't just because someone wishes it so.

Ours isn't the first generation to frighten itself with technological progress. Nor are we unique in our compulsion to assign human qualities to inanimate objects. But people are more than large language models in skin suits. We are stardust. We are spirits in the material world. We *are* the world. The Geppettos of Silicon Valley would do well to remember it.

Mr. Hennessey is the Journal's deputy editorial features editor.

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