An answer to David Runciman
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It is a great pleasure to have you in Paris, David, well, in Paris so to speak, since we are dependent on technical means to discuss your paper on “Artificial agency versus artificial intelligence”. The present conditions of our exchange might not be, by the way, entirely unrelated to the topic of your paper – how our present political condition allows, or not, for a relevant use of artificial intelligence –, but that is something that might come up at some point in the general discussion, after the few remarks I am going to formulate as a way of introduction.

1. The nature of the problem: the Priority thesis

The problem you are dealing with is not so much a problem about artificial intelligence per se – what is it all about? How does an algorithm function? Are we going to be subjugated by the intelligent robots and calculators we devised? –, but a problem about the political dimension, if any, of the technics we have gathered under this fancy expression of “artificial Intelligence”, or, if we want to make it shorter, AI. How should we consider those technics now present in our daily lives as far as our political associations are concerned? Do we have to fear a new kind of intelligence that would in the end reduce our human intelligence to very little? When the best check player of all times loses against a program, is it the end of the supremacy of human intelligence?

To approach this problem properly you suggest that we make a philosophical move away from the current formulation of the question: we should stop focusing on the distinction between artificial intelligence and natural intelligence, and focus instead on the distinction between artificial intelligence and what you call “artificial agency”, or AA. The difficulty, according to you, does not lie with intelligence, but with what you call in English, “agency”, which is a notion not so easy to translate in other languages, and in particular in French. To put it in simple terms, in the political perspective which is yours, the matter is not so much to understand what we’ll do when more and more sophisticated calculators have developed around us – it is already the case, and we are not faring too badly –, but what we can do with corporations and states who are often using those calculators in order to develop policies of their own. The AA, or “artificial agents” you are concerned with are indeed nothing really new: they are modern inventions, there are the states, which we have now known for more than 5 centuries, and the corporations, so central to economic life in a capitalist system; those corporations, or corporate enterprises, are all the less new that they have borrowed their structures to medieval canon law. To sum it up, your question is not so much about AI; it is a question about what should concern us more between “artificial intelligence” and what you call “artificial agency”. Is it to understand how super-calculators work, or is it to know what can be done to limit the powers those calculators give to super-agents such as states and corporations? Your answer is to say that the priority lies in dealing with super-agents, and not with super-calculators, since super-calculators are not agents by themselves, and always depend on agents that can be either very intelligent, or relatively stupid. But when we speak here of intelligence we are of course speaking of political intelligence, and not of mathematical or digital skills.
Once we have understood the nature of the problem, which is to establish an order of priority between two questions, it becomes easier to get why your main argument is not based on the technicalities of artificial intelligence, but on history of political thought. After reading the title one might be surprised, when reading the paper itself, that there is so much intellectual history, and so little mathematics and digital considerations in it. Though, the surprise vanishes when this person realizes that what matters is not to explain what AI is about, but to explain what makes AI a political concern, and that that concern has little to do with supercalculators. What matters is Artificial Agency, not artificial intelligence. And when you want to understand what Artificial Agency is you need to go back in history, and you need to discuss the origin of the invention of this notion of Artificial Agency.

Before following you in this genealogy of Artificial Agency, one remark is to the point, to try and dispel an objection. If you say that we need history to understand Artificial Agency, why is it that you are not using terms that were used when the notion was invented? The truth is that you don’t find the notion “artificial agency” in the late 16th, early 17th-century, but you find other notions, such as “corporation”, “state”, “persons” in the juridical sense of the word, etc. I understand that the use of an anachronistic expression, artificial agency, is there to bridge a gap between the early modern period and our present philosophical parlance. Therefore, your second thesis is a lexical one – the first is what I would call the Priority thesis – is to say that the various notions used to describe early corporations and states can be caught up by this notion of “artificial agency”. Corporations and states are “agents” since they are capable of doing things and of being responsible for the consequences of theirs actions; they have two main characteristics: they can make decisions about things to be done by human beings, and they are “artificial” agents, since they are composed of human individuals who are not behaving on their individual wills and decisions, but according to specific rules decided in the name of corporations and states.

2. Two families of Hobbesian commentators, and Artificial agency

The structure of your paper is the following: in the first part, as we have just seen, you describe the nature of the Priority problem; in the second part you introduce a discussion in history of political thought in order to show that you are not the first to identify the importance of artificial agency in the reading of Hobbes; and in the last part you explain why we have to be more concerned, politically, by big corporations and states using AI, than by AI as such. The problem, you say in your conclusion, is not the algorithm used by Facebook, but the political choices made by Mark Zuckerberg and his likes.

Unsurprisingly, according to the matter at hands, the central figure of your genealogy of artificial agency is Thomas Hobbes’s theory of the state. Indeed, the old gentleman of Malmesbury has described for the first time – and represented on the frontispiece of his Leviathan – a commonwealth under the guise of an artificial person, with a head, a heart, arms and legs, with proportions out of the ordinary, but still a recognizable person, in charge of protecting the natural human beings that we can see in the drawing of Abraham Bosse. Before being a monster, Leviathan is indeed an “artificial agent” who/that acts on the international scene, makes war and peace, and develops public policies in our names. To make it short, I would just say that your putting together of corporations and states is all the more relevant that Hobbes is known for having applied for the first time the juridical notion of “corporation” to the idea of the state. But Hobbes is not the focus of your analysis in the second part of the paper, you have written elsewhere a very convincing paper on Hobbesian
theory of representation and democracy\(^1\). What matters in the pages we are discussing today is that you spot out two families of commentators of Hobbes: there are those who see in him the ancestor of Artificial Intelligence, and those who read him as the ancestor of Artificial agency. Your general thesis, the Priority thesis, that AA is more important than AI for political thought, makes it easier to guess whom among those commentators you’ll be siding with: those who read Hobbes as the father of modern calculators have a few arguments but those arguments are mostly metaphors based on the idea that “natural” reason is not really natural since it is based on names. That Hobbes be a nominalist in logics is not a discovery, it is certainly true but probably not sufficient to trace a direct line between him and Alan Turing. So, those who come forward in your analysis are members of the other family of commentators, those who perceive that Hobbes has devised a new form of agency, which you call artificial agency.

There would be many things to say about your reading of Arendt’s *The Human condition* (we know it in French as *La condition de l’homme moderne*), but I would rather let those remarks for the general discussion, and make three remarks on Oakeshott, with a link to Arend.

What I would like to say now, in the first place, is that I was very much interested in your putting Hannah Arendt and Michael Oakeshott together in your analysis of “artificial agency”, tracing a line from 1920s Heidegger to Arendt, and a line from Arendt’s theory of “action” to Oakeshott’s conception of the “human conduct”. When Oakeshott’s book, *On Human Conduct*, was translated into French, in 1995, twenty years after its initial publication in English in a series called “Leviathan”, the author of the preface did not even mention Arendt or Heidegger. The truth is that Oakeshott has not in France the well-established reputation that Arendt has conquered here over the years: political scientists know and use his article “On Being Conservative”, but not much else is read, as it should be.

In the second place, you help us understand what “conduct” means for Oakeshott: quite the opposite of “behavior”, not a mechanistic succession of gestures but the free expression of the self in the public space – the expression “self-disclosure” has an obvious Heideggerian ring to it, and your quote on page 12 is quite explicit on the connection with Arendt’s theory of action: “[T]he agent discloses and enacts himself in performances, whose hoped- and wished-for outcomes are performances of other agents or other performances of himself: satisfactions not only pursued in actions and pursued by actions but wholly composed of actions”’. Arendt has very similar passages in *The Human Condition* when she distinguishes ‘action’ from ‘work’ and ‘labor’. This dimension of action, “doing as itself an exhibition of intelligence”, or, in Hobbesian terms, as you put it, “willing under conditions of reason” (p. 12), helps us understand that human action is neither a natural behavior nor an artificial conduct. It has to do with history as a place of disclosure, or with a theory of what an event is. The compliments of Oakeshott to Arendt on the publication of the English version of *Between Past and Future* (In French, surprisingly, *La crise de la culture*), is a confirmation of what you say on their proximity.

But, and that is a third remark, Oakeshott connects his Arendtian interpretation of ‘action’ to his well-known reading of Hobbes, clearly presented in his 1946 introduction to *Leviathan*, and a key to Oakeshott’s political philosophy. Let’s make it short: there are two ways, for Oakeshott, to characterize our political life, one as members of a *societas*, that is an association between free agents, one as a *universitas*, that is as an enterprise of sorts. In the

first case, politics is about helping citizens to act as free agents; in the second case, politics is about using citizens in order to achieve the goals of the political enterprise, whatever this goal may be – building pyramids, making as much money as possible for redistribution, or, as it seems to be the case today, to produce ‘jobs’, or, to put it otherwise, obtain as high as possible an ‘employment rate’ (p. 9). This distinction plays a central role in On the Human Conduct, and it is one of the strong points of the book to help us understand that a state should be conceived on the model of the ‘free association’, not on the pattern of the ‘corporate enterprise’ aiming to achieve particular goals – most of the time in a capitalist economy ‘profit’.

Things seem to be clear: Oakeshott’s Hobbes is on the side of ‘free association’, opposed to Bacon’s project to turn politics into entrepreneurship, the big Leviathan has been established to unable citizens to act as free agents. The artificial condition of politics is there to permit free action of citizens, and the existence of a public sphere in which human action can be seen, and produce its long-lasting consequences. Here Hamlet would say: “Hey, there’s the rub”. Current Hobbesian theory seems to say the exact contrary: the state is a corporation, and if the state is a corporation, it is not a ‘free association’. Hobbes seems ready to write: France incorporated, England Inc. Two corporations producing various goods to be circulated around, and more or less ‘jobs’. David helps us resolve this apparent contradiction in Oakeshott’s reading of Hobbes: peace might be considered as the goal of the state, which would make his corporate nature compatible with ‘free association’.

3. Is there only one form of Artificial Agency?

If we accept this ‘coherentist’ reading of Oakeshott there is one last point that I would like to put forward before the general discussion: Oakeshott’s and Arendt’s positions are quite similar as far as ‘artificial agency’ is concerned: the state is not, properly speaking, an ‘artificial agent’, since it is not really an agent. I quote David (p. 13): the “Hobbesian state is artificial in the sense that it provides the non-natural space for human agency, just as a well-made constitution in Arendt’s terms creates the non-natural room for action. Humans are builders of the conditions of their own agency. They do not build artificial versions of that same agency” (p. 13). If I read you well, my impression is that in the end you agree with this version of artificiality in politics that is defended here by Oakeshott and Arendt. There are artificial conditions to our action as free persons, those conditions allow for our producing not just jobs but also history, but those artificial conditions cannot be considered as ‘artificial agents’ proper; their artifice is entirely subordinated to allowing human individuals to act in free associations. But I have a doubt on this interpretation, that is also a doubt on what should be considered as ‘artificial agency’ proper, and whether there is only one, or two forms of AA in your paper.

One version of ‘artificial agency’ would be illustrated by the agency of corporations: the aim is set, and acting signifies gathering the means of attaining this aim. It is artificial as an Amazon-style organization is artificial: every job in the company is connected to the fastest delivery of any goods available on the market. That is what may be called ‘corporate artificial agency’. Another version of ‘artificial agency’ would be ‘Hobbesian states artificial agency’: “Human agents reveal themselves through their actions; so do states” (you say on p. 13), with the logical conclusion that “[s]tates, like other kinds of persons, have a history but no nature” (Ibid.).

In the beginning of your paper you seem to put corporations and states in the same category, whereas in the concluding part of it you tend to distinguish them as two forms of ‘artificial
agency’; you also add one more idea in the conclusion, that is, that if Oakeshott’s Hobbes is right, and the states are artificial conditions for our free action in a free public space, they must try and control those other forms of ‘artificial agency’ to be found in ‘corporations’. The latest decisions of G7 seem to give a confirmation of this analysis.

There remains a question as to your Priority thesis, which is, by the way, a normative thesis: when you say that AA is the real political problem, not AI, do you also say that this first thesis implies another thesis, that is, that there are two quite opposed understanding of what artificial agency means. When the notion is applied to a Hobbesian-Oakeshottian state, it seems to have a history of its own, since there have been various ways of endowing us with security and freedom; when the notion is applied to corporations, there seem to be no history in this case, but machine-like organizations that can go only one way. If this reading of your paper is correct, then, would you say that the real question is not the priority of AA over AI, but of the priority of State-AA over Corporation-AA?

I have another question, if we have time for it, that could maybe help make sense of the previous distinction I have suggested: how do you conceive of the distinction between ‘practice’ and ‘person’ which you make on page 11. It is Oakeshott, maybe influenced by Wittgenstein this time, who introduces the notion of ‘practice’ to explain his interpretation of *Leviathan* as a non-corporate artificial agent. But you rightfully reply to him that “[t]he covenant in *Leviathan* is not described as building a ‘practice’, it builds an artificial person” (p. 11). What difference then does it make to introduce practice instead of person when considering the priority of state-AA over corporation-AA?