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Seeking Out Camille, and Being Open to Others

Robin K. Hill on overcoming biases against alternative views, and Carlos Baquero on his search for the elusive Camille Noûs.

Robin K. Hill
Safe Space for Alt-Views
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September 27, 2021

Some of us are skeptical that recommender systems can detect their own biases and overcome them. Some of us are skeptical that either generative grammars or phrase substitution systems will ever speak any natural language fluently. Both claims challenge techno-optimism by asking why computers can't do what we do. But those challenges are not the subject of argument here. The subject is the alternative space available to such skeptics.

Claims of the power of artificial intelligence, or the success of language translation, or of the inevitable emergence of machine consciousness or volition are the premises driving much artificial general intelligence (AGI) research. Some weaknesses of those premises stand out pretty well: A program can't overcome bias unless it's programmed to look for bias in a particular attribute; a computer cannot power up itself and cannot process an interruption unless it is already checking for it. When someone (myself, for instance) raises these mundane objections, the reactions from AI boosters are often directed not against the objections per se, but rather against some form of anti-intellectualism. Skeptics are seen as propounding a religious, mystical, or magical stance. No. Far from it.

The space of alternative views is vast, not simply mud puddles where notions of soul and spirit taint the discipline of logic, but strong currents flowing every which way. Can't we allow, invite, and cultivate other paradigms, without putting up obstacles of dogma? Recall non-numeric reasoning, such as the geometric proof that an angle can be bisected with a straightedge and compass. Those methods, which do not depend on symbolic logic, preceded our systems of arithmetic and algebra, but their standing has eroded.[2] Of course, earnest attempts to transcend logic, math, and other rigorous systems encounter many pitfalls. Gödel's proofs, forced into awkward, debased, or metaphorical applications to philosophical questions, have been abused by many.[1]

To be clear, in protecting alternative views, we do not seek a particular theory, such as the Penrose-Hameroff theory of Orchestrated Objective Reduction.[3] The well-developed and quite particular theories of prominent philosophers of mind have spun off into the weeds, if it's fair to apply that figure of speech to the level of detail reflected in the discussion among, say, Jerry Fodor and his critics.[4] We want a place to refresh, a refuge for explanations of human cognitive phenomena that are novel or familiar, commonsensical or radical. Refuge from what? The Turing-computable? The digital? The discrete? The formalizable? Hard to say; hence, we avoid particularities.

All of this is meant not to close off lines of inquiry, but to illuminate the many that are open. (1) There may be an alternative other than magic. (2) There may be no alternative other than magic. (3) The alternative we now call "magic" may turn out to be something rigorous and respectable in forms that we cannot yet conceive. Or even (4) No alternative is needed; the current paradigm will work when it matures. Techno-optimism may be correct. It could turn out that there *is* a way to augment Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence, or data science, or deep learning, or the neural model, so that computers can do what we do. That way may be chem-

istry, or it may be quantum physics, or it may be geometry. That way may favor one of the weedy theories of philosophy of mind. Or both standard and alternative views (and more?) could play their parts in some harmonious whole. All welcome! We wish only to forestall the reaction of the Pythagoreans to the prospect of irrational numbers; that is, condemning the idea and its proponents. Let's react as did later mathematicians: they accepted the existence of numbers that could not be expressed as rationals, and dubbed them, in a stroke of brilliant unorginality, "irrational numbers."

That suggests that the alternative space could be circumscribed by giving it a name... *ubereason* (pompous), *extracomp* (unattractive). Or words from Latin such as "humilis," lowly, humble, literally "on the ground," from humus "earth," from Proto-Indo-European root *dhghem- "earth", which is also the root of "human." Or "crete," as opposed to "discrete," that is, solid as opposed to divisible. Well... this is good fun, but none of these notions are compelling. Either we are not as brilliantly prosaic as the post-Pythagoreans, or the naming exercise is premature because we cannot articulate the circumscription of "alternative" until we answer, "alternative to what?" But the very idea, the very possibility, the very question, points toward a safe space for alternatives.

The trend in computing is to subsume the humanistic in the technical. The focus and confidence of Tech sheds a glow of affirmation, which casts outer levels of interpretation into shadow. But those of us who believe in the power of AGI to triumph and make the world a better place need not treat those of us who question that belief as eccentrics. It is an inquiry, not a heresy. Let's get ready, when the time comes, to name the alternative space, declare victory, and move on.

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Carlos Baquero
We Are Camille

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It was a Friday afternoon and I was reading a distributed systems paper. The subject was very close to my field of research and had three authors. The first two were affiliated to a known French institution, but the third had one I have never seen before: *Laboratoire Cogitamus, France*.[5] The name was slightly odd since it is a Latin word that means We Think (*Cogitamus ergo sumus* is the plural of the *cogito ergo sum* quote from René Descartes, "I think, therefore I am").

Not too worried with the etymology of the affiliation, it was just an odd impression at the time, I decided to search for the third and last author on Google Scholar to see which other papers he or she had. (I know, I should have been reading the paper before wasting time with Googling the authors.) The scholar profile of Camille Noûs[11] shows papers since 2019, about 200 citations and an h-index of 6. More striking is that Camille, in less than two years of activity, now counts more than half a thousand papers with a wide breadth of subjects that is more typical of a renaissance author. The explanation to this inhuman productivity is quite simple: Camille Noûs does not exist, at least as a human.

Actually, Camille Noûs has existed as an idea since March 2020.[6] It was created by a French research advocacy group, RogueESR.[10] The idea is that Camille symbolizes the anonymous researcher that did not make it into the author list, but influenced and enabled the research. It could had been that five-minute talk on a coffee break that sparked an idea, or the technician that made sure the gene-sequencing machine kept working at night and the email arrived on time. The name itself, Camille, is gender-neutral, and Noûs ("we") can be seen as us, the collective. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, but until mid-2020 the giant did not have a name; maybe now it has a proper one.

Another apparent objective of the initiative is to show the fragility of evaluating author merit and production merely as a function of a few numeric metrics. It also exposes the danger of elevating individual production at the cost of collaboration. These are not fringe concerns, the DORA declaration[8] provides several guidelines to improve research evaluation and to recenter on the scientific merits of each work, and not rely exclusively on bibliometrics.

Adding Camille as an author is not without consequences; papers have been withdrawn from journals,[7] and it would be hard to argue in what capacity did a non-existing person contribute to a specific article (like this one, as a matter of fact). What can be a funny statement from a tenured professor can be a strange CV item to explain when applying for a position.

However, once an idea is created and spreads collectively, it becomes hard to stop. It is very likely that Camille Noûs will continue publishing prolifically. Paul Erdos[9] published around 1,500 papers during his lifetime. He was a generous collaborator who often visited other scientists to pick their brains with new problems and conjectures. Nowadays, scientists pay homage to Erdos by calculating the size of their authorship path to him; the closer, the better.

As Camille keeps publishing, the number of papers will not take long to pass 1,500, and the Camille collaboration graph will keep increasing and getting more tightly connected. Maybe one day the Noûs number will tell each author how close they are to the collective effort of everyone else.

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