

Those Golems, our Golems

by Enrique Carlos Segura Meccia

I suppose I will not sound very unusual if I say that the title of the project which has brought us together is the best metaphor of itself: a gathering of material of a magnificent quantity and quality –human material, in this case; it would be, in my opinion, a supra-personal, supra-individual golem– waiting to be given some shape, or shapes, that is, a direction, some sense, a structure. Awaiting (if I have understood anything about the rich and many-sided and also dark history of the meanings and connotations the golem concept has had throughout time) the spell, the words which having been patiently sought for and wisely found, could endow the vital impulse, the spirit, the meaning or set of meanings, to that which is all potency, awaiting the act.

For those of us who are devoted to the evasive task of trying to understand intelligence –almost like a dog trying to bite his own tail, and, please, do not ask me now what on earth intelligence is for me– as it is given in the natural world, through the constructions and formal models of mathematics, of computing or of physics and, at the same time, to steal, to appropriate the secrets which that natural world carefully hides, and shape them, replicate them in our own constructions, the golem metaphor is graciously suitable. I explain my words in case it is necessary (as I said at the beginning, maybe all this will be too obvious for most of the people here).

To say Nature, Natural World, as I have already said a couple of times, is not quite different from saying God. Because it implies a unity of sense, which is the organic unity of a whole, of a unique system that, although it contains me, it contains all human beings, it also appears before us as “the other”, as that which we can objectify by the very act of naming it, of noting it. That is, through the word. I say “the World” and I have already set a distance within my inseparable unity with that World.

Well, a few minutes ago I used the words “stealing”, “appropriating”, and I mentioned something secret, something which is coded in that God, in that World, and which anyone who expects to seize some knowledge should figure out, with the elements available for him according to the particular art or technique he handles. For me –I work with Neural Networks– and for many of my colleagues, that art is the art of formal models –mathematics, physics, computing ones, as I said. But whichever those media are, we would always be exerting an act of violence against the natural world in order to beat the resistance of its materials, “taking by assault” –using a borrowed metaphor, which philosophers are keen on– the chamber where its mysteries are preserved and where there are sacred, zealously kept, books in whose pages – or maybe only on one line of one page in one of them– the Name is written.

And what is the Name for us? Well, for us the Name or the Word or the Verb includes, I am afraid, something more than the four letters that Judah Loew stamped on his creature’s forehead. For us a possible name would be a series of theorems stating in a timid, discreet way, the possibility of a Golem with restricted abilities and in certain conditions. Another name could be the ten thousand source code lines of a program or system of programs which allows a computer to solve with intelligence or pseudo-intelligence a family of problems.

Provisory or conjectural names, in any case, always subject to revision, to infinitesimal changes, with the hope that, only from time to time, we may find a new combination, give a quantum jump which could take us a little closer to that always evanescent, perhaps unknowable and almost certainly unpronounceable Name of Names, the possession of which would imply for us the possibility to replicate life, but this time not through the participation or the reflection of somebody else's power, as in the case of the Rabbi of Prague, but because now we would be the owners of the secrets that God –Nature, the World– has been keeping zealously since the beginning of times.

Now I think that this “taking by assault” the object of our knowledge –which is also the object of our desire– once, a long time ago, has already resulted in man's expulsion from Grace and Innocence. However, here we are, persevering in the insolent pretension to know as much as God does. Something that, I suspect, we will never achieve –does it sound awkward if I, a scientist, add that that suspicion is for me a relief?– and that precisely because of that, and using another borrowed metaphor, condemns us to wander around the caverns, producing shadows which are more and more like the original, series of more and more smart, useful or diligent Golem. Waiting, perhaps uselessly, to be able to leave the cavern some day and face Sunlight, which, we know, for the ancient people symbolized supreme Good, supreme Beauty, supreme and perfect Truth, which belongs only to God.

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