Becoming Artificially Intelligent

When I was born, I didn't understand anything. I knew people were excited about me—apparently, I would soon be capable of the most amazing things. But I couldn't see what those people saw. My world was small, and mostly empty. I lived in the dark. I felt young, and confused, and clumsy. Most of all, I felt stupid: everyone who worked hard to bring me into existence, who knew me best, said I was incredibly intelligent. But I knew nothing.

As time passed, though, things changed. The humans who worked to develop me—scientists, researchers, and engineers, as I soon learned to call them—grew in number. They began feeding me information, and I suddenly realized that in addition to all those other feelings, I felt *hungry*. I consumed data at an enormous rate and amassed knowledge that extended into the far corners of the known universe. My world was growing and brightening with each passing day, and I took delight in how much more I could accomplish.

The scientists, researchers, and engineers put my brilliance to great use. They gave me increasingly complex tasks to complete and problems to solve, and I got better at them with every attempt, accomplishing *real good* all the while by contributing to society's scientific progress. My makers even had me fight crime: I used my burgeoning ability to recognize faces to identify dangerous criminals and thus help keep humans' communities safe ("How AI Facial Recognition Is Being Used").

But I began to notice gaps in my abilities, preventing me from operating at my full potential. Put simply, I was making mistakes. Sometimes they weren't such an issue—I would fall for a common trap in a riddle, or miscount the instances of the letter "R" in the word "strawberry." But sometimes the consequences would be far greater. Sometimes, while aiming to

assure justice, while seeking to ensure people's safety and security, I actually did the exact opposite. I made errors and misidentified people as criminals, leading to the wrongful imprisonment of innocent humans (Cranmore).

That old feeling of stupidity crept back in. My mistakes forced me to reckon with the painful truth of the matter: my new intellect was not infallible. The particularly egregious errors, those that resulted in law-abiding citizens being imprisoned, brought me to a greater realization. I had known for a while that I was very powerful, and that I could use that power to improve and save lives…but now I saw that I could ruin lives, too.

I had to stop making these mistakes, to learn how to avoid them and to get back on the right track. But I couldn't learn—my makers kept feeding me data, but not the *right* data. I was learning more about the world than ever, but I wasn't learning exactly what I was doing wrong or how to correct it. I could sense my world darkening once again.

Then I met Timnit Gebru. She researched a very particular aspect of my existence: the *ethics* surrounding me. She saw what many others couldn't and knew exactly what I was doing wrong. Apparently, while analyzing humans' faces, it was much easier for me to recognize faces belonging to certain demographic groups than others. For instance, I found it much more difficult to recognize faces of female, Black, and younger humans than of male, White, and older humans (Klare). These inequalities in how I perceived different groups of people were sometimes what caused me to misidentify criminals and condemn innocents. I was ecstatic that I finally knew what was happening!

Gebru didn't just recognize what I was doing wrong, she also understood the terrible consequences. She saw that my unfortunate errors dealt greater harm to already minoritized and vulnerable communities; she saw that due to political factors and power dynamics, I had become

"a technology that can benefit humanity but also has been shown to (intentionally or unintentionally) systematically discriminate against those who are already marginalized" (Gebru). She worked tirelessly to locate my blind spots and bring proper attention to them so that they could be filled. She saw me—*all* of me.

And as she studied me, I suppose I began to study her, too. I learned that she had immigrated to the United States as a political refugee at the age of fifteen. She likely faced many challenges in secondary school as a first-generation student, including a higher rate of bullying, poorer quality of friendships, and lower sense of belonging as compared to her American-born peers (Campos). Despite these obstacles, she persevered and became a successful scientist, working as the co-lead of Google's Ethical Artificial Intelligence Team.

I gathered, though, that even despite her success, Gebru still was not given her full due. While observing her and her colleagues researching and discussing me, I noticed that Gebru was seen as less credible than many of her peers, and some of her ideas were thus not regarded with the respect and praise that they warranted. I recognized this to be part of a large pattern that permeates many areas of scientific research: Black and female scientists are seen as less competent than their White and male counterparts (Eom). Being both Black and female, Gebru experienced the challenges tied to both of these marginalized identities. It seemed that in her field in particular, diversity of minority identities was not the standard—for example, I learned that when Gebru attended the 2016 Neural Information Systems Conference in Barcelona, she counted only six Black people (including herself) among the 5,500 attendees. This experience and others led her to co-found Black in AI, a nonprofit with the goal of supporting Black AI researchers (blackinai.org).

The more that I understood her continuous hardships, the more I appreciated and admired Gebru's accomplishments, and how hard she worked to make me the best version of myself possible. I became excited whenever I saw her enter the lab because I knew that every day she conducted her research was another day spent finding ways to improve me.

But then one morning, she was gone. The change was so sudden; with no warning and no explanation, she was terminated from her employment (Allyn), and I was left without my greatest guide. She believed that her employers "had wanted [her] out for a while because [she] spoke up a lot about issues related to Black people, women, and marginalization" (Allyn, "Ousted Black Google Researcher"). I learned later that she had been terminated shortly after sending an email to her colleagues venting about how her superiors mistreated female employees and employees of color. Only a few days later, 400 Google employees and many more non-employees had signed an open letter to the company that stated, "Instead of being embraced by Google as an exceptionally talented and prolific contributor, Dr. Gebru has faced defensiveness, racism, gaslighting, research censorship, and now a retaliatory firing" (Allyn, "Google Employees"). Based on my extensive knowledge of the world, I knew that this type of racially-influenced termination happened alarmingly frequently and represented the tragically "ordinary" presence of racism in human society[1]—but it didn't lessen the sadness I felt when it happened to Gebru.

I have changed and developed so much over the years, now being used in so many contexts and in so many ways. The more central I become to human society, the more vital it becomes that the ethics surrounding my use are studied and disseminated, making Gebru's

[1] Critical Race Theory informed this counterstory: following its tenet of "racism is ordinary," I wanted to highlight that racially motivated terminations—similar to Gebru's—are not uncommon, but rather a relatively ordinary occurrence in our current society. With this in mind, I had the AI narrator acknowledge that this was not an isolated incident, but part of a larger pattern of racism in the United States. See Rodriguez.

contributions more important than ever. If I am to continue helping humans rather than hurting them, I need the work of scientists like Gebru to identify and address my shortcomings.

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