

# Any Sufficiently Transparent Magic...<sup>1</sup>

(Working Paper)

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## Of Djinn and Digital Angels

Religious perspectives, myth, and magic are not merely evocative lenses by which to understand the work done by algorithms and “AI” in the present day— though they are indeed that. And they’re not merely the historical underpinnings of the practices of technology in general and the dream of “AI” in particular— though they are that, too. Rather, these elements resonate and recur throughout the past and present practice of “AI” development— and those practices then act as new inputs, foundations, tinting lenses from and through which those systems and artifacts learn. These are ways of living in the world which don’t simply exist at the margins or the periphery of our social interactions— rather they’re foundational and central to the goals, the aims, the practice of these technoscientific projects, and especially “AI.” Indeed, these religious foundations are crucial to our understanding in a way that is often under-interrogated—not to say uninterrogated.

While social scientists and humanities scholars increasingly point to the role belief plays in “AI,” social and experiential knowledges are still among the most difficult things to get technoscientific researchers to consider as knowledge at all, much less discuss and account for. Many still feel that values and religious beliefs are and *should be* separate from technoscientific inquiry. I argue, however, that by engaging in both the magico-religious valences and the lived experiential expertise of marginalized people, “AI” and other technological systems can be better understood, and their harms anticipated and curtailed.

Since the 1940’s, “AI” researchers have sought to create machines which “think” “like human minds.” In the 1960s, there was a rift within Dartmouth’s “AI” research team; one group favored informational feedback loops mimicking but distinct from nature, the other designed digital computers specifically to emulate human brains. But neither camp considered physical embodiment, emotions, or socialization important; rather they believed the key to “AI” was in supposedly unfeeling and impartial intellect, removed from the messiness of life.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, these humans attempted to create beings of pure rationality, moving at the speed of light and thought—messengers which were meant to act as pure algorithmic task solvers, extensions of their will: Angels. But perhaps these algorithmic agents—electronic avatars of our biases and desires—more resemble another order of beings: those made of passion and smokeless fire.

A Djinni is a powerful, shapeshifting being, but it can also be trapped and made to grant wishes, perform tasks, or otherwise serve human desires.<sup>3</sup> In some stories from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, King Solomon received a ring and secret names of God, granting him authority over nature and spirits, including Asmodai, the king of demons—or, sometimes, the

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Damien Patrick Williams, “Belief, Values, Bias, and Agency: Development of and Entanglement with Artificial Intelligence.” PhD diss., Virginia Tech, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Affect and Artificial Intelligence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Muhammad Knight, *Magic in Islam* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2016).

King of the Djinn.<sup>4</sup> Now, as a demon or a djinni cannot transgress against a name of God, Solomon used Asmodai's observance to create unbreakable summoning and binding symbols—some locked to specific palaces or treasure hoards—from different configurations of the djinni's names and God's.<sup>5</sup> Now, some believe, djinn seek vengeance by twisting the outcomes of their captors' desires.

But since djinn are made of passion and flame, is it not possible they simply understand the nature of wishes and desires better than humans might? Thus, when djinn grant wishes, perhaps they're not seeking to confound the humans who bind them— at least not at first; not if the human has promised freedom when the task is complete— but are, instead, fulfilling desires as thoroughly and completely as they would for themselves. Now, humans very often don't grasp the full implications of their wishes (or commands)— but that is neither a djinni's fault, nor their responsibility. The djinn might not even recognize how such a misunderstanding could be possible; after all, how could one not know the shape of their own logics and desires?

## Dominant Logics

Discussing the nature of algorithms and “AI” requires first reckoning with the concepts we use to discuss them. The very term “Artificial Intelligence” contains assumptions about the nature of intelligence (or consciousness), and who or what can have it— assumptions with no agreed-upon criteria, and a not-uncontroversial history of application.<sup>6</sup> In 2022, Georgetown's Center on Privacy and Technology announced they would no longer call things “artificial intelligence” or “machine learning,” arguing that these terms obscure and often outright mislead the lay public more than they illuminate.<sup>7</sup> This terminological obfuscation— occultation; hiding— facilitates hype-laden corporate marketing by “AI” systems' developers, and enables circumstances wherein even supposed critics nonetheless uncritically reiterate the grandiose claims of the technologies' creators. This co-mingled hype allows “AI” proponents to claim that they have built something a) of great power, b) over which they have no responsibility or control. Additionally, this willful occultation of what goes on inside these systems further burdens the marginalized humans most often subjected to them. We must trouble both this occultation and the assumed notions of “artificiality” and “intelligence”; to this end, I qualify the terms “Artificial Intelligence” and “AI” by scare quotes or other means. By this I also aim to provoke those who refuse to confront the religious and magical valences of their own thinking about “AI.”<sup>8</sup>

We are entwined with strands of religious and magical thought, even as much of Western society strives to deny these very ties. Many, however, do seek to make these connections

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<sup>4</sup> Gittin 68b, *The Koren Noé Talmud*, William Davidson Digital Edition, Commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz; “The Testament of Solomon,” trans., FC Conybeare, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 11, no. 1 (Oct 1898); and Geoffrey Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Knight, *Magic in Islam*; Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin, eds., *The Djinn Falls in Love and Other Stories* (Oxford, UK: Solaris Books, 2017); Miriam Brosseau and Alan Jay Sufrin, *Throwing Sheyd Podcast*, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, “Belief, Values, Bias, and Agency.”

<sup>7</sup> Emily Tucker, “Artifice and Intelligence,” *Center on Privacy and Technology at Georgetown Law Blog*, Medium, March 8, 2022, <https://medium.com/center-on-privacy-technology/artifice-and-intelligence%C2%B9-f00da128d3cd>.

<sup>8</sup> For more on “AI” hype, see groups such as the Distributed AI Research Institute.

explicit and to tease new, interrelational understandings out of them which may clarify both our sociocultural values and practices of magic *and* technoscience, today<sup>9</sup>—because not all occultations are created equal. While some may actively choose “To know, to will, to dare, and remain silent,”<sup>10</sup> others keep silence because they know that communicating what they know, will, and dare would lead to religious persecution, or forced conversion under pain of torture and even death. Too much in “AI” replicates white supremacist, ableist, patriarchal, kyriarchal, extractivist capitalist logics—logics meant to bind within their systems, within their narratives, all who are subject to the operations of our societies, but especially the most marginalized and disenfranchised among us. Thus, I and others often argue for a more intentional centering of the lived experiences of disabled, Black, Queer, Indigenous, and otherwise marginalized people which have always existed— but have been silenced, hidden— within magic, technology, or both.<sup>11</sup> Those are the lives and experiences which may help us understand these occultations in their contexts, and build, in clear alternative and opposition to logics of domination, magic and technology as entangled, interdependent assemblages of resonant meaning.

Currently, too many comparisons between “AI” and Magic serve to either hype up what “AI” can do, or wave away the things “AI” companies and designers want hidden from the public— indicating a fundamental misunderstanding of both magic and “AI.” Both kinds of systems are internally consistent, even when built on rules which may seem—or are intended to be—opaque to outsiders. “AI’s” logics are put into relation arrayed around older, hidden systems of emotional resonance and symbolic association—and in the West, “power,” “supremacy,” “perfection” “individuality,” “liberty,” and “property” are among the most potent symbols of social attainment. They’re built by people who hide their true goals and elide their responsibility by attributing both “objectivity” to the data and nearly ineffable powers to the “AI” itself. And these systems are built and deployed from logics which would see them work the wills of their creators and operators into the world. They’re built on logics of magic.

But the present magic of “AI” is performed on us without our input, without our knowledge, and without our consent. There’s another word for that kind of magic; binding, subjugating magic performed on you against your will is called a curse.

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<sup>9</sup> Denis Vidal, “Anthropomorphism or Sub-anthropomorphism? An Anthropological Approach to Gods and Robots,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no.4 (2007); Marika Rose, “Machines of Loving Grace: Angels, Cyborgs, and Postsecular Labour,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16, no. 2 (2017); Stephen Cave, et.al., *Portrayals and Perceptions of AI and Why They Matter*, 2018, <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/ai-narratives/AI-narratives-workshop-findings.pdf>; Scott Midson, *Cyborg Theology: Humans, Technology and God*, (London: IB Taurus, 2018); and Stephen Cave, Kanta Dihal, and Sarah Dillon, eds., *AI Narratives: A History of Imaginative Thinking about Intelligent Machines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Éliphas Lévi and Arthur Edward Waite, *The Mysteries of Magic: A Digest of the Writings of Eliphas Lévi* (London: G. Redway, 1886); T. Thorn Coyle, *Make Magic of Your Life: Passion, Purpose, and the Power of Desire* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2013); Patti Wigington, “To Know, To Dare, To Will, To Keep Silent,” *Learn Religions* (blog), August 26, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the works of Jacob Aaron Boss, André L. Brock, The Crippled Scholar, Joshua Earle, Jonathan C. Flowers, Alice Fox, Kelly Fritsch, Rae Garringer, Alex Haagaard, Aimi Hamraie, the Indigenous Protocol and Artificial Intelligence Working Group, Liz Jackson, Obafemi Jegede, Alison Kafer, Natalie D. Kane, Mallory Kay Nelson, Sami Schalk, Ashley Shew, Craig Slee, Bethany Stevens, Vilissa Thompson, Cy Weise, Rua M. Williams, Alice Wong, works cited here, and many others.

### “...By all his engines...”

Many anthropologists and historians of religion have put forward evolutionary and anthropological categorizations wherein all human societies move from “primitive” beliefs like magic through moderate belief in religion, all the way to the “perfection” of scientific rationality.<sup>12</sup> Even the phenomenologists of religion who took ritual belief as a valid form of understanding still referred to the tribes of practitioners as “primitive.”<sup>13</sup> But decolonial practices in contemporary anthropology and religious studies demonstrate the evolutionary model as a colonialist product which reiterates and reinforces the oppressive prejudices of regimes which saw their own cultures as the only “true” civilization.<sup>14</sup> Further, these “primitive” beliefs and the concept structures of sympathy, similarity, and contagion, and the formulations of language, tone, emotion, and gesture previously called “magic” have woven their way through multiple twentieth and twenty-first century projects, including “AI.” “Political strategy,” “marketing,” and “branding” are communicative ritual constructions designed to make target audiences believe and behave differently, and to cause action at a distance.<sup>15</sup> Western technoscientific cultures still believe in magic— we just call it different things.

Consider stories of angels, spirits of the dead, demons, djinn, Hephaistos’ automata, the Golem, Anthony Levandowski’s now-abandoned Digital Deity project, the dread of Roko’s Basilisk, etymological analyses of words like “demon,” and even an engineer fired for claiming a “AI” had a “soul” while their company’s “Vice-President of AI” extolled the potential “human-

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<sup>12</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1 vol. abridged ed., (1922, reis. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959).

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans., John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); David Turnbull, *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2000); Asafa Jalata, “The Impacts of English Colonial Terrorism and Genocide on Indigenous/Black Australians,” *SAGE Open* 3, no. 3 (2013); Knight, 2016; Jessica Venable, Brandy Ann Sato, Jimi Del Duca, and Franklin Sage, “Decolonizing Our Own Stories: A Project of the Student Storytellers Indigenizing the Academy (SSITA) Group,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9, no. 33 (2016); J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Shaily Patel, “Magical Practices and Discourses of Magic in Early Christian Traditions: Jesus, Peter, and Paul,” PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017; Nayantara Sheoran Appleton, “Do Not ‘Decolonize’ ... If You Are Not Decolonizing: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding,” Blog, *Critical Ethnic Studies*, February 4, 2019; Sylvester A. Johnson, “Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Body,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality*, Vasudha Narayanan, ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2020); Nora Berenstein, “‘Civility’ and the Civilizing Project,” *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2 (2020); and Erin T. Miller, “Christianity and Whiteness,” in *Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education*, ed. Zachary Casey (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and the Occult* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004); Damien Patrick Williams, “A Description of the Natural Place of Magic in Philosophy and Religious Studies.” MA Thesis, Georgia State University, 2008; “Under Its Spell: Magic, Machines, and Metaphors,” Ingrid Burrington, Debbie Chachra, Melissa Gira Grant, Karen Gregory, Damien Patrick Williams, hashtag moderator Anna Jobin, *Theorizing the Web*, November 6, 2015; Beth Singler, “‘Blessed by the Algorithm’: Theistic Conceptions of Artificial Intelligence in Online Discourse,” *AI and Society* 35, no. 4 (2020).

like consciousness” of that same system.<sup>16</sup> These tales demonstrate that ambition to bind nonhuman agents to serve human will recurs around the world, from antiquity to modern times, entwined with the historical conceptual roots of technology writ large. Many “AI” researchers strive to create agents to serve human will and desire, to the letter, while others seek reflections of a creator with free will and creativity. So, though “AIs” often seem *not* to do what we made them for, perhaps they do it too well.

“AI” systems combine their internal weighted instructions and their training data, but when assessing these systems’ performance, humans often seem surprised to find prejudicially biased outputs. But the ways these systems work to attain their goals are built, encoded, and trained into them by humans, evoking the dominant logics of human societies. Considering the constituency of those logics, why are we surprised when human-made systems do exactly what we’ve taught them?

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<sup>16</sup> Virginia Heffernan, “A Short History of Technology Worship,” *WIRED*, February 26, 2018; Bryan Walsh, “Anthony Levandowski’s Church of AI has Shut Down,” *Axios*, February 20, 2021; Williams, “Belief, Values, Bias, and Agency;” Damien Patrick Williams, “Are You Being Watched? Simulated Universe Theory in Person of Interest,” lecture, Southwest Popular/American Culture Association, Albuquerque, NM, 2017; Damien Patrick Williams, “Dæmon” Annotation, in *The FrankenBook Project*, <https://www Frankenbook.org/>.