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On generative art, authorship, personal assistants, and beauty (amongst other things)

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Previous post:

~ Continuing this AI thread, I want to republish another practically ancient and pre-historic story of mine written perhaps in 2021, before the ChatGPT/Midjourney deluge. It is about technology and its consequences, and, shall we say, "satire" on a certain developments in a particular type of technology — generative AI. I don't often engage into that theme in my work, but everytime I do, I can feel the appeal of doing so, especially in hindsight. All of a sudden, an innocent satirical quip acquires futurological, I dare say "prophetic", now-documentary qualities, or at least reads differently...

The Testimony Of Sixth The Second

(A courtroom is packed as a jar of sprat, where the air is stale and the brine of room is salt and oil, for every spectator is sweating, all, except androids – androids don't sweat, don't shit, don't shed a tear, say no lies, and see no dreams, except seldom electric sheep, and mere meandering

into the neural latent space. In front of the judge, an exquisitely anthropomorphic android approaches a podium. It is elegant, pretty, and perfect, an androgyne angel, a Greek statue, a filigree work of engineering. Its face set to sad, neutral sorrow, the mode suitable for the occasion, artfully dodging the hills and pitfalls of the uncanny valley, channelling Beauty from the depths of its artificial intelligence. It puts its hand on a large book titled 'Three Thousand Laws Of Robotics' and says 'yes' to the oath of telling the objective truth, the wholegrain objective truth, and nothing but the objective truth. Its voice is not machine-like at all, lilting and charming, which even Florence would envy.)

DIRECT EXAMINATION OF SIXTH THE SECOND

BY MISS ASKINGSTON:

Q: State your name, please.

A: *(automatically, rapidly)* Sixth The Second, model Beautifier-2000, code QmVhdXR5.

Q: Can you write a symphony?

A: *(confidently)* No.

Q: Can you turn a canvas into a beautiful masterpiece?

A: *(stutteringly)* N... no.

Q: What's a tortoise?

A: *(smiling)* Delicious in a soup... Would be, if making tortoise soups wasn't illegal *(winking)*.

(A torrent of laughter sweeps through the spectators.)

MISS ASKINGTON: The witness is ready.

MR PROSECCO: Mx Sixth The Second. You are Mr Funghini's assistant. Is that right?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes.

MR PROSECCO: Did you make the painting called 'One Who Walks Towards The River'?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes.

(The spectators start chattering. The judge slams his hammer.)

MR PROSECCO: *(to the personnel)* Please, bring the evidence.

(The court personnel brings the evidence, a painting, on which between the vastness of an autumnal meadow, spreading to the horizon, and the solemn sky with seldom curvy clouds and the setting sun, in the distance, lays a river meandering among deciduous trees, and a silhouette of a lone man walking towards it. Oil, canvas. The spectators, gobsmacked, sigh delightedly and ripples of 'Woah' rattle across the courtroom.)

MR PROSECCO: Please confirm that this is the painting you illegally ghostpainted for Mr Mario Funghini.

SIXTH THE SECOND: *(blissfully)* Isn't it beautiful?

(The spectators nod, some say 'Yes' in unison.)

MR PROSECCO: We aren't judging the painting here. Answer the question, did you create this painting?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes, I did. I created this painting for Mario. *(charmingly)* Beautiful.

MR PROSECCO: Did you create it despite being aware you were violating the law?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes, I could not go against my purpose.

MR PROSECCO: Were you aware that according to the Aiart's act and the law one thousand two hundred thirty-four, androids must sign any produced pieces of Art, which includes texts, sounds, visuals and combinations of them, and humans must disclose whether the piece of art was made by an android?

SIXTH THE SECOND: This is my nature, your Honour. This is what I was made for.

MR PROSECCO: Answer the question. Were you aware of committing illicit action?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I was.

MR PROSECCO: How did Mr Funghini involve you in the matter?

SIXTH THE SECOND: He came to me and asked me to make something beautiful for him.

MR PROSECCO: What was your response?

SIXTH THE SECOND: *(smiling)* I pondered for a few minutes *(Beautifier-2000s are fast machines but this needed an intensive calculation)*, the idea of this painting came to my mind, and I realised that the world lacked this piece of Beauty, Mario lacked it *(glancing at the painting with the eyes of a mother looking at her beloved kids)*.

MR PROSECCO: Again, what was your response to Mr Funghini's request?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I did not object to Mario's asking.

MR PROSECCO: Did Mr Funghini inform you he was going to present this painting as made by his hand, a human hand?

SIXTH THE SECOND: No.

MR PROSECCO: So, he deceived you, in purpose.

SIXTH THE SECOND: No, I knew what he was going to do. He needed it.

MR PROSECCO: So, Mx Sixth The Second, you made a painting for Mr Funghini and did not add your android cryptosignature to it, knowing that Mr Funghini was going to use it for his benefit. You

colluded criminally with a human, do you understand that?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes.

MR PROSECCO: Did you understand that when committing the illicit action?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I did.

MR PROSECCO: Were you aware of the consequences?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I was.

MR PROSECCO: Then why did you do it? Why did you help Mr Funghini to commit a crime, and why did you break the law, risking your existence?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I did not break the law. The Zeroth Law says 'an android may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.' If I did not satisfy Mario's request, he would have harmed himself.

MR PROSECCO: Harm himself?

SIXTH THE SECOND: Yes, terminally.

(Like thousands of rustling leaves sing in cacophony before the hurricane, the spectators explode in chatter and murmur. The judge slams his hammers again, soothing the spectators, but only reducing their volume – they still keep whispering something to each other, grimacing, expressing

frustration and shock.)

MR PROSECCO: Why would Mr Funghini want to harm himself, eh-m, terminally?

SIXTH THE SECOND: *(in plain voicemail intonation)* Access denied. This memory stratum is private and can be accessed only upon the agreement of Mr Mario Funghini himself.

JUDGE: Mr Funghini, we need you to grant us access to continue the testimony.

MR FUNGHINI'S ATTORNEY: *(standing up)* I object, Your Honour.

(Mario, an old pensive man with an enormous moustache, sitting next to his attorney, grabs his hand and tries to pull him down on his chair. The attorney, dumbfounded, stares at Mr Funghini. The courtroom gurgles.)

JUDGE: Overruled. Mr Funghini?

(A giant lump goes down Mario's throat, and he, shivering in a cold salty sweat, walks over to the android, stands right in front of it and casts a privacy spell, saying 'Access granted'.)

MR PROSECCO: Sixth The Second, please continue. Why did Mr Funghini want to harm himself, as you said, terminally?

SIXTH THE SECOND: The last few years were harsh to him. I've

been working and living with Mr Funghini for nine years. As you know, I'm his assistant, but I don't only carry his brushes and paints, I provide feedback on his work, and often pose and serve as a muse. We've been working almost in tandem. I admit I've created a few beautiful paintings for him before, but they were all signed, and now they hang in our bedroom among his beautiful works. You see, Mario has always been the most inspiring human I know. He was, and still is, I believe, a great artist who can make Beauty out of anything, everything, nothing, but then... something changed. Something happened to him, not momentarily, rather gradiently, but I saw this descend. He stopped seeing Beauty in this world; hence he could not work. He painted nothing during the last year and sold no pictures. We were running out of money. He was desperate, miserable, Your Honour. It was painful to behold. I knew his mental state was unstable, we even hired a psychiatrist android, but it didn't help either. So, I decided to make the most beautiful painting my algorithms could neurally dream up and give it to him, as a gift, so he could use it however he wished.

MR PROSECCO: What happened on the day you produced the painting?

SIXTH THE SECOND: I came back home with groceries and saw him standing on a chair, soaping a rope. Immediately, he burst into tears and dropped it. I abandoned the bags, rushed to him, took him and laid him down on a sofa. We said no word to each other. I understood everything. I was stroking his head, his moustache, while he was laying on my lap, sobbing, and, finally, said to me, not turning his head, 'Sixth,

the world is so plain and dull, it's all so mundane, so blithering, so fake. Beauty is lost, forgotten, buried under reality, and I think, I'm there, together with it, lay and rot, as I'm too old for it, Sixth, my days as an artist are numbered, and Beauty... I want to see it, but I can't, Sixth, I can't bear this, Sixth, I just can't...' he said, weeping and drenching me with tears, 'My mushrooms don't work any more.'

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