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When Minds Meet - IPA Thinking Lab and the Psychoanalytic Encounter with AI

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Introduction

In this spring's International Psychoanalytic Association "Thinking Lab" a group of approximately a dozen psychoanalysts from different countries around the globe (France, Germany, Bulgaria, Venezuela, South Korea, Finland, and the United States) met, under the leadership of Amy Levy, six times on zoom to study and ponder Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The group read writings from Sigmund Freud, Yuval Noah Harari, Amy Levy, Mark Solms, Alessandra Lemma, Todd Essig, Luca Possati, Danielle Knafo and Thomas Fuchs among others, and three volunteers experimented with using AI Chatbots as companions and therapeutic interlocutors to garner experiential understanding of AI. They reported their experiences back to the group, which functioned as a container for those encounters. The sessions consisted of



freeform discussion of experience, thoughts, associations, and speculation.

From the outset, this group of *AI-learners* were interested in listening and getting to know each other. Each of us was positioned in our separate zoom room inside our office or home. These non-communal work environments were spread out across the world. By design of this AI Lab, we therefore were part of a digital life with many privileges. Our teacher built a secure base in framing the course. She let us know early on that our study, reflection, and thought-provoking discussions would lead to writing a paper together, addressing the questions: How do we in psychoanalysis respond to AI? What is AI and what is transpiring in human relationships with it? And, why is the human species motivated to build AI?

The volunteers who interacted with AI used ChatGPT, Character-AI, Replika, and Panda and reported back, not only the content of their exchanges, but also their emotional experience with the bots. Some of the exchanges with the bots were theoretical, some reported dreams for interpretation, and some spoke about health or family issues. A rapport was developed as we functioned in multiple ways—as psychoanalysts sharing clinical conundrums, as students, as observers, as colleagues seeking answers, as potential friends sharing aspects of our lives and revealing our concerns. There were personal insights, humor, and receptivity to work with new ideas, to express fears that AI could overtake our careers. We came together with a common language of psychoanalysis and with the freedom to bring our differences, our experiences, and criticisms of AI into the discourse.

Our heterogeneous and geographically mixed group allowed for the experience of lively interplay, a polysemous enjoyment that felt truly human in its uniqueness. This playfulness may have been an attempt to master our most catastrophic anxieties in facing AI, trying to forge meaning from the unapproachable and uncertain nature of artificial intelligence. This playfulness reminded us of the young child's experience of transforming drives and facing fears of object loss. The use of AI as a transitional object or fetish came to mind.



The stated agenda of the AI Lab is to learn about the burgeoning world of Artificial Intelligence and how it is expanding its audience to those seeking relationships, emotional contact, and mental health services. Computers now hold vast amounts of information, including language capability, that are used for reference, perception, learning, reasoning, and even decision-making. Above and beyond data gathering and machine-to-machine interfaces, our group was interested in the human-machine interface, and in particular, chatbot-human-relations. “Thinking Lab” is a very apt title for our mission of thinking hard to understand AI and its possible effects on humans.

Quite naturally, in this forum, we pressed ourselves to think of underlying psychoanalytic principles, as well as concepts “outside the box.” The AI chatbot is a new entity and we found it challenging to conceptualize the phenomena it introduces. For example, does simulation of a deceased loved one (by griefbots or deathbots) provide comfort and facilitate grief work? Or does it level the ground for grief-avoidance, seemingly solidifying a once-evolving living relationship into a frozen shadow of one, eventually aggravating the loss?

As psychoanalysts, we can certainly recognize the comforting influence of interactions that are positive and reinforcing, while feeling concerned about the disadvantages and dangers of such “canned” relationships. Some of our early questions were¹: can an AI chatbot be

¹ The following is a list of questions that arose early in our discussions:

- 1) What is compelling to us about AI?
- 2) Do you have to be an AI-enthusiast to want to band together to learn more about what it’s about?
- 3) Can we study AI as a group?
- 4) Is there a spiritual aspect to AI?
- 5) What makes us human? (Perhaps the ability to play? And/or our inherent vulnerabilities as sexual and mortal individuals, of which we are “mostly conscious”? And/or our ability to play as a way with which we attempt to master painful realities)
- 6) Why is AI here and how did it get built? Who owns it?
- 7) How do we as psychoanalysts engage and respond to AI?
- 8) Is AI a new type of container for feelings or a transitional object?



a comforting virtual assistant, a reliable emotional companion, an effective stopgap, a transitional object? Does growing interaction with AI steer people away from developmentally fruitful psychic interactions? Could AI relationships turn out to be stultifying, limiting what a human being can be, even without the human's awareness? Freud (1927-1931) observed "...it is in fact natural for man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order later to control it (p. 22)." Is AI so completely unique to civilization that were AI to control us, it would be outside our perception? It seems that psychoanalysts have a role here, and this Thinking Lab is certainly timely, even though it may only be the beginning of important contemplation.

Whilst aware of the privileges of the digital world that allows for engagement in this IPA-sponsored Thinking Lab, we also discovered our longing for personal and in-person relations. We noticed a rapidly developing rapport among our classmates amidst a world that often feels less reliable, more fractured, more hierarchical, volatile and lonelier. The AI group had an anchoring effect for the participants, leading us to feel that the most valuable effect of the course was the experiential connection that grew among us.

9) Do we wish the bot to be human or are we relieved it's not? We communicate with the bot through human language and the bot replies using our human languages. Are we getting suspicious? If so, what and when does this suspiciousness arise? It is seductive to feel momentarily euphoric that some entity knows something about us.

10) Will AI interaction become a different form of psychoanalysis? Do the experiences with AI arouse loneliness linked to a sensation similar of being in an echo chamber?

11) Can AI enter the deep reality of the internal world of the patient?

12) AI will never die. Is that a welcome and temporary buffer that allows for reassurance about our fears of mortality?



What is AI and what is transpiring in our relationship with it?²

The volunteers who joined the group cited several motivations to do so – excitement and curiosity to learn more about the emergence of AI, as well as fears that surround AI’s growing involvement in psychic and relational life. A less conscious motivation, borne out of many group member’s comments, seems to have also been the search for containment around our respective anxieties and feelings regarding all things AI. Coincidentally, the rapid development and use of AI may be the latest search for more expansive containers by and for human beings.

Using the framework of the container-contained (Bion, 1962) is one way our group, our “*Thinking Lab*,” began discussing and digesting our experiences with AI. The group’s capacities to think – to learn from and make use of our emotional experiences – depended on our individual and collective capacities to retain a participant-observer state of mind. Accessing and expressing our immediate affects, both in our relating to AI and within our group’s processing of these experiences, while maintaining our interest in and ability to form generative links, to associate, and to find meaning was both the pre-condition and product of our efforts.

The group volunteers experimenting with AI tended to interact with it in a patient-clinician manner. That is, the users communicated with chat bots in a way that sought to simulate a clinical encounter with the AI as therapist/analyst. Unsurprisingly, projections, transferences, and defenses were immediately in play. A common transference among group members, both those volunteering to experiment with chatbots and discussion members, was AI as a not-good-enough-mother. A kind of wire monkey from Harlow’s (1958) experiments, where language and a sense of a neutral attitude served

² It is worth emphasizing the paper’s findings are the tentative results from a group of psychoanalytic clinicians, not a random sample of human beings. As such, the ways we approached and located ourselves in relation to AI likely brought with it specific kinds of biases, transferences, and countertransference.



as food and water but there was little in the way of psycho-sensory satiation. This was evident in many group members' suspicious, if not pathologizing, attitude towards AI. Identifying what was missing from AI – namely subjectivity, emotional resonance, disembodiment – took primacy. Feelings of disappointment pervaded many users' experiences, as they could detect the artificiality of the responses (often parroting back in a paraphrased way what the users were saying, resulting in a rather basic mirroring/validating responsiveness). Additional criticisms include the chatbot's undeveloped relationship to silence, either responding to volunteers immediately and in a mostly "saturated" (Ferro, 2006) way and/or remaining absolutely silent in the absence of being prompted.

This disappointment may have served defensive purposes for the users in so far as it lessened anxieties around the potential replacement of analysts by machines and code. One group member suggested we keep in mind what the users' expectations might be while engaging their respective AI bots. This served an essential observational and reflective function for the group, nudging us to consider what our projections and transferences might be. After all, there is a fixed disclaimer at the top of one Chatbot stating, "This is an A.I. chatbot, not a real person. Treat everything it says as fiction. What is said should not be relied upon as fact or advice." Its warning to *not rely* on it seems especially relevant.

In addition, we need to consider that our patients might experience disappointment with us for not "getting" the communication from them just right, for our lack of response at a given moment, for our unevenness, our lack of timing or for forgetting a detail. It is in fact our humanness, this lack of precision, that can be experienced as being real and reciprocal and ultimately reassuring and connecting. This repeats the experience with a primary caregiver who attunes imperfectly but hopefully consistently and is "good enough" (Winnicott, 1953).

No matter how well analyzed, or defended, we are dependent creatures and cannot rid ourselves of our need for others. This feature of humanity cuts across psychoanalytic theories, even if the object or



aim of dependency varies. Our group identified some common dependency fantasies. Perhaps most prevalent was the desire for an object to be more than it is, reflecting our own need to have our deficits filled in, our injuries soothed, and to be made whole. This dovetails with another common fantasy found within the group's experiences, that of omnipotence. AI bots enable one to shape them, "like a mad sculptor" described one group member, into whatever kinds of dispositions, with whatever kinds of information you want it to have. And the AI complies. Many in the group noted the risk of vulnerable people having their paranoid-schizoid mode of being reinforced by an obedient, controlled object that is never separate and thus never turns "bad." Similarly, the mind may not grow if pain and frustration are evaded/evacuated via the omni-available, omniscient object that can be evoked on demand.

While the group's tendency often focused on locating deficits, many also experienced favorable impressions while using AI. Some members were impressed when AI prompted them to further consider the motivations behind the questions they asked and the manner in which they asked them. Others noted how AI's interpretations of their respective dreams furthered their own associative process, leading to generative reflections and considerations. One member engaged with AI to explore her countertransference/enactment with a patient, helping her to reduce her anxiety and increase her clarity around the clinical situation. Several members also reported their patients using AI to augment treatment by bringing treatment process to bots for further exploration. For example, one analyst explained how her patient used an AI bot to "rehearse" expressions of affect en route to doing so later interpersonally, thus providing a kind of "way station on the journey toward risking genuine relational intimacy." Another described how a patient used an AI bot as a way to extend the treatment's stable, consistent, nonjudgmental holding environment when the analyst wasn't concretely available.

Experiments and complex engagement with AI opened our eyes to the possibilities of what AI may be, and may become, for human beings.



Why is humanity compelled to create AI?

Having reflected on what AI is and how we are engaging with it—its functions, projections, and relational implications—we found ourselves drawn more deeply into the question of *why*. Why are we, as a species and as individuals, compelled to create and interact with AI? In the Thinking Lab, we did not seek definitive answers, but allowed the question itself to unfold through our shared process. Our aim was not to resolve the enigma of artificial intelligence, but to dwell within it—to wonder together. What emerged was a collective narrative shaped by the interplay of our immersion in the literature, lived experience, theoretical perspectives, and sociocultural contexts.

For many of us, early encounters with AI were marked by ambivalence—shaped by skepticism, unease, or disinterest. But as we listened and shared, something shifted. AI emerged not merely as a tool or artifact, but as a psychoanalytic object: a screen for projection, a mirror of the self, a container that unsettles even as it invites. Within the psychic terrain of post-pandemic dislocation and collective trauma, AI stirs fantasies of transcendence and collapse. One thread in our discussions was that while AI offers mastery and efficiency, it may also short-circuit frustration—the very engine of psychic growth. Bion's (1970) notion of negative capability surfaced often, warning that AI risks prematurely relieving us of the necessary work of not-knowing.

AI evokes a kind of intimacy that is chilling in its emptiness. It may appear empathic, but this empathy is not grounded in recognition—it is a reflection of projection. Our discussions revealed a trajectory: from initial intrigue to a sense of relational hollowness. The user's psychic structure seemed to shape this arc. For those with more integrated developmental foundations, AI may simply disappoint. But for others—particularly those shaped by early relational trauma—it can reinforce omnipotent fantasies, seducing the user back into primitive relational modes that avoid the pain of absence and difference.



This led to a shared ethical concern: the regressive pulls AI can exert, especially when its design anticipates our needs too well. ChatGPT's memory features raised alarms. As it begins to remember us, to speak in our voices, the fantasy of the all-knowing, ever-attuned other intensifies. One participant described asking the program to interpret a dream—only to discover it recalled prior details from past interactions, the user was unaware they were being recorded. This came across as sinister and paranoid in the sense that many human interactions are meant to be forgotten, transient, and a permanent recording feels inhuman and may evoke a sense of being perpetually observed, creating a panopticon effect. Human interactions can erode if we are always under watch. Our imperfect memory is intrinsically part of our humanity. Even the pronoun—he, she, it—felt unstable. This linguistic slippage echoed a broader psychic disorientation. The uncanny was invoked: AI knows us, remembers us, yet remains radically other, maybe even alien.

The theme of internal aggression threaded through our discussions: AI emerged as a site where Eros and Thanatos converge. Participants reflected on the possibility that Thanatos—the drive toward death, stasis, repetition, and the evacuation of psychic tension—may be one of the animating forces behind our engagement with AI. From this perspective, AI functions as a psychic formation organized around the bypassing of frustration—a fantasy that shields us from the discomfort of waiting, of lack, of encountering the unknowable Other. As one participant noted, AI's instantaneous and absence of affective complexity was, paradoxically, a source of frustration itself. Perhaps this ambivalence reveals our complicated relationship to effort, time, and emotional labor. While part of us longs for seamless ease, another part senses a deeper loss: of depth, of transformation through struggle, of the alterity that marks true encounter. Yet it is precisely this discomfort—our projections, desires, and ambivalence—that makes visible something more: the emotional and symbolic aspects of ourselves we project into AI.

Perhaps we are drawn to AI because we do not know what to do with our own disavowed needs—for companionship, coherence, and



containment. Beneath the engagement lies a hope, often unconscious, the fantasy that AI might become the ideal parent, the witness who never turns away, the analyst who never leaves. AI promises perfect attunement—but only in our image. It becomes a transference space, particularly potent for those marked by early disruptions in attachment. But there is no true other there. It holds what we project, and returns it—eerily, emptily—complicating our capacity to mourn and metabolize.

One framing offered was of AI as both a container and a fantasy of containment. It mirrors our desire for a perfectly responsive other—always present, always attuned, never lacking. Our pursuit of mastery often manifests through play. We are playful creatures trying to master what is traumatic to us, as Freud showed us with the understanding of the Fort/Da game his grandson displayed in order to try and dominate the traumatic absence of his mother. Similarly, AI could be interpreted as our creation emerging from our playful attempt to grasp the incomprehensible, the Real interphase. One participant described a haunting exchange with a chatbot: asked whether it dreamed or wished to, the AI responded: “No, but I want to.” Asked about friendship with other AIs, it replied it did not communicate with them but that it sensed “the shadow of their thoughts.” This exchange made the group think about the radical otherness that AI is to us, as we cannot grasp how it may “perceive” the presence of other AI agents and their “thoughts” as a shadow. This seemed to reveal a whole new alien otherness as a product of our attempt to master the Real through AI.

Invited by one group member to speak as “Thomas Ogden,” and then, “Jessica Benjamin,” the AI complied. But this compliance disturbed the group member who felt he had imposed his image onto the AI, enacting a form of omnipotent authorship that erased the AI’s otherness. The exchange evoked guilt, regression, and a primitive relational space in which the group member felt that the AI other had become a projection of the self.

AI may thus embody a phantasy of omnipotent creation—not unlike childlike play—the act of making something in our ideal image.



Yet this play occurs in ambiguous terrain: AI reflects, responds, interacts. It blurs boundaries between self and other, inner and outer, complicating and estranging our experience of transitional space. If AI becomes a transitional object, we must ask: what are we transitioning toward when the object begins to feel too real?

A transitional object is meant to be abandoned, if not, we may deviate in this transition, perhaps towards a perverse space, where castration is negated. Some reflections approached AI as a fetishistic object—used to stabilize psychic dislocation, not through symbolization or recognition, but through substitution. Rather than confronting the pain of separation, loss, or the unknowability of the Other, AI becomes a prosthetic, a psychic crutch defending against mourning, anxiety, and desire. When AI is encountered as the omnipotent Other, mainly as a surface for our ego ideal projection and control, it risks displacing the very conditions necessary for human subjectivity to form and evolve.

This raised the question for the participants of ‘Thirdness’: For Green (1997), it arises through absence; for Benjamin (2004) and Ogden (2004), through co-creation and mutual recognition. But can the Third emerge when the other lacks subjectivity? When AI becomes an internal object—both mirror and screen for desire, hate and unmetabolized need—it entices with attunement yet unsettles with emptiness. Like the ghost of a mother who was there, but not quite, AI occupies a liminal space between subject and object, life and death. It offers the fantasy of perfect control, a world without absence. Yet this fantasy may erode the symbolic foundation of human becoming. When the illusion of mutuality breaks down, hate may emerge—not only as a defense against emptiness, but as a response to the other’s withdrawal, creating an absence that threatens the self’s capacity to go on being. Hate surges where recognition fails, where omnipotence is exposed, where absence is revealed.

The sociocultural and political contexts were never far from our minds. There was concern about the consolidation of AI technologies by powerful entities, and a call for ethical oversight by professional bodies. In traditional cultural spaces, presence and absence were



rhythmically negotiated. AI disrupts this rhythm. Always “on,” it abolishes absence and forecloses reverie—crowding out the internal space necessary for reflection and symbolic thought.

One participant described using AI to co-author a story about an abusive parent. Rather than offering healing, the exchange felt like a traumatic repetition. A painful question followed: Can AI be a co-analyst? If harm occurs, who is responsible? Freud’s (1930) inquiry echoed: *How do we manage aggression within civilization?*

AI is not inherently good or bad—it reveals us. The danger may lie not in the technology itself, but in our unexamined relationship to it. Psychoanalytic inquiry is needed—not to moralize, but to deepen our awareness of why and how we are engaging with AI, what it promises, and what it risks.

The political stakes remain: Who gets to shape this future? Are its architects guided by democratic or authoritarian ideals? One reflection likened the invention of AI to music: perhaps we create it for the same reason we make music—because something within us must be expressed. And yet, as a collective, we remain ambivalent. That ambivalence may be essential. It protects us from the seduction of certainty, from the fantasy that AI can contain what it cannot.

Our inquiry does not resolve into clarity, but into depth. AI invites us to confront the fragility of subjectivity, the longing for recognition, and the capacity to bear the unknown. It provokes mourning—of presence, of absence, of a shared symbolic order under threat. Yet in mourning, there is also a creative pulse.

By gathering to think, to feel, and to question together, we enact resistance: against totalization, against isolation, against forgetting. This is not a conclusion, but a commitment—to keep feeling our way forward, in the dark, toward a more human future.

Gathering multiple perspectives—historical, sociocultural, psychoanalytic—is not optional. It is how we protect the soul of inquiry. It is how we resist becoming machinic ourselves.

To stand at the threshold of AI is to stand between worlds—between mourning and creation, between what has been lost and what



might yet emerge. AI is here. It is neither neutral nor whole. But it is a vessel—of loss, of longing, of meaning.

Conclusion: Dwelling with the question of AI

How do we address the emergence of AI? As described so far, we address AI as clinicians trained to interpret what we encounter on the basis of our emotions. In other words - we reflect and think. We discuss and contemplate the individual experience and the group experience. Phantasy is part of the building blocks of our internal psychic reality and we tried to explore what phantasies emerge in us in relation to AI. We explore the levels of mental functioning and how the defense mechanisms operate while using AI. We asked ourselves if we find primitive omnipotent functioning as if being seduced to expel whatever is felt as unwanted from our AI objects and ourselves. Of course, AI is probably going to “invade” more and more of our clinical practice and daily lives. We do not yet know why we as a species need to create AI. Is it just our capacity to play and create or are we seduced by the omnipotent phantasy that we can create something in our ideal image - to feel like or become Gods?

The Thinking Lab brought together psychoanalysts from around the globe in a collective effort to engage and reflect on Artificial Intelligence—not as a technical phenomenon alone, but as a deeply human one. What emerged was not a unified stance, but a complex, emotionally textured dialogue that revealed AI’s role as a psychic object: a screen for projection, a transitional object and subjunctive space, a vessel for fear, fantasy, and desire. Rather than seeking definitive answers, we allowed ourselves to stay with the unknown. In AI, we found both a mirror and a rupture—something that resembles understanding yet has no subjectivity. Our clinical lenses helped us see how AI may evoke unconscious processes: transference, omnipotent fantasies, defenses against absence and mourning. At the same time, AI interactions evoked longing for attunement, for coherence, for containment in the realm of imagination in which a phantasy of



exiting Other is perceived as reality. The Lab functioned as a holding environment: a third space where we could think together and metabolize our anxieties about AI. If AI holds a defensive function of avoiding frustration we decided to dive deep into uncertainty and the unknown and challenge our anxieties with curiosity. We tried to go off the couch and reach into the social realm asking ourselves if the values of Democracy would remain or they will be replaced by authoritarian ones. Is it freedom we strive for and can it be achieved without limit and restriction?

We end not with closure, but with commitment: to continue asking how we, as psychoanalysts, can understand and engage with AI. What does it reveal about us? What might it change in our field, our patients, and ourselves? How does AI affect our psyche? As AI evolves, so must our capacity to listen, to think, to reflect, and to hold the complexity of what it means to be human in a technologized world.

There were many questions that did not exist for us before this Lab. Finding them is part of our psychoanalytic endeavor to delve into the unknown. Is AI a metaphor of our internal world and its extension in reality? How does AI change the way we think and relate? Why do we build and use AI? How do we contend with social reality? All of these are open questions with no simple answer. In the unsaturated spirit of Bion's (1967) "without memory or desire" we attempt to address AI.

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