Artificial intelligence and human creativity: a historical approach

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For as long as I can remember, being creative has felt natural to me, nothing to really think about. I've always felt the urge to write that line, take that photograph, pursue that line of thought. The image of a creative mind touched by inspiration, favoured by a muse, might be naïve, but it still has a certain hold over me, especially if we see creativity as one foundation of being human, as a particular way a person thinks, makes decisions and produces meaning.[1] This one foundation has come under pressure though, since generative AI became widely accessible in late autumn 2022, which in consequence caused the widespread anxiety that AI threatens creativity.[2] What is equally clear, however, is that creativity has changed recently, and AI will continue to change it even further. Accepting such change means that the relevant question is not whether a change is happening, but what it means and how our understanding of creativity influences the current debate.

As a historian, I turn to the past, in fact to the very moment a lasting image was born. On 10 November 1619, René Descartes is said to have shut himself in a stove-heated room somewhere in southern Germany and enacted what would become a foundational image of modern intellectual life. He doubted everything that came from outside until what remained was the thinking subject alone: solitary, internal, self-certifying. For almost

1 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität: Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014).
2 George Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen: The Hidden Steps Behind Breakthrough Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2026).



Fig. 01
Descartes in the heated room, embodying the modern myth of solitary thought while remaining surrounded by inherited voices.[5]

four centuries, Western intellectual culture and beliefs about creativity have been shaped by this powerful image of the solitary scholar, seated by a fire, withdrawing from the world in search of certainty.[3] In that tradition, the blank page is a challenge to one's creative independence: are you able to create without assistance?[4]

The image we inherited

Still, Descartes was never as alone as that image suggests. He read voraciously before that legendary day: Aristotle, Augustine,

3 Edgar Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes: Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Antike und des Frühkapitalismus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926); Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.

4 Gregor Betz, *Descartes´„Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie“: ein systematischer Kommentar* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2011); René Descartes, *Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie* (Leipzig: Meiner, (1641) 1944); Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes*.

5 The illustrations in this piece were generated with AI in June 2026 using OpenAI's ChatGPT image generation model and Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4.8 for custom prompts.



Aquinas, Montaigne and many others. Even his method of doubt was itself inherited, adapted and refined from a long tradition of sceptical philosophy. What appears as pure interiority at first sight, turns out, on closer inspection, to be a kind of intellectual conversation with past interlocutors whose arguments had become so deeply internalised that they no longer announced themselves as external voices.[6]

What has changed with AI, then, is not that creative work has suddenly become collaborative when you use AI, but that you might be judged for no longer thinking on your own. Thinking has always involved collaboration and the (internalised) voices of others. What has changed is the form of collaboration. The interlocutor is no longer only built by the corpus one has read and absorbed, nor a living person with whom one exchanges ideas, but now, it can also be an artificial partner: frictionless, instantly available, trained on a textual archive far larger than any single human can read in a lifetime.[7]

Fig. 02
Kleist in the act of speaking, as language itself becomes the medium through which thought takes form.

6 Betz, *Descartes´"Meditationen"*. Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.
7 Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen*.

Kleist's counter-image

In 1805, Heinrich von Kleist described a model of thinking that contrasts with the image of the solitary scholar. Kleist imagined a person speaking to whomever happens to be present to form his thoughts: a friend, a sister, a colleague or in an extreme case, as Kleist famously remarked, even a dog or a stove. So, talking to an AI model is less a revolution than perpetuating a concept of creative work that goes back to Socrates, as we will see.[8]

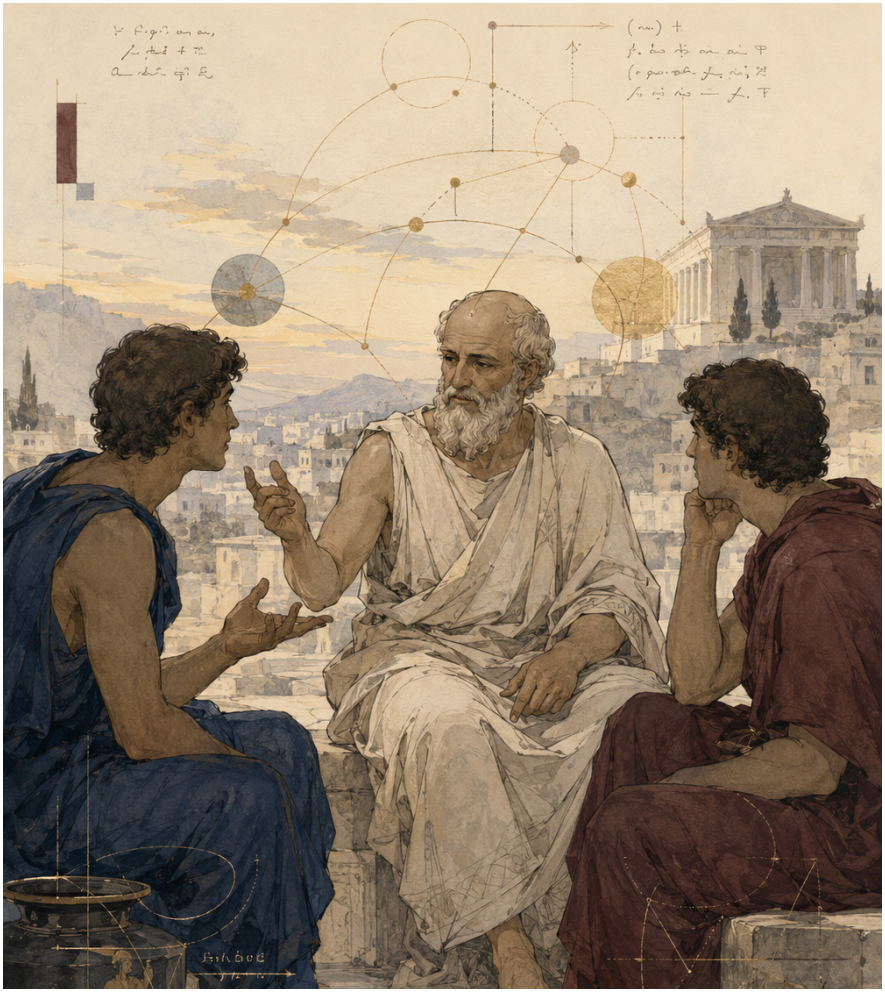
While cognitive science might have a different view of how thinking is synchronised with speaking, claiming that thought is always first, Kleist's concept feels very relatable and important to the transformation of creativity through AI, as creative work with AI requires language. Conversational interaction in the form of voice messages and live chats are an important mode of working with AI today. In that sense, the (spoken) prompt is more than simply an instruction for a tool; it can be understood as a thinking act. Formulating a question in conversation with an AI model requires the same kind of intellectual effort that Kleist associated with speaking to an Other.[9]

Many centuries before Kleist, Socrates had grasped something similar to Kleist's idea of how speech forms thought. Socrates's method was to interrogate assumptions instead of delivering conclusions,[10] such that thoughts emerge through conversation with another person, animal, subject or chatbot. Kleist noted that even a half-attentive listener or simply the anticipation of being heard (dog) was often sufficient to set thinking in motion. He believed that the pressure of having to articulate a thought matters more than the listener's intelligence. An AI model that responds coherently and without judgment (unless you ask for it) creates precisely that pressure, especially since the quality of AI answers depends on the quality of your questions. It is, of course, not a substitute for human dialogue, but it is a structurally similar condition to the methods described by Kleist and Socrates.

What creativity was

Creativity can be subject to various understandings. The idea that it names a universal human capacity, something everyone possesses and every culture has always recognised, conceals a more particular history.[11] The history of creativity in other cultures reveals why the supposed threat of AI towards creativity

8 Heinrich von Kleist, 'Über die allmählige Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden', in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Roland Reuß and Peter Staengle, vol. 2, *Erzählungen, kleine Prosa, Gedichte, Briefe*, (München: Hanser, 2010); Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
9 Kleist, 'Über die allmählige Verfertigung'; Pinker, *The Language Instinct*.
10 Günter Figal, *Sokrates* (München: C.H. Beck, 1995).
11 Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.



depends on the European understanding of creativity. In the Confucian tradition, appropriateness, as the capacity to act, judge and write fittingly in the moral and textual order is a higher virtue than originality. The great commentators of the Song dynasty understood tradition as the condition of creativity, not a constraint. To work in an inherited framework, to refine one's judgement through engagement with received texts, was itself a form of creative mastery.[12]

A similar strand appears in the Islamic world. Al-Farabi, the scholar who synthesised Aristotle with Islamic theology, located creative thought between imagination and the intellect. He aimed to refine himself into a more precise instrument for the transmission and transformation of shared knowledge. The individual, in his understanding, was less source than medium, which resonates unexpectedly today, as an AI model is also a medium that processes, recombines and transmits what creativity has already produced.[13]

12 Charlene Tan, 'A Confucian Interpretation of Creativity', *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 54, no. 3 (2020); Weihua Niu, 'Confucian Ideology and Creativity', *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 46, no. 4 (2013).

13 Abū-Naṣr Muḥammad Ibn-Muḥammad Farabi, *Al-Farabi: The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts* (Ithaca, USA: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Fig. 03
Socrates conversing in the Athenian agora, where thought emerges not in isolation but through dialogue.



In many precolonial West African traditions, knowledge was collective, performative and embodied. The griot, the keeper of genealogies, memory and moral authority, was living archive, shaping inherited material through each new act of transmission rather than an author pursuing originality.[14] Doesn't this resemble interactions with AI? This third example again underlines that creativity was subject to different understandings in other historical and cultural contexts. What unites the three examples is a shared understanding of the self as a node in a network rather than a sovereign point of origin. From that perspective, AI reveals the collaborative infrastructure that was always already there. It even shaped the European pre-modern era: in medieval scriptoria, monks also viewed themselves more as mediums of a textual and divine tradition, whose creative merit lay in compiling and annotating existing knowledge, than as autonomous authors.[15]

Fig. 04
A global constellation of creativity, linking Confucian scholarship, Islamic philosophy and West African oral tradition.

14 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

15 Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scholar Press, 1984).



Two barriers

Still, merely adjusting our perspective with a historical approach does not safeguard creativity, as there are real threats to creativity and everyone working with AI, especially in the humanities. While AI does not destroy creativity but rather questions modern European understandings of it, we must still face the problem that AI provides easy, coherent solutions to complex questions. As contradictory as it may sound, the easy, coherent solutions are exactly where the real threat of AI for creativity lies.

The phenomenon of writer's block actually covers two experiences. The first is structural: you know what you want to say, but you cannot find where to begin. The problem is the blank page. In the tradition of Descartes, it is the challenge of one's creative independence. AI can be genuinely useful here as it can offer a provisional frame, suggest an initial structure and produce an opening sentence that can be accepted, rejected or reshaped to overcome this barrier.

Fig. 05
A contemporary writer faces AI as both creative partner and historical filter, where collaboration may open new possibilities while quietly reproducing old exclusions.

The second form of writer's block is different. It often appears in the middle of thinking, because it is epistemological rather than structural. Imagine you are already thinking and writing, following your creative process, and then suddenly the movement stops. The barrier is more chasm than wall because you realise with unease that your argument has reached the edge of what you know, but there is still a gap to cross. Turning to AI, using the Socratic method, again can be fruitful with the requisite caution.

Of course, every interaction with AI needs caution, as there are biases, hallucinations and the problem of statistical probability, which I will address below, but the problem demanding caution here is different. As the AI's answer is most likely coherent, elegant, plausible and fully aligned with your surrounding text and ideas on the page, the temptation to traverse the chasm using the AI-generated answer without question is strong, as it promises the relief of overcoming the blockade. But did you?

Using dialogue with AI to solve a problem, create something, overcome a barrier and develop your own ideas is comparable to Descartes, who turned to internalised arguments and ideas of authors he had read. But in this case, AI 'read' and internalised arguments and ideas in the training corpus for you. It is also comparable to Socrates's method of dialogue. Still, using AI without proper dialogue and questioning its answers can foreshorten the thought process that the barrier interrupted. Your work may continue, but the thought may have stopped short. Sure, AI can develop your thoughts further in one answer, but you might not realise your genuine creative potential unless you really think for yourself all the way. Otherwise, you will lose more than originality in the romantic sense; you'll lose all the chance of arriving anywhere unpredictable. AI really threatens creativity when the demand for speed and efficiency makes easy solutions more tempting, which is especially problematic when your creative product requires the time to read, think and write.[16] While this text primarily addresses creativity in terms of thought processes, research, and textual composition, these reflections apply equally to creative practices such as photography and videography. Here, too, we are expected to produce creative work at the push of a button, whereas genuine achievement in these fields demands (internal) dialogue and depth.

Building AI literacy,[17] developing the cultural and intellectual competence to distinguish between different moments in the creative process when working with AI, can disarm this threat, though we still have a long way to go, especially in the humanities. It will require profound judgement and education beyond simple technical literacy to encompass formulating questions precisely

16 Newman, *How Great Ideas Happen*.

17 AI literacy means knowledge and skills that enable people to understand, critically evaluate and use AI responsibly, effectively and ethically while retaining meaningful human judgment and control.

and understanding a subject with sufficient depth to evaluate the quality, relevance and limitations of AI-generated output. Without that foundation, creative collaboration with AI substitutes rather than enhances creativity.

Narrative levelling

There is another threat I address in my research as *narrative levelling*.[18] AI models are trained on vast archives of existing writing, while they remain probabilistic instruments, generating what is most likely to follow from what preceded. Again, the problem is that the fluent, coherent and apparently well-supported answers tend to converge on what is already sayable in the middle of an existing, mediocre distribution.

That's narrative levelling. It describes how AI can flatten difference by rendering thought more probable and more conventional among most sources, especially sources those who trained the models value highly, which might not reflect their scholarly value. The result is polished mediocrity packed into a smooth, convincing answer. Precisely because the output is often persuasive, the danger is as easy to miss as the shortcut across the chasm.

For historiography and for all research that depends on creative thinking, narrative levelling is a major problem because knowledge advances at its edges. AI, which is optimised for probability, is structurally ill-suited to that task. In fact, it actually limits creativity. Yes, AI can assist research in many ways, but it does not naturally incline towards the marginal, the dissonant or the yet-unarticulated. This is also one reason that the humanities may prove unusually important in the coming age of AI. The humanities are supposed to read against surface coherence, to attend to ambiguity and to ask what a fluent answer leaves out. As AI is exceptionally good at producing convincing continuities, disciplines concerned with rupture, silence, contradiction and interpretation will gain value.

The long history of changed minds

Every major technology of thought has its companion anxiety. Past centuries display a pattern: a new tool appears, anxiety arrives with it, and the anxiety turns out to be partly right and mostly wrong. Socrates feared that writing would damage memory, and it did indeed change memory, but was that change simply a loss?[19] Centuries later, the printing press transformed knowledge

18 See Felix Ehlers, 'Maschinelle Narrative', in *Künstliche Intelligenz und Unternehmensreputation. Zwischen algorithmischer Macht, unternehmerischer Verantwortung und öffentlichem Vertrauen*, ed. Florian Müller and Ulrich Bihler (Berlin: Springer, 2026).

19 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).



Fig. 06
Human and artificial intelligence reach toward one another in a contemporary reimagining of creation, where authorship, imagination and technological mediation meet in a fruitful tension.

and who could produce it. Yes, the change entailed some loss, like the individual scribe's artistry, as each manuscript, once a unique object shaped by hand, was replaced by an identical, mechanically reproducible copy, but wasn't it a decisive win for many subsequent historical processes?[20] Similar anxieties accompanied the rise of photography, which seemed to threaten painting, and the rise of cinema, which seemed to unsettle theatre. We are seeing comparable debates in our own time around smartphones and social media, whose effects on attention spans, social life and cognition are indeed more than merely speculative. We also see the pattern unfolding around AI, again not without reason.

Each transformation was experienced as the end of something essential, but each was also the beginning of something that the fearful could not imagine. What changed without being lost is the capacity to think, to be creative and the architecture within which creativity takes place. The question that AI poses us in every act of

20 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (New York: New American Library, 1969).

writing, every generated sentence, every encounter with a source, every moment when an epistemological barrier opens and AI offers to close it effortlessly is one we have always faced with our tools: what do I still wish to do for myself, what am I still capable of doing for myself, and what am I willing to have the tool do for me? That is an anthropological question, it is also a philosophical question and, in an age increasingly tempted by the frictionless assistance of artificial intelligence, it is perhaps even a sign of decadence.

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