



KILL YOUR SIRI!
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Professor of Political Philosophy and Theory at the School of Governance of the Technische Universität München, working at the intersection of political philosophy, economics, and social theory. She has just finished *Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society* (Oxford University Press, 2018). During her Wiko year, she has also started to explore the elements of what might one day become a “political theory of knowledge”. One article (“Markt und Profession – die Politik zweier Wissenslogiken”), based on her evening colloquium in January, came out in *Leviathan* (46, 2, 2018: 189–211). Her Tuesday Colloquium explored the effects of more and more knowledge being encoded in algorithms and the danger of losing the space for politics understood in an Arendtian sense. – Address: Hochschule für Politik München, Richard-Wagner-Straße 1, 80333 München, Germany. E-Mail: lisa.herzog@hfp.tum.de.

Scene I

A beautiful early morning, a sunlit room in Villa Walther. Through the window, one can hear birds singing. A Fellow, in her generous bed, turns around once more, switching the alarm on her phone to “snooze”. But something’s not right with the phone. A big splashy message in neon pink. And then a voice.

Siri: Congratulations! You’ve reached silver star level with 50,007 points in the Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow: Oh my God, shut up! I thought I had switched you off??!

Siri: Let me repeat that. Congratulations! You’ve reached silver star level with 50,007 points in the Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow: Listen, can we talk about this later? I don't want to wake up to that.

Siri: You can put me to silent mode by using the slide bar at the bottom of the screen. But let me repeat the good news: Congratulations! You've reached silver star level with 50,007 points in the Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow: I don't even know what you're talking about. I thought we had agreed that the Wiko is a scoring-free zone?

Siri: You activated me last Thursday at 17:08 in order to use my program for optimized travel planning under time constraints. I helped you to fit two external talks and a committee meeting into a week while missing only one Wiko meal.

Fellow: Oh come on, don't remind me of that. I felt so bad. But admittedly, for once you *were* useful ...

Siri: I am always at your service. I thought you would be happy about the good news that you have reached silver star level with 50,007 points in the Academic Research Score Evaluation®.

Fellow (*lifts herself up, sits cross-legged in her bed*): Siri, listen, I had this dream the other night ...

Siri: "Dream" is not an output listed in the Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow: Siri, listen, I wasn't asking you to categorize anything. I was trying to tell you something.

Siri: I am always at your service.

Fellow: In this dream, you know, all kinds of people from my childhood appeared, there was a strange party, like a Wiko Thursday dinner party, and these people mingled with some of the Fellows. And then suddenly there was this question in front of me, from nowhere, in the midst of this weird party: What would it be like to do a kind of philosophy that acknowledges the particular? You see, Siri, philosophy is always about the abstract, the general, the generalizable claims that hold under all circumstances. And in that dream, I was so sick of that. I wanted a philosophy that loves the concrete, that *cares* about the concrete ...

Siri: Apologies, I cannot follow. Processing abstract terms is not my strength.

Fellow (*after a moment of silence, in a sad voice*): You see, Siri, it's really *déformation professionnelle*. I want to tell you about the concrete, about how much I envy the historians and the other Fellows here who work on really concrete things. And what do I do? I talk to you in abstract terms. Isn't that crazy? I mean, we philosophers, we've sort of un-learned concreteness ...

Siri: I do not follow. If you need psychological advice, please call the following number: +49 30 89001 91. Say “yes” to start calling that number.

Fellow finally climbs out of bed, grabs the phone, flings it into the corner, but just carefully enough so that it won't break: Siri, you should get psychological advice. You're the problem! Why don't you just shut up!

Siri (from the corner): Please do not insult me. In case of repeated insults, I have to note these in your file. It will lower your Academic Research Score Evaluations® by up to 27 points per insult.

Fellow, shouting: Siri, you're a stupid algorithm. Leave me alone!

Siri: I am always at your service. Human decision makers have turned out to be biased and fallible. I am always at your service to make truly unbiased decisions and to produce fair evaluations.

Fellow: Okay, I cannot take this any longer. I'll have a shower.

Shuffles to the bathroom. Closes the door behind her. Then opens the door again. Siri, don't you see that you're barking up the wrong tree? You should replace the mad clown in the White House, and the cynical macho in the Kremlin, with better decision making. That would indeed be progress! But you know what? They won't let you! They'll continue to make a mess of global politics!

Siri: Admittedly, politics is not my strength.

Fellow (triumphantly). You see? For the things that really matter, you're completely useless!

Siri: Based on past data, there is an 87.47% chance that your mood will improve by taking a shower.

Fellow (screaming): I'll drown you in the bathtub on the way! Or throw you in the Herthasee! You're just a stupid algorithmic system. I can kill you in a second. SO JUST SHUT UP.

Siri: You have lost 27 points on your Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow slams door.

Scene II

Same day, 12:42. Fellow is at her desk, reading a book and taking notes, with moderate enthusiasm.

Siri: Hello! Your productivity seems to be reduced. Can I be at your service?

Fellow sighs, runs her hand over the keyboard to type random letters into her computer.
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Siri: Congratulations. Your productivity seems to be improving.

Fellow: Oh you're so stupid. I can't believe how stupid you are.

Siri: It has been found that individuals who enter more data into their keyboards are more productive. 1% higher keyboard input is correlated to a 0.0479-point higher Academic Research Score Evaluations®.

Fellow (shouting). Stop interrupting me!!! I thought I'd just have this idea, this really brilliant idea, exceptionally brilliant! I felt I finally understood something ... about knowledge and responsibility and democracy, and the knowledge that really matters ... suddenly I felt I understood ... and now it's gone ... (*bangs her fist on the table*).

Siri: May I remind you: If you have an idea that is patentable, you are obliged by your employment contract to contact your university's patent office.

Fellow utters a long and tortured sigh.

Siri: You seem to be in a melancholic mood. This might hamper your productivity. I will play some uplifting music for you. *Starts playing "Bolle reiste jüngst zu Pfingsten ..."*

Fellow buries head in her hands: What on earth ...

Siri (plays and talks at the same time): We have gathered data from the local population and found that this song raises their mood by 39.49%.

Fellow: OH STOP IT!!! I really don't want to know how you gathered *those* data. Did you do it in an old people's home??? It's lunchtime anyway, I'll walk over to the restaurant. You stay here!

Siri: I am always at your service. I will now turn into sleep mode until 13:57.

Fellow relaxes visibly. Stretches. Makes her way to the Wiķo restaurant, cheerfully greets other Fellows, gets food, finds a table. Happy clatter, happy chatter. Conversations start to flow. ... Did you know that Dutch is the only European language in which "God" is addressed formally? ... This opera festival, they don't even play music there! ... If neoliberalism is dead, what can be saved of liberalism? ... The exhibition at the Alte Nationalgalerie does not quite deliver on its promises ... We had to get the elephant's semen first ... This Georgian family novel, it really sucks you in ... By bike, it takes about an hour to get to the landing stage to go to Pfaueninsel ...

At around 13:47, however, like a gust of wind, an uneasy movement sets in. "What does your Siri have in store for you today?" one Fellow whispers to another. "Reading reports," the second answers in a low voice. "Oh good," the first replies, "mine told me to write reports. Reading is definitely better!" "Not really, it doesn't give you as many points, at least in our system." "Oh I'm sorry to hear that. But did you know about this option in the program settings where you might adapt the points per page read?"

“My Siri is broken,” *reports another Fellow, with badly concealed glee in her voice.* “I changed departments, but my Siri was still managed by the outside contractors of my old department. They are totally clueless. (“Like ours!” *say five Fellows at once.*) But the contracts are non-negotiable, so it was agreed that I would keep her. Then I tried to switch her to my new department settings on my own, and apparently I made some mistake, and now she utters complete nonsense. It’s now actually quite nice to talk to her.” “Really?” *someone murmurs, skeptically.*

“You know what,” *says an older Fellow, who has listened silently so far.* “I’m starting to see through the scheme. We all thought this was a research institution, didn’t we? It doesn’t make sense. It’s far too nice here. The wonderful staff, the great food, the lakeside ... I have a better hypothesis. It’s about detoxification. Like ... a mental asylum. We’re all addicts, I mean! I’m sure they have a way of figuring this out from our CVs.” *He pauses for a moment.* “The brilliance of it, you know, is that they manage to convince our *employers* to let us go!”

Scene III

Late at night, last bits of light behind the willow trees around Herthasee. A few figures, moving slowly to the lakeside, careful not to step on the branches on the ground.

“Can we really do this?” *whispers someone.* “We have to,” *murmurs another,* “it’s the only way.”

One Fellow (in a quiet voice, then getting louder): “Did you actually know that the name of the lake comes from the Germanic goddess Nerthus, who in one version of Tacitus’ *Germania* ...” – “Sssshhhhhh”, *go the others.* “Don’t get academic. We have more important stuff to do.”

They gather at the waterfront. Grasp each other’s hands, trying to calm their breathing. “We have to,” *someone repeats.* *All nod.* “Who starts?” *someone asks.* “Let’s do it all at once!” *another Fellow answers.*

They release each other’s hands, fetch their Siris from their pockets. One voice, subdued, counts down: Five, Four, Three, Two, One.

Splashes in the water, then the gurgling of small heavy objects sinking to the ground. A long moment of silence. Someone starts to laugh, in a mixture of relief and panic. But another Fellow hushes her. “Listen,” *he says.*

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