The Meanings in
the Machine

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Meanings matter to people. Meanings are our symbolic representation of the world, helping us make sense of life and communicate with one another. We constantly define, interpret, translate, and express meanings—often unconsciously, usually implicitly.

Many philosophers and psychologists would say that meaning-making is an intrinsically human activity, maybe even the defining human activity. But that’s changing.

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WHY NOW?
In the past, computers didn’t participate in the human world. We programmed them in simulated worlds in their own language. They figured stuff out in that world, and returned a result for us to use in our world. Remember the old saying “garbage in, garbage out”?

But computing objects are increasingly entering our world, sensing what’s going on around them in real time and being asked to respond directly in our language.

Future nonhuman companions will need to not only sense but also make sense—smell the “rotting garbage” and toss it out.

Although computers won’t have human consciousness, they’ll have sentience—the capacity to feel, perceive, or experience subjectively.

Because we don’t think like computers and computers don’t think like us, we’ll need a shared language to communicate. I think that shared language just might be meanings.

MAKING MEANINGS EXPLICIT AND SYSTEMATIC
Spoken language is the first frontier for human–nonhuman communication. Anybody living with Alexa or Google Home is getting a glimpse of how talking to your computer changes the relationship.

But we’re also becoming painfully aware of words’ limitations. So much meaning lies in the implicit and unspoken.

Meanings are rich, contextual, and shared. They create relationships, communities, cultures, and markets.

Meanings are also easy to dismiss as transient, invisible, abstract, and difficult.

But as meanings become the de facto currency of collaboration with technology, we must acknowledge that they exist, better understand how they develop, and learn to create new ones effectively.

Thus, meanings will move from the implicit to explicit. From the accidental to the systemic. From the shadow to the light.

FROM HUMAN-TO MEANING-CENTERED DESIGN
I recently told fashion designers that future technology will need its own fashion and accessories to participate effectively in this world. If fashion is an expression of the self, perhaps it can help us understand the subjective experience of these sentient but nonhuman objects: when they’re confused and overwhelmed; when they need our care and attention; when they have a new perspective to offer that could improve, or even save, our lives. This will require us to understand our own meanings and translate them so that the machines understand us. And then we’ll need to translate meanings back, so that we’ll understand the machines.

Are you prepared to think about meanings and technology in this way? If not, it’s time to start. Meanings matter to people—and will matter to robots, too.

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