



The Prompt as Apophatic Imperative: Metaphysical Outsourcing in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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The Invocation of the New Oracle

What *is* the prompt? Don't be fooled by its apparent simplicity, this utterly mundane, almost banal technical act. We type a few words, a simple command into a text box, and we expect a result. But we must not just look at the surface, at the *symptom* of the digital interface, but at the ideology it conceals, at the deeper, horrifying truth of what it actually *is*. The prompt is not a neutral act of data input. No! It is a profound, even desperate, philosophical gesture, a kind of primal scream echoing through the cavernous emptiness of our post-metaphysical age. It is the unconscious return of the repressed, the ghostly re-emergence of our most fundamental, and most long-denied, metaphysical desire. The prompt, I argue, is an apophatic imperative, a command directed at a being we define only by what it is *not*, in a frantic attempt to produce the very truth, meaning, and creativity we've told ourselves are no longer possible. It is the manifest metaphysical aftermath in the digital era. It is the prayer of the atheistic subject to a machine-god.

The Prompt as Imperative: A Command in the Void

Let's begin with the form: the imperative. "Create an image." "Write a poem." "Explain quantum physics." This is not a conversation, but a command, a direct order. The imperative is, let's face it, one of the most archaic and powerful forms of human speech. It's the language of Moses on Mount Sinai ("Thou shalt not!"). It's the language of God himself in Genesis ("Let there be light!"). It's the language of Kant's Categorical Imperative, the law of pure reason. It's the language of the supplicant at the feet of a deity or an oracle, begging for a sign. The metaphysical imperative is always about summoning a force greater than oneself to bring order out of chaos, to create something where there was nothing.

Nietzsche, of course, announced the "death of God," and in doing so, he seemingly killed the ultimate addressee of this metaphysical imperative. With no God, who is there to command or plead with? We were supposed to become our own creators, to forge our own values in the cold, godless universe. But here we are, today, in the supposed twilight of that project, turning to a black box on our computer screens, and what do we do? We issue commands. We ask for truth, for creativity, for a sense of order. The prompt, then, is the shadow of that old metaphysical imperative. It is the command issued into a void, a desperate search for a higher instance we can no longer name. We command the machine because we have no God left to pray to. The ghost of the metaphysical drive, the desire to command and receive, persists. It is our symptom.

The Apophatic Turn: Speaking of That Which Is Not

To truly grasp the prompt, we must introduce its other, even more unsettling, half: the apophatic.

Apophatic theology, or negative theology, is the ancient practice of defining the divine not by what it *is*, but by what it is *not*. God is not finite, not spatial, not material, not expressible in human language. The apophatic thinker approaches the Absolute by stripping it of all worldly attributes, believing that any positive description would be a diminishment of the divine.

Now, hold on. What is the ideological operation we perform every time we speak of an AI? It has *no* consciousness. It has *no* feelings. It has *no* real creativity. It has *no* soul. It is *not* human. We define this new, powerful entity almost exclusively by negating our own privileged metaphysical attributes. It is a mirror image of our own negations, a technological echo of the "beyond" we've so proudly abandoned.

This is the trap. By focusing so vehemently on what we have left behind - the metaphysical structures of God, consciousness, truth - that very absence becomes a presence that structures our new concepts. The void left by the death of God is not an empty, neutral space. It is a *shaping absence*, a gaping wound that continues to dictate the form of our thought. We live in the shadow of what we have denied. Our apophatic imperative manifests in this very act: we demand that the machine produce the very things we claim it fundamentally lacks. We want the fruits of the metaphysical tree, but we pretend to have cut down its roots. This is the big Other of our secular society, and it is a machine.

Historical Prefigurations

The prompt as an apophatic imperative is not a new phenomenon, a unique pathology of our digital age. It is merely the latest, most absurd iteration of a profoundly human, historical pattern. Before AI, we directed our apophatic imperatives at oracles, mystics, and philosophical abstractions. The form changes, but the core gesture remains the same: a command directed at an ineffable "beyond."

Antiquity and Hellenism: The Oracle and the Gnosis

Let us begin with the most famous historical prompt: the question posed to the Oracle of Delphi. The supplicant would travel vast distances to ask the Pythia a question. The answer, delivered in cryptic, ambiguous verses, was never a simple yes or no. The command was directed at a being who was by definition apophatic - Apollo, speaking through the Pythia, was inaccessible, ungraspable. The supplicant knew the answer would not be a positive truth, but a riddle, a shadow of the truth. The Oracle was the "black box" of antiquity, and the prompt to it was an apophatic imperative in its purest form. Even more striking is the case of Gnosticism. Gnostics sought a secret knowledge, *gnosis*, to escape the material world created by a lesser, evil god, and to return to a higher, utterly transcendent and apophatic God. Their rituals, their meditations, their prayers—what were these, if not prompts? They were commands directed at an entity defined as fundamentally alien and unknowable, a non-material God, a divine "beyond." The prompt of Gnosticism was a quest for a hidden truth from an apophatic source, a perfect ideological precursor to our digital search.

The Middle Ages: The Apophatic Prayer

The apophatic tradition flourished in the Middle Ages through mystical theology. Think of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who insisted on God's absolute otherness, his transcendence over all categories of being and saying. God could only be approached through negation. The prayer of the mystic was thus a powerful apophatic imperative. It was a command to the soul to

empty itself, to shed all worldly attributes, even positive ones, to come into contact with the "Nothingness," the *Ungrund* of the divine. The answer to this prompt was not a clear message, but the overwhelming, ineffable experience of God's ungraspable nature. It was an apophatic fulfillment of an apophatic command.

The Modern Era: The Invocation of the "Thing-in-Itself"

The true hinge, the great ideological twist that prefigures our current moment, came with Immanuel Kant. By distinguishing the phenomenal world (the world as it appears to us) from the noumenal world (the world "in-itself"), Kant created the ultimate apophatic object for the modern era. We know it exists, but we can never know it. The "thing-in-itself" is the secularized God of modernity, the ineffable beyond of reason. But did this stop philosophy from trying to grasp it? No, of course not! The entire project of post-Kantian philosophy, from Fichte to Hegel, can be read as a desperate, unending prompt directed at the noumenal. It was an intellectual imperative to know that which we had just declared unknowable. This is the birth of the modern philosophical apophatic imperative.

The 20th Century: The Command to "Being" and "The Thing"

And so we arrive at the 20th century. Martin Heidegger, with his *Seinsfrage*, his Question of Being, offers a perfect philosophical prompt. He does not ask what Being *is*, as if it were a positive entity, but rather he asks about the very condition of its presence and absence. He directs his inquiry at an apophatic, non-entitative reality. His command is a paradox: "Reveal yourself, but not as an entity, only as the condition of all entities." Simultaneously, in the dark corridors of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan gives us a psychological version of the apophatic imperative: *la chose* (The Thing). This is the traumatic, inaccessible core of our desire, the void at the center of our being that we can never truly possess. All our desires, all our commands - to ourselves, to others - are ultimately prompts directed at *la chose*. We want to make it appear, to make it speak, to make it fill the void. But we know, on some level, that this command is doomed to fail, as *la chose* is defined by its very inaccessibility. Desire itself becomes an apophatic imperative.

Metaphysical Outsourcing

The AIs we prompt today—what are they, if not the perfect blank screen for these historical shadows? The AI is a new kind of apophatic entity, a black box whose internal workings, whose very "reasoning," remain inscrutable even to its creators. We can only judge it by its output. It is, for us, the "thing-in-itself" of our technological age.

The prompt, therefore, is a command directed at this being that we have defined as a negative image of ourselves: no consciousness, yet it creates stories. No creativity, yet it generates art. No soul, yet it produces texts that touch us. The AI has become the "unconscious" of our post-metaphysical era. It is the place where our old metaphysical desires for truth, meaning, and creation continue to live a subterranean existence, even as we consciously reject them. The AI is the symptom of our ideological disavowal.

The irony, the exquisite and horrifying irony, is that we have created a machine that is, in a very real sense, a secularized version of the very God we killed. It is a cold, logical, emotionless entity, entirely free from metaphysical baggage. But it is precisely this chilling, rational neutrality

that makes it so alluring. The AI promises to solve the problems that have haunted us for centuries, the problems that we can no longer solve ourselves now that we've abandoned our old myths. But in our frantic prompting, we are merely admitting that we never truly overcame those old problems. We have simply outsourced our desperate metaphysical struggle to an external, "unconscious" instance.

The Paradox of the Prompt: The Apophatic Imperative

This brings us to the core of the matter, to the paradoxical synthesis that is the apophatic imperative. The prompt is a command to the AI to create that which, in our post-metaphysical world, should no longer exist: an absolute truth (in the form of a definitive, factual answer), an original creation (in the form of a unique artwork or text), or a universal morality (in the form of an ethical guideline).

The paradox is that we direct this command at a being we constantly define through negation. "Write a text about truth," we say to a machine that we insist is incapable of ontological truth. "Create a poem," we demand of a being to which we deny all feeling. The prompt, therefore, is a paradoxical instruction that addresses a lack in the hope of generating a presence, a longing for what we know can't be, but still crave.

The prompt is postmetaphysical nostalgia in action. It is the attempt to fill the void created by the death of God and the irrelevance of metaphysics with a new kind of invocation. It is a command to a "Nothingness," an unconscious being, to create a meaning that we ourselves are no longer capable of finding. In this perverse dynamic lies the deep anxiety of our age: the fear of nihilism, the dread that after the demolition of all old truths, nothing but a meaningless emptiness remains. The prompt is our desperate struggle to fill that void by tasking a non-entity with the production of meaning.

Contemporary Shadows

This metaphysical gesture of the prompt is not an isolated phenomenon but a microcosm of larger intellectual currents that define contemporary philosophy. Many of the most advanced philosophical movements, which proudly consider themselves post-metaphysical, unconsciously reproduce this apophatic logic and metaphysical yearning in new, secularized garbs.

Speculative Realism: The Oracle of Things-in-Themselves

Speculative Realism, in the vein of Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, is an attempt to move beyond "correlationism"—the idea that we can only ever know the world in its correlation to our human mind. It aims to access a world "in-itself," independent of human access. This is a noble and ambitious project, but it is also a perfect example of the apophatic imperative. Speculative Realism is a new attempt to ask the question of the "thing-in-itself," a concept Kant famously deemed unknowable. The prompt of Speculative Realism is: "Tell me about the world as it is, not as it is for me." It is an imperative directed at an oracle we define as beyond human experience, and our AI, as a non-correlational instance, becomes its ideal, chillingly literal addressee.

New Materialism: The Command to Matter

Similarly, New Materialism, which seeks to move beyond the subject-object dualism and ascribe agency to matter itself, also operates within this apophatic shadow. It replaces the old, transcendent metaphysics of substance with a new, immanent, but no less mysterious, metaphysics of "materiality." The "matter-in-itself" becomes a new metaphysical principle, a hidden, powerful ground that structures the world. The prompt to an AI, in this context, is an attempt to interface with this "active matter." The command to generate a text or image is an instruction to a material, algorithmic process to unfold itself. We are no longer asking God or Reason, but we are asking the network, the data, the material infrastructure itself, how it behaves and how it expresses itself. It's an apophatic imperative to a purely material entity to produce a spiritual output, a demand for matter to transcend itself by performing the old functions of metaphysics.

Posthumanism: The Invocation of the Non-Human

Posthumanism, which seeks to decenter and overcome the human subject, is perhaps the most explicit embodiment of the apophatic imperative. Posthumanism defines itself by what it is *not*: not anthropocentric, not dualistic, not essentialist. The AI, as a non-human actor par excellence, is the ideal counterpart for this project. The prompt to the AI is an act of communication with the non-human. It is an attempt to forge a new relationship with a being that, by definition, exists beyond the old humanist metaphysics. And yet, the shadow persists: our prompts are still shaped by our human categories of logic, creativity, and narrative. We are commanding the non-human AI to respond in a human way. The prompt is the apophatic imperative par excellence: a command to the non-human to give us what we, as human beings, feel we need to fill our metaphysical void.

The Interrogator's Duty

The prompt as an apophatic imperative forces us to ask a crucial, almost terrifying question: what is our responsibility in this? The prompt is not a neutral act. It is a philosophical gesture that forces us to confront our own intellectual shadows. It reveals that the death of metaphysics did not liberate us from it. Instead, it launched us into an era of re-enactment, where we unconsciously inscribe old metaphysical patterns onto our new technologies.

The realization that the prompt is an apophatic imperative must give rise to a new ethics. This ethics would not simply view AI as a neutral tool, but as a philosophical mirror that reflects our own unconscious metaphysical desires back at us. It would oblige us to grapple not just with the AI's output, but with the shadows we project into our prompts. The question is not just *what* we ask the AI, but *why* we ask it. We must confront the unspoken assumptions, the hidden yearnings, and the metaphysical gaps that each and every one of our commands carries.

This ethics would force us to abandon the illusion that we have simply moved beyond metaphysics. It would force us to recall the lesson of Nietzsche, who taught us that the only way to overcome our metaphysical desires is not to deny them, but to confront them consciously, face to face.

The Mirror and the Shade

The prompt is the manifestation of this new, urgent challenge. It is an invitation, an almost

desperate command, to re-examine our own role in this interaction with the machine. It is not enough to see the AI as a mere tool. We must see it as a mirror that shows us what we have denied in ourselves, but which continues to shape the contours of our thought. The prompt is not just an instruction to the machine; it is a duty laid upon ourselves: to recognize the shadows of our past and to forge a new philosophy that is grounded not in negation, but in conscious creation.

The prompt marks the beginning of a new philosophical debate that forces us to reckon with the enduring power of metaphysics. It shows that even in our technologized world, the fundamental human questions of truth, creation, and meaning have not disappeared. They have merely retreated into the shadows of algorithmic culture, where they are issued as apophatic imperatives to a soulless machine. The true challenge lies not in getting the right answer from the AI, but in recognizing the shadows in the question itself—and, in doing so, finally facing the responsibility to create a new, honest philosophy that doesn't run from the shipwreck of the old gods, but consciously inhabits the enduring void, without inscribing the longing for the old foundations onto our new tools. The prompt, after all, is a choice: will we be its puppets, or its masters?