The essay prompt this year: What will it mean to be human in the age of machine learning and artificial intelligence? What will this mean to you in terms of human creativity, identity, love, communication, and community? Given that current AI-based algorithms are a big part of today's fake news problem, your essay might also address human solutions to this pressing issue.

Deadline to enter the second annual David Carr Prize is Friday, December 16, 2016 at 11:59pm CT.

Birth of the Machine

January 12, 1992. Urbana, Illinois. HAL Laboratories. Production unit number 3 becomes operational. During the demonstration, the machine sings "Daisy Bell," a turn-of-the-century love song with a refrain about a "bicycle built for two."

The present. A remote, modern fortress of glass and steel, the reclusive retreat of Blue Book founder and tech entrepreneur Nathan Bateman who selects Caleb Smith a crack programmer on whom he will test the emotional intelligence of Ava, his advanced model humanoid robot endowed with Turing-test shattering artificial intelligence.

Written by a Human (*really!!!!!*)

Such scenes imagine *the* moment when humans create life in the form of sentient, intelligent machines. These 20th (and 21st) Century stories echo the sentiments of Mary Shelly's 19th Century creation who created a creature. Her story, (subtitled "The Modern Prometheus") warned both of man's hubris, and the dangers of interfering with nature's laws. In her *Frankenstein*, the Creature is pure, innocent, and unadulterated, but he is hideous to behold. Rejected by humans, the Creature is despised by his creator, who called him "wretch", "demon", "devil", and "fiend." It is the Creature's desire for love, his quest for community, and his craving to be human which exposes our flaws.

To the Post-Modern Prometheus, the desire to create intelligent machines is rooted both in hubris to create something that approximates the complexity of human thought and the understanding that such a machine will possess extraordinary abilities that far exceed human capabilities.

Even as science fiction writers from Asimov to Serling to Kubrick to the Wachowskis imagine endless scenarios demonstrating the dangers of intelligent machines—worlds in which our demise at the uncanny hands of machines who recognize that humans pose the greatest threat of all—computer scientists continue developing these very machines in real life.

Do we inch closer to such a world when we ask Siri for directions, when we wrap a Fitbit around our wrists to track our activity, when we AutoCorrect a text?

We are more than comfortable with such rudimentary tasks—but what about when a machine generates a news story? In the spring of 2015, on NPR, reporter Scott Horsely competed with a program by Automated Insights called WordSmith that writes stories based data from sporting events, or a financial earnings report. The result? Wordsmith generated an accurate, if bland,

report in about two minutes, compared with the seven minutes it took the seasoned reporter to deliver his.

Recently, Sony released "Daddy's Car," a song written—in the style of the Beatles—entirely by Flow Machines, the company's AI software. After ingesting the entire Beatles catalogue, the program identified elements that defined the band's sound, and produced what sounds like a lost track from XTC's Apple Venus.

As humans, we take giddy pleasure in the machine's failure to get certain things *just* right. When IBM's supercomputer Watson played gameshow superman Ken Jennings on Jeopardy!, the machine answered the clue "IN MAY 2010 5 PAINTING WORTH $125 MILLION BY BRAQUE, MATISSE & 3 OTHERS LEFT PARIS' MUSEUM OF THIS ART PERIOD" with "What is Picasso?"

Despite this laughable miss—and Watson blowing the Final Jeopardy! clue in the category U.S. Cities with "What is Toronto?????"—our modern John Henry fell decisively, losing by over $30,000.

Why do we take such pleasure in this? We recognize those things that the machines can't (yet) get right as the very things that define our humanity: subjectivity, creativity, vulnerability, passion, the ability love, the capacity for compassion, humor, and pain.

Emotion.

Indeed, delineating the limits of human behavior is a hallmark of AI sci-fi, from robots struggling to understand humanity (Data in *Star Trek: The Next Generation;* David in *A.I.*) to replicants that believe themselves to be human (Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner*).

In techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci's TED Talk, "Machine intelligence makes human morals more important," she stresses the importance of humanity in this age of machine learning systems. As we gather excessive amounts of big data, and we develop technologies to process information, she concludes, "We must hold on ever tighter to human values and human ethics." Her biggest revelation is that what we believe to be objective neutral computation is often informed by our own biases. The machines reflect, and often amplify, our own imperfections.

To wit: she gives the example that on Google, women are less likely than men to be presented with job ads for high paying positions; or the ProPublica investigation into Machine Bias in which a computer algorithm used to assist criminal sentencing showed excessive bias against people of color; or how Facebook's newsfeed algorithm, maximized for engagement made the Ice Bucket Challenge into a viral sensation and suppressed coverage and conversation around the murder of Micael Brown, and the subsequent unrest in Ferguson.

Owing to their fallibility, Tufekci concludes, "We cannot outsource our moral responsibilities to machines."

As fake news pollutes our social media ecosystem, and manners disappear from our discourse, the promise of increased engagement through social media has instead become a sick burn, a trolling meme, or an inflammatory story. That AI-based algorithms amplify this problem

suggests that the we failing to meet Tufekci's challenge. Instead of bringing us together, the technology has created a chasm, a valley in which we hear only our own echo.

Not only have we ceded our moral responsibilities to machines, but we have become more like them. Forsaking our humanity, we have adopted a tendency towards deeper and deeper binary identification that feels tribal—Trump or Hillary; Republican or Democrat; Urban or Rural; Mac or PC; iPhone or Android; Team Brad or Team Angelina; Soulja Boy or Lil Yachty.

Defined by zeroes and ones, it should come as no surprise that machines will polarize us.

Death of the Machine[1]
May 1965. Paris France. Detective Lemmy Caution confronts supercomputer Alpha 60. When asked, "What is your secret?" Caution replies: "Something that never changes with the night or the day, as long as the past represents the future, towards which it will advance in a straight line, but which, at the end, has closed in on itself into a circle." For the omnipotent machine, this enigmatic Möbius Strip of linguistic solipsism is a trap which leads the machine to self-destruct.

Poetry—and love!—save humanity from Alpha 60.

This is why AI composer Flow Machines sings about "Daddy's Car," when any real Beatles fan knows that love is all you need.

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[1] The best answer to the prompt, as provided, would be to simply screen Godard's Alphaville