Prophecy: *Prediction, Power, and the Fight for the Future, From Ancient Oracles to AI* (2026)

by *Carissa Véliz* **Summary by Helen Reynolds** https://itsalearningcurve.education/

Content	Questions/Thoughts
Prelude/Overture: What's in a prediction? AI algorithms are making predictions (Ps) all the time, without your permission, no oversight. P is advantageous for humans evolutionarily. We dislike uncertainty → like prophets/prophecies. 'Naïve view of prediction' = quest for knowledge (K)/truth, misses 5 crucial characteristics: They are 1. guesses, 2. wishful 3. about power 4. sometimes impossible 5. can be harmful. Ps can be made using a. gut feeling b. data (D) c. AI (have different accuracy/legitimacy).	• How do we think about the predictions of AI (or do we?) • How aware are we about the decisions being made without our permission? • What do we need to know to do better? • How can we live with uncertainty?
Part 1. The Promise of Prediction: **Chapter 1: Prophets and Power:** A brief history of P, or why astrologers get thrown off cliffs. Prophecy + power = kindred spirits. Historically: we want to know the same things (health/ business/ love) + predicting is a business. History: Oracle of Delphi/freelance seers (combined P with treatment). Used by healers + warriors (in medicine/war). Prone to abuse/con-artists. Ps cannot be separated from power: legitimize actions/lend authority to leaders/ prediction still in halls of power (methods have changed – use D/AI not entrails).	• Have moved from Oracles to AI • Predictions are no longer dangerous for the predictor (which is significant for AI) • Christianity supplanted astrology but did not remove it • Modern leaders used astrology (Reagan, Mitterrand)
Chapter 2: Conquering Uncertainty and Taming Risk: The mathematization of decision-making: Move to using D: maybe fate wasn't just up to the gods/world was mechanism that could be read/trust in numbers. Rise of probability theory: Disenchantment + measurement (14^{th} C→)/idea of a mechanism (like a clock) (16^{th} C →)/experiments (17^{th} C→)/trust in people → trust in numbers. Frequentist prob: feature of the world = $\frac{desirable\ outcome}{all\ outcomes}$, dice not completely unpredictable (1564, Cardano) Normal/Gaussian distribution/bell curve (1738, de Moivre, 1823, Gauss). Bayesian prob: expresses degree of certainty (Bayes, 1755). Influential considerations: juries/conviction rates/free will & determinism/distribution of errors (follow bell curve). Beginning of collecting D about people, measuring 1 person 100 times = same distribution as measuring 100 people. (1844, Quetelet). Concept of 'normal' (from 'norma', carpenter's square, right (angle) = good) → deviancy (from norm/mean). Study → sociology (coined by Compte, 1838), led to insurance, based on probs, led to Ps/rates (Lloyds, 1688). Statistics: def. info about a state, 1589. Numbers→ objective →credible →Ps believable BUT kills free will/anything we can't measure.	• AI 'biggest gamble in business history' • Concept of 'probability' is recent • Magical/mystical/spiritual replaced by rational/scientific/technical (mainly) • There isn't just one way of thinking about probability • Bell curve: 68% fall withing 1 standard deviation, 95% within 2 s.d. • Always 'follow the money' • Rutherford: "If your expt. needs statistics, you need a better expt." • Statistics not inherent: we measure → drove us to AI – 'anything' predictable
Chapter 3: The Ultimate Prediction Machine: Artificial intelligence is the new Oracle of Delphi: AI is the latest Oracle/Tech execs (TEs) (Altman/Musk/Bezos…) the new prophets. 'If we know position/motion of all particles can predict the future precisely' (Laplace (1814) → machine learning (ML) advocates think this. Two types of AI: symbolic (SAI) (write algorithm)/ML + neural net (it uses training D to improve algorithm) = both P machines (that's **all**). Went from symbolic to ML through more D (issues: theft/surveillance / scraping from internet), building computational infrastructure (issues: use of natural resources). AI Ps in: 1. Everyday life (news stories/social media/maps…) 2. Business (retail ordering/insurance/healthcare…) 3. Government (who to bomb/IRS/CDC…). History: cookies, social media D, cellphone D… gov realized it could use it, gave it to tech companies, sold it back to gov = Faustian pact. Motivation: short-term goals/re-election + naiveté (didn't realize power/money motives of TEs). Now gov is an agent of ET →rise of EdTech coinciding with fall of democracy.	• Astrologers/seers → astronomers/socio-logists→ economists →comp/data scientists/engineers • Machine learning = corporate victory (not scientific).All machine learning does is predict • Companies use our data to train AI and sell back to gov • Gov hires tech people… vice versa • Who is providing AI governance/ monitoring AI safety?
Part 2. The Perils of Prediction: **Chapter 4: Likeness to Truth:** Why educated guesses are not facts: Examples of Ps gone wrong: population crisis + food shortages/machines wouldn't fly. Likeness to truth ≠ truth. AI content can be more compelling that truth (like designer drug in form of fortune cookie). Bullshit = persuasive speech that is unconcerned with the truth. LLMs fortune tellers not truth tellers + ultimate bullshitters (technical term): can never be concerned with truth (makes for easy conspiracy theories/dangerous in medicine/law/journalism) Chatbots mirror → brain interprets that as empathy but isn't: dangerous →mental health/bad advice. Ps are speech acts but not always obvious/predicting past = finding something plausible to fill gaps. Two origins of K: reason (Descartes, Leibniz) →SAI/experience (Locke, Hume)→ ML. Going to need a combo of both →guardrails. AI can never causation, only correlation (but if that sells…) Back to stats: Frequentist (chances of happening)/Bayesian methods (degree of confidence) →always think 'which is it?'. Nature 'chancy all the way down' → quantum physics/chaos theory.	• Predictions are not facts (but they look like them, unfortunately) • What is fake by design more attractive than truth → it's designed that way! • We should know the output of AI is bullshit, and why. • Correlation does not imply causation • TEs not in it for the sciences, they're in it for the money • Numbers carry (often unjustifiable) weight but are often just made up by AI • Remember prediction ≠ to limit injustice
Chapter 5: When Predictions Become Verdicts: On the tyranny of surveillance and self-fulfilling prophecies (SFP): You can make Ps come true despotically if 1. they alter actions/belief →SFP (e.g. predict interest rates ↑, changes behavior so they go up) 2. you change the circumstances 3. you have max. surveillance – enough D mean you know (all these are). Ps are commands disguised as descriptions. A speech act (illocutionary, J. L. Austin) = not true/false, performative, doesn't describe the world (e.g. 'I name this ship…'). Ps are misleading speech acts (e.g. TE says 'in the future everyone will use AI' → attempt to influence people. What to do: 1. Don't obey in advance 2. Treat as invitation to defiance 3. Decide what to believe. SFPs – real effect: placebo/nocebo, humans are suggestible/superstitious. Evidence: book advances, business's 'bright but baseless forecasts', Great Depression, bank runs, wars (Thucydides's Trap), Germany in WW2, racism &	• Predictions are not innocuous; you can 'make' them come true – despotically • Ps become rulings IF we obey them • Using AI → not getting ahead →obeying orders • Avoid 'anticipatory obedience' • Make an active decision/choice • Avoid magical thinking/faith in business – can be dangerous

sexism (in legal system, finance, recruitment), political polls. Algorithm SFP: score people for loans/insurance/jobs etc.: shape reality → partly responsible for negative trends (inequality/ racism / sexism/polarization). Algorithms opaque, recourse virtually impossible. Examples: mortgage approvals, social media posts. Soothsayers had much less D/more D due to extensive surveillance, every search/email/interaction logged/sold/used to make profiles/predictions. ETs chose not to keep records of D, so can't reveal the 3rd party D used for training (arguably illegal). ETs want more D →get us to do more digitally & track it → digital = surveillance (so go analog!) → shames into sharing everything. 'Without a quantified record of human affairs, states (and TEs!) are blind'. Surveillance → dominance/asymmetries of power/despotic e.g. Soviet Union, China, no 'neutral' reason for it. State-initiated social engineering needs: 1. Quantification/ digitalization 2. High confidence in tech 3. Authoritarian state acts 4. Incapacitated society (to allow it).	• Polls – no such thing as 'public opinion', but can affect how people think/vote • SFPs are the 'perfect crime' • Algorithmic predictions *are* SFPs • Chatbots get more from you than you do from it • Technology is never neutral; it's designed to do something • Ditto surveillance + makes it hard to defy authority • Accurate forecasts about people = bad
Chapter 6: The Crystal Ball is Cracked: Why the unforeseeable is never going away, and how forecasts can increase risks: Five sources of unpredictability/troubles: 1. Data: replicability dubious, p-values & coincidence, invented D (easy to hide, easier if you're prestigious), misleading D (like models: all wrong/some useful), confounding variables, survivor bias, heuristics can out-perform large D sets, **all** D invented, data-driven →own agenda, not all distributions Gaussian →power law distribution (means/medians don't work, e.g. wealth, few people have most) 2. Social: unevenness more likely not Gaussian 3. Scientific: discoveries unpredictable (by their nature!) 4. Coincidental: flukes (Napoleon's cold/Cleopatra's nose) 5. Ironical: overuse of prediction → less predictable/false sense of security, experts not better at prediction, AI creates risk (then sell the resolution, omitting some details), existential risk = diversion by TEs (suggests AI has more power than it does, avoids talk about surveillance/keeps algorithms opaque, TEs building bunkers), produces monoculture. There'll always be unpredictability: partial K, social complexity, breakthroughs, flukes, blindness.	• Numbers = magic, people believe them • Even if it's correct data can be misleading e.g. survivor bias/gambling • Some important things can't be measured • We don't collect data; we create it • Science cannot predict itself • A true expert =opposite of a prophet • Prediction decreases redundancy • Appearance: stronger, reality: less resilient, riskier, less predictable
Part 3: Rethinking Prediction: **Chapter 7: Truth, Virtue, and Beauty:** Why ideals outdo prediction: Effective altruism (EA): type of utilitarianism (maximizing well being/happiness of many) rebranded, superficially intuitive, not based on loyalty, justice, or rights (e.g. kill one person to save 5 more, allows/requires monstrous acts). Questionable because: 1. You can't define utility 2. We can't predict the consequences of actions 3. We can't know the consequences in the long term. TEs + EA: Initially alleviate global poverty, costs too much → AI safety (lots of money buying property). Long-termism/ infinity masks problems. Issues: doing what's right/caring about truth/freedom of speech/preserving academia vs. maximizing/ minimizing future consequences via utilitarianism, villains perceived as cool.	• Earn more so you have more to give away sounds plausible but.. • Autonomy → freedom to decide, bedrock of human rights • Hard to know how to spend effectively • Can't treat moral issues by calculating • Humans have psychological barriers to utilitarianism that AI does not • Alpha males *actually* protect the weak
Chapter 8: Defying the Odds: On using creativity, humor, and resilience to flip the script: When mainstream hits a wall we need people on the fringes/outliers/misfits. AI algorithms steer towards the middle/missing talent that changes thinking. Humor → source of truth, irreverent, gives us courage, about caring (teasing because you care), too subtle + context dependent for AI. Free will: AI/predictions pushing back to determinism, predicted →foretold →determined. People ≠ ∑ data about them. Democracy: good for peace/stability/prosperity/freedom/innovation/business but slow/inefficient/imperfect, about distributing power to avoid domination (hard to avoid with AI)/ sustain diversity. Data doesn't speak; we interpret it, sometimes there isn't enough data (flooding, climate change). Trade off: leanness vs uncertainty, alternative is preparation→ look at reasons for what we have now, commitment to the present/truth (better option: climate change, investments).	• Defying odds = heart of being human • Hiring algorithms reduce the chances of finding unique properties/people • AI can't laugh • Uncertainty healthy → = possibilities • Democracy needs order *and* chaos • Need a debate about predictions that can be made about people • Prepare for the future; see predictions as invitations to defy the odds.
Chapter 9: How to Thrive Amid Uncertainty: Curiosity, fearlessness, and philosophy as antidotes to prophecy: Power of curiosity (C): C about the present → less apprehensive about the future, even tedious = interesting, can be cruel kinds of C too, need benevolence, comfortable with uncertainty. Standing firm: bravery necessary for facing trials with integrity, C can help, when rights are not respected → need to fight or it gets worse, care: illusion of safety can backfire. Books: central to prophecies (reading/ writing metaphors for deciphering cosmos/navigating life), challenge prophecies (trustworthy way of passing down knowledge), unite humanity, form us (we think thoughts we wouldn't have otherwise thought. Decisions based on judgement = own it/safer vs based on data = shirks responsibility/riskier. Ebooks = informants, have not removed paper despite TE prophecies. Philosophy: that which brings poison can bring antidote, Oracle of Delphi brought philosophy = antidote because interested in the good life, money/power can't buy that (Thales of Miletus: 1st Greek philosopher/broke from myth & divination/grounded in obs. and reasoning, Epicureanism (democrat, virtue as means, can be author of own life, path to happiness = good friendships) vs Stoicism (virtue as end in itself, everyone has blueprint for their life). Have neither fear or desire; write your best, kindest, most authentic, beautiful life.	• Curiosity about the present is the antidote to cravings for prediction/ allure of prophets • Safe bets may no longer be safe • Courage is hard; easier if focus on present • Books allow us to live many lives in one • Data irrelevant to the quality of a book • Big tech setting market not following – resist by choosing good literature • AI/TE are experimenting on humanity • Techs like Stoicism (play down parts) • TEs richer but not freer/happier than us • Embrace the joy of missing out, • Time to rebel → defy the predictions
Epilogue: Ten Lessons in Prediction: 1. Live in the present 2. Watch out for prophecies 3. Remember the nature of predictions 4. Take predictions as invitations for defiance 5. Prepare, don't predict 6. If you have to predict, predict smartly 7. If you have to predict, predict ethically 8. Avoid being the subject of predictions 9. Increase serendipity 10. Live well. **Postscript**: AI Ethics 101: Digital Tech's Original Sins: Ethics not boring or a matter of opinion. AI ethics NOT in opposition to regulation/politics but work to be done on ethics of prediction.	• Ground yourself in truth when looking at other people's predictions • Good laws based on ethics; applies to AI • Business based on surveillance + prediction = greatest sins • We need an 'ethics of prediction'