

**Book review of Runciman, D. (2023). *The Handover: How We Gave Control of Our Lives to Corporations, States and AIs*. Liveright. 336 pp.
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Reviewed by

Fabio Tollon  ^{1 2 3} 

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¹ Postdoctoral researcher, University of Edinburgh, UK; Email: fabiotollon@gmail.com

² Fellow, Centre for Artificial Intelligence Research (CAIR), University of Pretoria, South Africa

³ External collaborator, Unit for the Ethics of Technology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

 Corresponding author

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You might be forgiven for thinking that the only ‘artificial agents’ you need to be worried about are those that are the result of Artificial Intelligence (AI). You would, however, be wrong. David Runciman, in his latest book *The Handover: How We Gave Control of Our Lives to Corporations, States, and AIs* makes the compelling argument that human history has *always* been shaped by ‘artificial agents’, and that this is not some new phenomena spurred on by research in AI. These artificial agents of old were built by humans to “expand our horizons” (p. 3). But what are these agents? States and corporations of course.

In the Introduction, Runciman outlines the main themes of the book, the most dominant of which is that if we cannot keep human-created artificial agents “tethered to a human perspective, it may be the last thing we do” (p. 3). Runciman argues throughout the text that the most important aspect of these artificial constructions (states and corporations) is their ability to act in the world, their *agency*. Provocatively, he claims that “if the world ends – because we blow it up, or render it uninhabitable by the insatiable consumption of natural resources – it won’t really be us who did it. It will be states and corporations” (p. 4). For those of us, myself included, who think agency is an ascription that should only be made to other humans, this is quite a strong claim.

Key to understanding Runciman’s argument is his assumption that “a group of people can have its own ideas, separate from the thoughts and intentions of its individual members” ... “Groups can possess certain kinds of knowledge - ‘wisdom of the crowds’ – that individuals lack” (pp. 5-6). He then takes this idea of collective agency and applies it to AI systems: What happens when “AI interacts with other kinds of artificial agents, the inhuman kind represented by states and corporations?” (p. 9). From this, we get an interesting conclusion. It is not the case that we have to ‘choose’ between a world filled with artificial agents or one without them. Rather, our choice is what *kind* of artificiality we want.

Chapter 1 traces out a brief history of the state, with a specific focus on Thomas Hobbes and his characterization of the state as an automaton, ‘made not born’, and the implications for thinking of the state as a kind of ‘superagent’. For Runciman, the takeaway from viewing the state in this way is that it brings into sharp relief its real superpower: Its capacity to act with large-scale consequences. Two important features make states superagents. The first is that they can make decisions that affect all of their citizens in a way that no individual could ever dream of. The second is that they are incredibly durable, and can outlast any individual human lifespan.

While Chapter 1 is concerned with agents that can act but cannot think, Chapter 2 takes a look at agents that can *think* but cannot act: Groups. To introduce the topic, Runciman runs through the ‘discursive dilemma’ from social choice theory. The dilemma, in short, is that it seems possible for groups to believe one thing and the individuals making up that group to believe the opposite. Runciman uses the example of Brexit. The public seemed to want Brexit but did not want any of the means for achieving Brexit. Therefore, they both wanted and did not want Brexit. The important point for Runciman, however, is that it allows him to talk of groups having “minds of their own” (p. 43). We can talk about groups ‘thinking’ things that are not thought by their individual members. This is not to suggest that their thinking is any better or worse than their individual members, but just that it is *possible*. It seems plausible to push back on this point and want some clarity on what exactly Runciman means by ‘thinking’ and how a group might perform such a task, as usually, we think of thinking as being tied to the capacity for a certain kind of cognition. While this seems like a minor point now, what we mean by ‘artificial agent’ is often tied to what we mean by ‘thinking’ and ‘cognition’, and so it would have been useful to have some clarity here. This is especially true when Runciman suggests that these agents can “set their own purposes” (p. 84), and this links back to my remarks on ‘thinking’. Surely only ‘thinking’ entities can set their own purposes.

In Chapter 3, we go to the world of states and investigate their durability. A key facet of this durability is a state's ability to service debt. Well, perhaps not to service it, but to take it on in the first place. States can rack up trillions in debt, and no individual person in that state is responsible for it, and we can tell a similar story about corporations. Corporations are also debt-servicing machines, but they do not have the same responsibilities that we offload to the state (such as the legitimate use of violence) (p. 79). While corporations can go into extreme debt, until quite recently, the individuals in those corporations couldn't be protected from that debt, but the introduction of the limited liability company in the 19th century changed that (p. 80).

Another key difference between states and corporations is that while states are general artificial persons, corporations are narrow artificial persons. Both of them, however, have agency. This minimalist definition of agency as the mere ability to have some effect in the world, however, seems too broad to me. The worry here is that by stretching the definition we include all number of things under the umbrella of 'agency' and we lose track of our distinctly human understanding of the term.

In Chapter 4, Runciman argues that it was not the advent of language (the so-called 'cognitive revolution'), but rather the creation of corporations and states that was the decisive event in human history (p. 110). He is quick to note, however, that the relationship between states and corporations is tricky and there is no standard formula for the best way for these two artificial agents to interact.

Chapter 5 tells the familiar story of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on global economic growth. Many factors are important to consider in understanding why economic growth happened in the places that it did such as coal, empire, culture, and demography. However, Runciman argues that the key underlying ingredient was institutional. All places that experienced rapid economic growth had stable states with representative bodies (important to note, however, that democratic governance is not essential) (p. 137). The stable state enables trust due to its artificial personality. It is not subject to the same whims as individuals, and so long as it is not captured by specific interest groups, it can provide a basis for long-term commitment from its citizens (p. 138).

In Chapter 6, Runciman takes a look at how the organization of the state is essential to the proper functioning of corporations (at least for now). That is to say, the idea here is to stress how historically, corporations have been dependent on states in some way. Part of this story is that states can afford to take more risks than corporations, meaning that most innovation happens due to massive investment from the state (p. 171). It is here that we start to see the story coming together, and the relation of the text to AI brought into sharper focus. While humans are the ones who make states, states are at the foundation of corporations, and corporations are the ones making AI. While AI is yet to advance to a point where it has an artificial 'personality' of its own (in the way that states and corporations do) the more powerful these systems become, the greater their impact on our lives, and the greater the danger they may pose to our well-being (p. 193).

Chapter 7 outlines the ways that AI might become integrated into the state. The key takeaway here is that depending on the *kind* of state in question, and how that state decides to regulate AI, we could see vastly different outcomes. Here Runciman is at his most instructive, outlining how different political regimes have approached emerging technologies, sometimes failing spectacularly (such as Cybersyn in Chile) (p. 221). What matters most, however, is that the choice we have in the face of emerging technologies and their integration is not between an imperfect or a perfect state, but rather a choice between an imperfect state or no state at all (p. 225).

In the penultimate chapter, Runciman takes us through a brief history of automation, and its often unpredictable impact on employment and the economy more generally. While we can be sure that AI will change the *character* of work, it remains to be seen whether it will *replace* human work to a significant degree. And this is important

because work is different from simple tasks. Robots and computers perform tasks just fine, but they do not (yet) work (or have jobs). Thus, “in the world of work it’s still people, organisations, machines – in that order” (p. 230). However, it remains to be seen whether this order will remain intact going forward.

In the final chapter Runciman offers some reflection on the path forwards. Importantly, many of the distinctions operationalized throughout the book come to bear fruit here. He outlines three choices that we have. The first is to maximise intelligence: we use AI to create smarter states and smarter corporations. The risk with this, of course, is that we humans lose the top spot. And so, our politics would be inhumane in a very literal sense (p. 269). The second option is to insist on keeping AI and artificial agency apart. Thus, the mechanisms of the state remain under human control. The risk here is that the machinery of the state chunks away with horrendous human choices, leaving us worse off. The last option is to give more rights and responsibilities to AI systems, much like we have done with states and corporations. The risk here is that ascribing responsibility to AI systems would give the humans behind those choices a screen to hide behind, reducing accountability and trust (270). Ultimately, these will all be human choices that we must make. Whatever we decide, we humans will be responsible in the moral sense, even if these new machines come to be more and more causally efficacious.

There is a lot to admire in this book. The weaving together of new problems raised by technology with old solutions is an argumentative strategy that I believe can be incredibly illuminating in a time when hype surrounds new technologies and their application.

Overall, *The Handover* is a provocative and insightful analysis of a ‘new’ problem through an old lens. The book will be of interest to those interested and embedded in the current AI ecosystem, but would also serve non-experts equally well. The arguments and descriptions are at a level that anyone would be able to make sense of and find rewarding to engage with.

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