



Columba livia



Riccardo Manzotti
Can Machines think?

The question

Can machines think? It's a classic question. The straightforward answer is yes—they already do. At most, we listen to someone's words, but we have never seen a thought.

What about our own thoughts? We say: "I think," "I'm worried," "Last night, I couldn't sleep because I had so many thoughts—about my mortgage, about my car that was parked where it shouldn't have been," "The thought of the car kept me awake."

But is that true? Was it really the thought of the car, or was it the car itself that kept one awake?

When we say that we think of something, what is really taking place? Can we describe what a thought is without any reference to what the thought is about? What about a naked thought, an empty thought? Is it something, or is it nothing?

It is widely accepted that thoughts are always thoughts of something. We cannot think of just anything. If we think of nothing, we do not think. So whenever there is a thought, there is also an object of the thought.

Thoughts by themselves—naked, empty, contentless—simply do not exist. There is no way we can conceive of a thought without its reference, without its object. And that is something intriguing.

Because it suggests that maybe this very notion that we think—like *The Thinker* by Rodin—might be a form of superstition. In the past, there were animistic superstitions, and people attributed all kinds of magical properties to objects that were invisible. Today, it might be that the very superstition we need to get rid of is ourselves.

The inner world

The idea that we have an inner world that nobody has ever seen is something to think about. How is it possible that we all believe in something no one has ever seen? And when people say, "Look inside yourself," how do we know in which direction to look?

This is suspicious because in the past there were many anthro-