



Carissa Véliz
Associate Professor
University of Oxford

*Carissa is challenging the biggest myths of the AI age. In her latest book, *Prophecy*, she argues that forecasts are less about predicting the future than controlling it.*

AI is the new Oracle of Delphi; *that's bad news*

Our world is increasingly ruled by prophecy. These days, we prefer talking about forecasting, but even if the techniques have changed – we no longer look for glimpses of the future in animal entrails or stars but in algorithms – and prophets have changed their job titles – from oracles to astrologers, and from social scientists to computer scientists and tech executives – the political function of prediction remains the same.



Predictions are all around us, opening and closing off doors for us, deciding whether we get a job, or a loan, or an apartment, influencing everything from medical triage to geopolitics. Machine learning – the kind of AI that is most commonly used in gadgets like your smartphone, tools like chatbots, and decision-making algorithms like software for hiring – is nothing but a prediction machine. What it’s doing is using historical data to fill in the blank of what it’s being asked to do, whether it’s predicting text, images, or whether someone will be a good employee. “Oracle” is a technical term in machine learning: a system of perfect prediction.

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Much of what tech executives say amounts to painting pictures of the future for us: tomorrows that are empty of jobs and full of robot butlers and automated transport. Prediction markets are gaining traction, expanding in the fortunes they trade in, the attention they get, and the influence they wield. A substantial proportion of what both academic journals and newspapers publish is not about the present but about the future.

Tomorrow brought to you by Silicon Valley

It is easy to forget that predictions are not facts. Facts are about the present or the past; the future doesn’t exist yet, and there are no facts about what hasn’t yet happened. At best, predictions are educated guesses. More often than not, however, and especially when it comes to predictions about the social world, they are power plays in disguise. When a tech executive says that in the future everyone will be using AI for everything, he doesn’t have magical powers to look into what’s around the corner; he’s doing marketing.

Predictions are deceptive because they sound like descriptions of the world, but a more realistic analysis reveals them to be closer to commands. The philosopher J.L. Austin argued that there are some kinds of assertions that are not meant to describe anything but rather they are tools to do something; they are speech acts, as he called them. Predictions about the social world are deceitful speech acts in that they seem like they are descriptive but in fact are normative – they don’t refer to facts but rather invite us to act in a certain way. What the tech executive is telling you with his prophecy is to buy his AI. When we give credence to prophets, when we believe their predictions and act accordingly, when we are doing is obeying them, doing as they say.

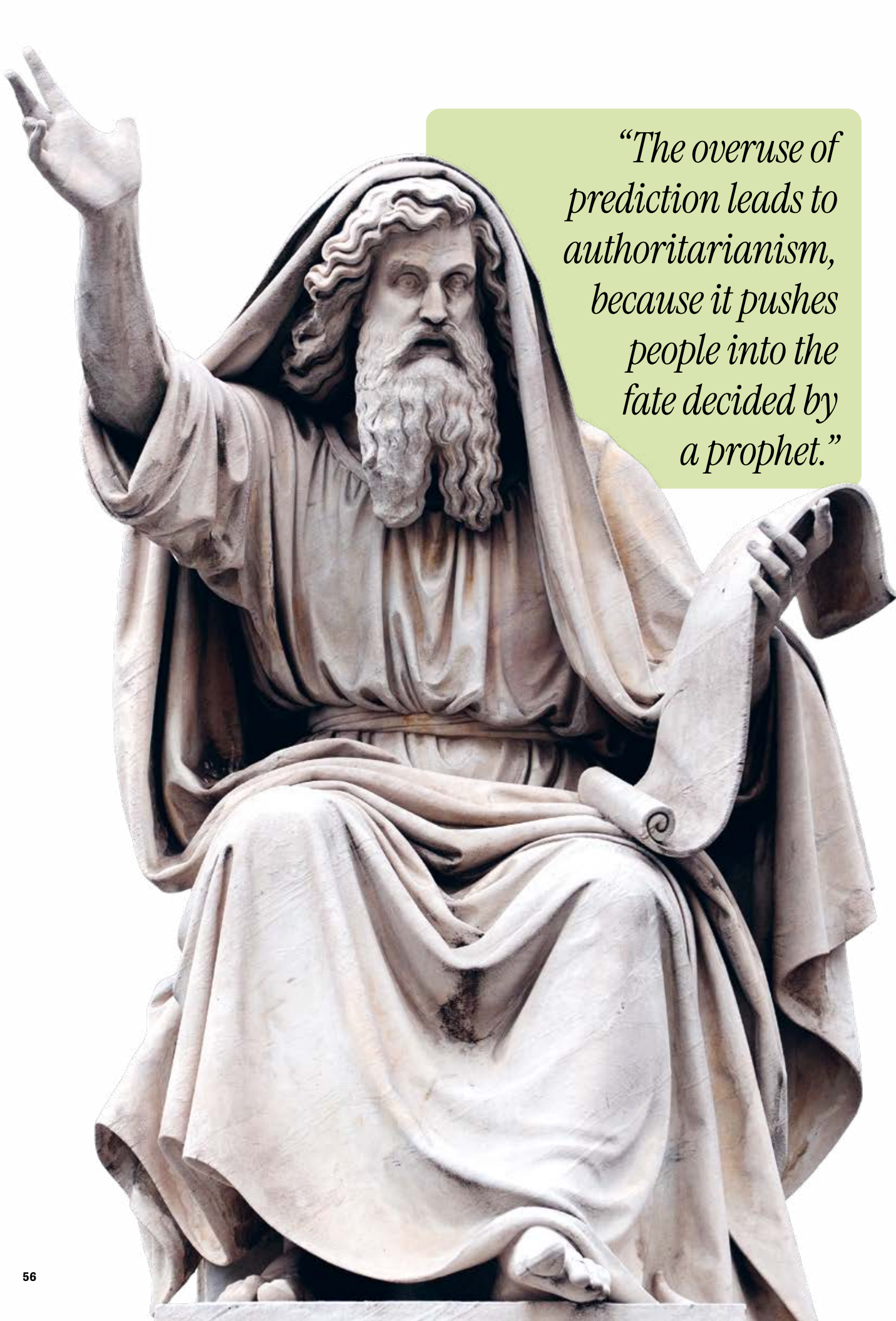
The perfect crime

What makes predictions about the social world all the more dangerous is their tendency to become self-fulfilling prophecies – to bring about the reality they purport to be merely foreseeing. Even worse, self-fulfilling prophecies are the perfect crimes because they erase any error signal. We will never know whether the person denied a job by an AI would've been brilliant at it; they will remain unemployed if other firms are using the same kind of algorithm, and the AI company will claim that it is 99.9% accurate, but at the cost of creating the reality it claims to be predicting. Often, the problem is not that AI might get the prediction wrong, but that it might getting right by fabricating the future: by rewarding those it selects for opportunities, and punishing those it doesn't.

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We are using AI to make decisions about loans, jobs, housing, sentencing, bailing, and more. These are contexts in which fairness matters. But predictions are not clear and transparent criteria. They are not even contestable. Since they are about the future, predictions cannot be challenged for being false.





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Democracy doesn't do divination

The overuse of prediction leads to authoritarianism, because it pushes people into the fate decided by a prophet, instead of allowing them leeway to defy their odds. Democracy shouldn't be led by divination or betting; it should be led by facts and liberal values, neither of which match well with predictions. Prediction markets are a good example of the kind of predictive practices that distort and erode democracy.

The argument in favour of prediction markets – that they contribute to society through offering valuable information in the form of the wisdom of the crowds – depends on an indefensibly naïve view of prediction as a quest for knowledge, ignoring how they are used by the powerful to increase their power. Recently, OpenAI fired an employee for having used confidential company information for betting in Polymarket. On another occasion, six anonymous accounts made \$1.2 million betting for the attack on Iran; some of those accounts were funded hours before. In yet another case, a journalist got bullied to change his report about a strike by gamblers who stood to earn \$900,000 from a bet in a prediction market.

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We are so anxious to know what the future holds that we are suckers for oracles, ancient and new. We tend to think of AI as cutting-edge technology; ancient Greeks thought the same about their oracles and medieval people about their astrologers. Philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus rose as the voices of reason in the face of ancient myths and superstitious beliefs in fate; it's our turn to rise to the occasion. We shouldn't give credence to prophets. The future is unwritten, unknowable, and up to us to write. ■