RESEARCH BRIEFING FOR COMPANIES

Homo Putans

The Supposing Human in the Age of AI

Can Büyükbay, PhD

Human beings are supposing beings. We can live with a possibility, let it guide what we pay attention to and change course when new experience calls for it.

In *The Art of Supposition*, Can Büyükbay develops this idea through cases in which experience reaches beyond what is immediately given. After an amputation, someone may see a prosthetic hand in one place and still feel their missing hand somewhere else. The distance between the visible and the felt offers a concrete way into the philosophy. The bodily world we inhabit takes shape through perception, experience and possibilities for action. [1–5, 9–10]

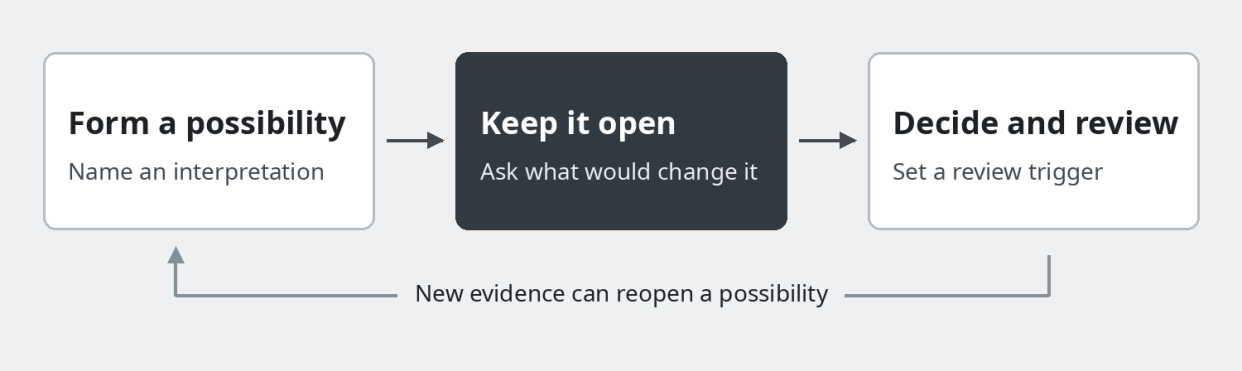


Figure 1. Supposing as a way to work with a possibility. Conceptual illustration based on Büyükbay's research. [1–5]

For companies, the question is what happens between an AI system generating an option and a team committing to it. A plausible output can prompt investigation. People still have to decide what evidence would justify acting on it, whose experience should inform the decision and when to revisit it. Homo Putans offers a vocabulary and a proposed decision practice for that interval.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

What it means to suppose

To suppose is to give a possibility room in thought and experience while holding open the question of its truth.

In the book, Plato's distinction between *doxa* (opinion) and knowledge opens the question of how people orient themselves through partial understanding. Hans Vaihinger's *as-if* philosophy shows how a fiction can serve inquiry and practice. We can work with a thought provisionally and learn from what it makes visible. The issue for Homo Putans is how that provisional stance is sustained when an interpretation matters to us. [1–2, 6–7]

Phenomenology gives this stance a deeper footing. Intentionality names the directedness of experience toward something. Husserl's suspension of ordinary commitments helps make the way something appears available for inquiry. Merleau-Ponty's account of the habitual body shows how past ways of moving and acting can still shape the field of present possibilities. His discussion of the phantom limb brings that temporal depth into view. [1, 8]

The structure and the threshold

Suppositional Structure Model

Epistemic uncertainty, projecting possibilities, suspension of assent, orientation and meaning-making. These five interacting moments describe how a provisional interpretation takes shape. [3]

Suppositional Threshold Model

Ten interacting dimensions, including affect, time, narrative and coordination, help explain when an imagined alternative remains open for exploration. [5]

A belief commits a person to a claim. A forecast estimates what may happen. A hypothesis is formulated for testing. **Supposing keeps an alternative available for exploration and revision.** It can concern a different reading of the present, a past that could have unfolded differently, or an imagined scene whose value comes from thinking with it. [2–3, 5, 7]

Philosophical implication

Human agency includes being able to act provisionally while remaining answerable to what experience and other people bring to light.

PHANTOM LIMBS AND PERCEPTION

When the hand is absent

The place where a person sees a prosthesis and the place where they feel a phantom hand can come apart.

After upper-limb amputation, a person may still experience the position, shape or movement of the missing hand. These experiences are called **phantom limb sensations**, and pain is one possible experience. Sometimes a hand feels drawn back towards the residual limb, a change in felt length called *telescoping*. An anatomical account locates the residual limb and the prosthesis. The person's report locates their bodily experience. [9–11]

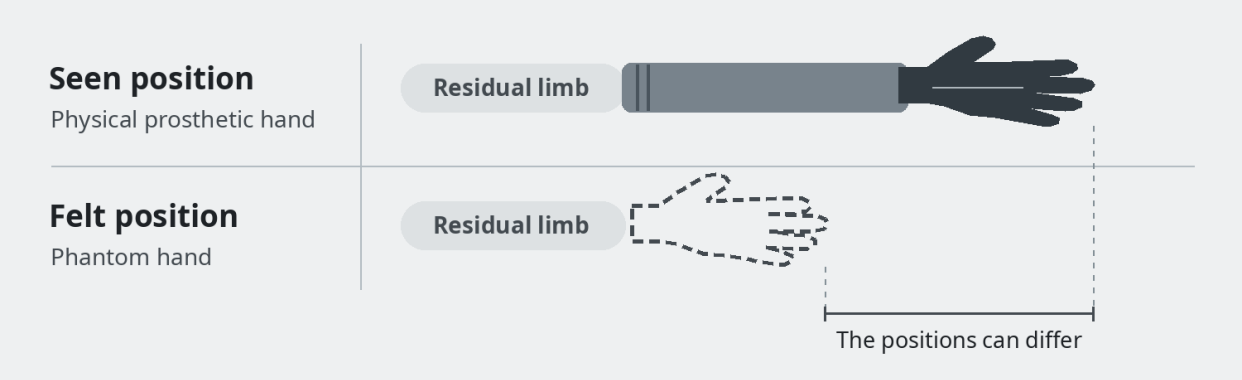


Figure 2. Seen and felt locations can diverge. Schematic informed by the position reports in Cuberovic and colleagues' single-participant study. [10]

Cuberovic and colleagues tracked one person using a sensory-enabled prosthesis at home. The participant drew where the phantom fingertips felt to be relative to the prosthetic fingertips. The positions became more closely aligned over the course of a day of use. The following morning could bring the mismatch back. This case documents how the perceived position changed for one person under those conditions. [10]

Earlier mirror experiments found that some participants experienced movement in the phantom when they saw a reflection of the intact hand moving. The neurobiology chapter of *The Art of Supposition* (pp. 54–65) uses cases like these to ask how bodily experience can have a shape and a location after its sensory inputs have changed. [1, 12]

NEUROBIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The embodied prosthesis

Vision, touch, body-position signals and sensorimotor history help shape where a hand is felt and whether it feels like one's own.

In Botvinick and Cohen's rubber-hand experiment, participants with intact hands saw a model hand being stroked while feeling matched strokes on their hidden hand. Touch could seem to occur at the model hand. Ehrsson and colleagues studied an adapted version in 18 people with upper-limb loss. Synchronously touching the hidden residual limb and a visible, separate model hand induced a sense of ownership in some participants. [13–14]

Rognini and colleagues tested two people with sensory-enabled prostheses. When visible cues on the prosthetic hand were timed to match evoked touch sensations, both participants reported stronger embodiment and located a phantom finger farther from the residual limb than in the delayed-feedback condition. Reports of **ownership**, estimates of **felt position**, and a sense of **agency** over movement answer different questions. In rubber-hand experiments, measured changes in position can occur independently of reported ownership. [15–16]

What the nervous system is doing

Proprioception is our sense of bodily position and movement. One model treats vision, touch and proprioception as evidence about whether seen and felt events share a source. Some research prostheses deliver feedback through remaining nerves, and that feedback can be felt as touch in the missing hand. Imaging studies have linked artificial-hand ownership to activity in premotor cortex. Research after amputation points to both cortical reorganisation and the persistence of representations of the missing hand. Sensory integration and the history of the body can both shape the experience. [10–11, 17–18]

From perception to philosophy

A person can know that the hand is absent and still feel *as if it were there*. The experiments document this layer of bodily experience. Homo Putans asks how what is physically absent can still be present in lived experience and inform how we act.

COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND PSYCHOLOGY

How possibilities stay open

The capacity to construct an alternative and the capacity to stay with it under uncertainty are distinct research questions.

From bodily inference to reflection

The nervous system can integrate sensory signals before a person formulates an explicit judgment. Predictive-processing accounts explore how expectations and incoming signals interact. At a reflective level, a person can articulate an alternative, withhold endorsement and return to it when evidence changes. This is the form of supposing that the Structural Model analyses. How bodily inference interacts with reflective supposing remains an open research question. [3, 17–18, 20]

Memory and counterfactual thinking

Work on episodic simulation suggests that details from remembered experiences can be recombined into imagined future events. Mental-model accounts examine how people reason by representing possibilities. Counterfactual research shows how considering a different outcome of a past event can inform future intentions. These literatures supply tasks and measures for studying how a person generates an interpretation and how readily they revisit it. [19, 21–22]

Affective conditions

The Threshold Model adds a question about the circumstances in which a possibility can remain live. Curiosity can make an unfamiliar proposal worth exploring. The fear of being judged for it can make that same proposal hard to raise in a meeting. A fictional scene, an unfamiliar prototype or an alternative account of a past decision can each become available again when the setting makes it easier to engage. [5]

A tractable research test

Give participants the same set of alternatives and time to consider them. Compare confidence in each alternative with the willingness to revisit it after contradictory information arrives.

POLITICS · SOCIOLOGY · ANTHROPOLOGY

Making futures thinkable

People can coordinate around a future they regard as worth preparing for, even when they assign it different likelihoods.

A possibility becomes socially consequential

Büyükbay's account of anticipatory supposition asks how an unsettled future can begin to shape the present. A proposal gains salience as it circulates through conversation and enters institutional agendas. People also act on *second-order suppositions*, their sense of what others may treat as worth considering. A team can agree to investigate a possibility on that basis while its members still disagree about the outcome. [4]

Whose alternatives enter the room

In a city planning debate, residents may bring an account of access that does not appear in current usage data. In a firm, frontline employees may see a recurring exception hidden in an aggregate dashboard. Whether those accounts can be sustained long enough to influence inquiry depends on time, credibility and access to the agenda. Appadurai locates the capacity to aspire in culturally learned ways of navigating futures. Fricker's work explains how credibility can be unevenly distributed among speakers. Together these questions locate the politics of supposability in concrete institutional practice. [4–5, 23–24]

What a researcher can observe

A researcher could follow the same proposal across conversations, meeting notes and revisions. Did it enter as an open question? Who had time to develop it? What happened when someone supplied qualifying evidence? Interviews and documents can also help establish whether participants held back because they expected dismissal or because the proposal had little relevance to their work. [4–5]

Implication for leaders

An invitation to challenge a forecast has practical value when people can bring a competing interpretation, receive a hearing and see the decision respond to evidence.

STRATEGY AND ECONOMICS

Judgment in the age of AI

Generative AI can increase the supply of options. Leaders decide which possibilities warrant time, evidence and a commitment of resources.

Knight distinguished risk that can be characterised with probabilities from uncertainty for which those probabilities are difficult to establish. Beckert examined how imagined futures guide economic commitments. Homo Putans concerns a formative interval in which a firm may have several working accounts of a future and can still ask which evidence merits attention. An AI-generated account can enter that inquiry alongside operational data and the experience of people who do the work. [4, 25–26]

Averages can conceal relevant differences

In a study of the rollout of a generative AI assistant to 5,172 customer-support agents, Brynjolfsson and colleagues reported an average increase of 15% in resolutions per hour, with substantially different effects across workers. For a company considering its own rollout, an average gain is a reason to investigate the distribution of outcomes. The same dashboard could support a broad rollout, a selective one, or further inquiry into which users and case types benefit. [27]

A meeting design can keep inquiry open

Edmondson’s study of work teams associated psychological safety with behaviours such as asking questions and discussing errors. A strategic application of Homo Putans is to give a competing interpretation a defined opportunity for review. If service agents notice more errors in edge cases, their observation can specify a possible explanation, the cases to examine and the evidence the decision owner should see. [5, 28]

The role of human judgment

People decide which outcomes matter, who bears the consequences of a mistake, when a trial should end and what evidence would justify changing the decision.

AN EXECUTIVE APPLICATION

A pilot for a decision team

Apply the framework to one live question with a named decision owner and a scheduled review.

Illustrative case. A service team is deciding where an AI drafting assistant belongs in its workflow. A small internal test suggests faster replies. Three explanations remain open, each with a different implication for the next decision. A single decision record captures the observations, interpretations and review criteria.

Working supposition	What to examine	What would follow
The gain is broad	Compare time and reviewed quality across matched case types.	Consider wider use if gains hold across the cases that matter.
The gain is concentrated	Look separately at routine replies and cases with exceptions.	Keep use within the case types where evidence supports it.
Review absorbs the gain	Measure rework and checking time alongside drafting speed.	Reassess the workflow if the saving disappears after review.

What the team would produce

In a proposed 90-minute session, the group would map its assumptions and assign responsibility for gathering evidence. An illustrative two-week trial would compare similar cases under ordinary quality review. The team would then review the results with the decision owner. The resulting record would name the options still open, the evidence behind the chosen scope and the conditions for reopening the decision.

How to judge the pilot

Alongside resolution time, review material errors, rework and the proportion of cases that need escalation. Track which alternative interpretations were examined and whether any changed the decision.

RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION

Testing the programme

The philosophical claim leads to questions about how alternatives are generated, held open, revised and used in real decisions.

The studies on phantom limbs and prosthetic embodiment provide evidence about bodily perception. The structural and threshold models specify what to investigate in reflective and collective life. The proposed company pilot is a way to evaluate practical value in one setting. The following questions keep those claims tied to the evidence each one requires. [3–5, 9–18]

1	**Cognition** When new evidence conflicts with a first interpretation, do people who keep several readings open revise more appropriately? Measure belief confidence, memory and revision separately.
2	**Institutions** Does the same proposal remain open for longer when it comes from someone with greater standing? Compare how the evidence is received and whether alternative accounts reach the decision record.
3	**Decision teams** Do teams that record a competing explanation and a review trigger reopen decisions when the trigger is met? Compare with their previous handling of comparable decisions.

Working with the research programme

A strategy, research or AI governance team can begin with one decision in which a plausible alternative is at risk of being closed too early. A collaboration can take the form of a briefing and facilitated session, or a small field study using decision records and follow-up interviews.

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