

The fear of AI is 2,400 years old

2,400 years ago the dangerous new technology was parchment, and the argument against it was word for word the argument against AI today

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Written 31 July 2026 · 318 words · gurovdigital.com/research/socrates-books-ai-fear-of-progress

Language and thought · Human-AI interaction · Digital behavior · Public trust · Claude · ChatGPT · Gemini

Socrates hated books. Just as people today hate AI.

The philosopher Socrates (470-399 BC)¹ sincerely believed that books (written language) would:

- destroy the human mind,
- create an illusion of knowledge,
- and lead to total forgetfulness.

Socrates claimed that writing and reading are a disaster for the human brain.

*This invention will breed forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, since they will cease to exercise their memory.*²³



Socrates

in Plato's Phaedrus 275a

Herm of Socrates, Capitoline Museums

This is a literal parallel to today's argument that "because of AI, people will forget how to think."

The ancient Greeks' fear of a piece of parchment and white-collar professionals' fear of LLMs is a fear of progress. Technology doesn't make us dumber; it SCALES our capabilities.

DEFINITION

Transactive memory — a model in which knowledge is held by a system of several carriers - a couple, a team, and since the 2000s external devices - while each member keeps not the content but the knowledge of where it sits. Subjects told their typed text would be saved recalled it worse, and its folder better.

Daniel M. Wegner, in *Theories of Group Behavior*, 185-208, 1987⁴ - the Google effect: Sparrow, Liu and Wegner, *Science* 333(6043), 776-778, 2011⁵

I recently read the non-fiction book "Moonwalking with Einstein. The Art and Science of Remembering Everything" by Joshua Foer⁶. One of the book's main characters is Ed Cooke, a

British memory champion and the creator of the Memrise app⁷.

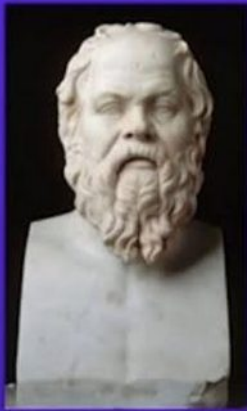


| The copy of Joshua Foer's Moonwalking with Einstein this piece came out of.

I became curious about what he's doing in 2026. It turns out Ed is working on an AI service called MindMax Labs⁸ (<https://mindmax.it/>). Their goal, inspired by Goethe's ideas, is to turn every person into a genius with the help of AI.

On the page, I found a great video (see screenshot) that perfectly illustrates the historical irony with Socrates.

Books



"This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves.

...[Reading] is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing."

The slide from MindMax setting the Phaedrus passage against a picture of a book. Its bracketed word reads "Reading", where Plato's text has the invention of writing. MindMax. mindmax.it. Screenshot, quoted under §51 UrhG.

Criticism of AI is criticism of books, version 2.0. We aren't losing the ability to think with Claude/Gemini/ChatGPT; we're UPGRADING our cognitive operating system.

REFERENCES

- 1Socrates, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy - on the dates, and on the fact that Socrates wrote nothing himself - <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/>↵
- 2Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-275b, trans. Benjamin Jowett - the myth of Theuth and Thamus, where the objection to writing is made - <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1636>↵
- 3Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. H. N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library, Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 (Harvard University Press, 1925)↵
- 4Wegner, D. M., *Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind*, in Theories of Group Behavior, ed. B. Mullen and G. R. Goethals (Springer, 1987), 185-208 - https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-4634-3_9↵
- 5Sparrow, B., Liu, J. and Wegner, D. M., *Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips*, Science 333:6043, 776-778 (2011) - <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1207745>↵
- 6Foer, J., *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (Penguin, 2011)↵
- 7Memrise - the language app Cooke co-founded - <https://www.memrise.com/>↵
- 8MindMax - the service Ed Cooke is building - <https://mindmax.it/>↵

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Gurov, P. (2026). *The fear of AI is 2,400 years old*. Gurov Digital Research.
<https://gurovdigital.com/research/socrates-books-ai-fear-of-progress>