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The Price of Freedom is Eternal Vigilance

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**Thinning the Herd: Brett Weinstein and the Dangers of AI**  
**By William Waite**

On the development and integration of Artificial Intelligence Brett Weinstein is more thoughtful than most. His perspective is from that of an evolutionary biologist and he summarises the problem as one of “hyper-novelty.” For an evolutionary biologist the state of hyper-novelty occurs when the rate of environmental change exceeds the rate at which humans can adapt to it. AI, he argues, can only accelerate what is already an intolerably unpredictable and shifting situation. On a recent podcast alarmingly titled “AI Agents Emergency Debate: These jobs won’t exist in 24 months! Containment has failed, we must prepare for what’s coming!”<sup>1</sup> Weinstein categorises his concerns. They are:

1. The malevolent AI scenario. AI runs wild and kills everyone (of least concern)
2. The misalignment problem where the AI misunderstands an instruction and in carrying it out causes tremendous damage.
3. The derangement of human intellect
4. The massive disruption to the way things function (labour displacement being the most important problem in this category)
5. The last one is that this just simply accelerates demographic processes that do potentially result in the unleashing of technologies that pre-existed AI. This can easily result in an escalation into wars that turn nuclear.

The final three are guaranteed and in varying degrees already with us.  
Dealing with Weinstein’s concerns in order.

From this distance it is impossible to assess the threat from a malevolent or misaligned AI. Many key people including Musk and Altman have expressed deep concerns at the potential for AI to get out of control. With the combination of AI target selection and [IDF sniper drones shooting kids in Gaza](#)<sup>2</sup> you could be forgiven for thinking we're living through the beginning of the end. There is a disturbing recklessness in how Silicon Valley elites appear to be knowingly jeopardising the wellbeing of billions of people who will be affected by their technology. The cavalier attitude was neatly captured by Sam Altman of OpenAI in 2015 when he said "AI will probably most likely lead to the end of the world, but in the meantime, there'll be great companies."

The derangement of human intellect has been going on for some time but has shifted up a gear with the widespread use of the internet and algorithmic social media. Weinstein references "dopamine traps" which bait users to become addicted to digital instant gratification and AI deep fakes which make it nearly impossible for the unsuspecting to know fact from fiction. Another certainty with the widespread use of AI is that it will cause human intelligence to atrophy. If intelligence is a function of the use of intelligence won't the outsourcing of our problems to AI necessarily lead to the deterioration of organic, human intelligence? It is the problem of labour displacement which features most significantly in Weinstein's fourth category. There is consensus that millions of jobs will soon be displaced by AI. In an article this morning in *The Australian* about the AI revolution in the banking sector we read:

*Banks are reviewing their entire operations to determine where to embrace AI. The area where the biggest changes will take place are head offices, and large areas of administrative activity will be taken over by AI.*

*The first major off the blocks was Westpac, with staff cuts and a declaration that it would target a cost-to-income ratio below other major bank rivals in four years.*

*Westpac's declaration has provided the trigger for an interbank cost reduction competition. This competition will spread to other areas of Australian corporate life, and the consequent revolution will impact universities because the initial routine tasks performed by graduates will be taken over by AI.<sup>3</sup>*

The concern can be condensed to something like this. The widespread replacement of people with AI spells economic ruin for the people and for the wider economy. At the level of the individual mortgages and rents will not be paid, food and a decent material existence is put out of reach. In a full employment economy where selling something remains the only claim to goods and services people, through no fault of their own, will be disallowed from accessing the products of a more productive economy ("productive of what?" is a different question). If the purpose of production is consumption what's the point of that?

It would also be a disaster for the economy. The widespread contraction of

incomes will lead directly to recession, defaults and business insolvencies. As per the pattern government debt would likely increase to fill the vacuum and corporations scaled to weather the ups and downs of business cycles would further entrench their advantages. This is an environment in which the public/private partnership thrives and what's left of genuine competition withers and dies. Purchasing power is increasingly siloed in assets by a diminishing fraction of the population insulated from the chaos by their wealth and liberated from the labour of the masses. This can go to very dark places. When asked what he fears most about AI Weinstein said:

*My fear coming, stemming from technology and AI is that this is a runaway process and that that runaway process is going to interface very badly with some latent human programs. That in effect, the need for workers largely disappears and the people who are at the head of the processes that result in that elimination for the need for workers start talking about useless eaters. Maybe they come up with a new term this time. Thin the herd. Yep, or they allow it to be thinned or something. Right.*

The half-baked range of solutions floated to address this impending dystopia are not cause for comfort. On the one hand is a government issued Universal Basic Income funded by redistributive taxation and government debt. On the other is a chorus of meritocrats – almost always tech entrepreneurs – who in addition to being above the impending chaos believe that creative and meaningful opportunities in the new economy will magically appear. The first is a formula for the final enthronement of finance by government debt and the second is an excuse for doing nothing and continuing to 'thin the herd.' Unsurprisingly both 'solutions' are suggested by the same people.

Optimistically what we have here is an opportunity to reframe the breakdown of the employment system as something that could provide for greater human liberty. If, as everyone says it will, the AI revolution increases economic productivity, it is not necessary that millions of people be impoverished in the process. If nothing else Australian bank share dividends show that money can be distributed completely dissociated from labour. A more general distribution of credit, unattached to debt, would allow those replaced by AI to continue to consume and permit society to avoid the worst aspects of mass labour displacement. It should be said that the possibility of this wider economic security has been with us for some time and is not new with the advent of AI, but, due to a faulty financial system which will not distribute purchasing power except as debt, it remains yet unrealised.

Such an arrangement would have beneficial second and third order consequences. A measure of economic security tied to the real economy of the nation would allow people to manage their own level of involvement in whatever comes next. Coming back to Weinstein's 'hyper-novelty,' people would have some flexibility in how, and at what pace, they adapt to the emerging conditions. Some might decide to pursue the course of tech entrepreneurs, good luck to them, but the temperaments and

nervous systems of mere mortals might prefer something quieter and less cut-throat. We should keep in mind that the idea that meaning is derived from our status as sales people is the assertion of a culture dominated by sales people, not a universal absolute.

To Weinstein's fifth point the most important 'accelerating demographic process' ongoing at the moment is the centralisation of power away from the individual. This presents possibly the greatest threat of all. Often AI is spoken about as though it is a neutral tool distinct from the people who program and deploy it. This is of course not the case. AI is another tool that is being used by some people to dominate others. Private companies and government are already teaming up to gather people's data and analyse it using AI in order to manipulate them in ways they can't control or understand. The police state entanglements between the Israeli and Trump administrations and their dealings with Palantir are a case in point.<sup>4</sup> Said Palantir CEO Alex Karp: "Palantir is here to disrupt and make the institutions we partner with the very best in the world, and when it's necessary to scare our enemies and, on occasion, kill them."

What do we become if we outsource our very thinking to a machine? If we take Descartes' "I think therefore I am" does it bring into doubt our very existence? To what degree are we our thinking and if that part of us is diminished do we just diminish ourselves? When what passes for thinking is just a machined amalgam from a selected range of expressions can the Conditioners finally say: "*They are not men at all : they are artefacts.*" And what are we to make of this obsession with intelligence as the solution to our problems? In the panoply of desirable human qualities intelligence (whatever it is) is hardly our limiting factor. Notably intelligence is absent from the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I am reminded of the final stages in C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*.<sup>5</sup> It may bring understanding but little comfort:

*I am inclined to think that the Conditioners will hate the conditioned. Though regarding as an illusion the artificial conscience which they produce in us their subjects, they will yet perceive that it creates in us an illusion of meaning for our lives which compares favourably with the futility of their own: and they will envy us as eunuchs envy men. But I do not insist on this, for it is mere conjecture. What is not conjecture is that our hope even of a 'conditioned' happiness rests on what is ordinarily called 'chance' — the chance that benevolent impulses may on the whole predominate in our Conditioners. For without the judgement 'Benevolence is good' — that is, without re-entering the Tao — they can have no ground for promoting or stabilizing their benevolent impulses rather than any others. By the logic of their position they must just take their impulses as they come, from chance. And Chance here means Nature. It is from heredity, digestion, the weather, and the association of ideas, that the motives of the Conditioners will spring. Their extreme rationalism,*

by 'seeing through' all 'rational' motives, leaves them creatures of wholly irrational behaviour. If you will not obey the Tao, or else commit suicide, obedience to impulse (and therefore, in the long run, mere 'nature') is the only course left open.

At the moment, then, of Man's victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely 'natural' — to their irrational impulses. Nature, untrammelled by values, rules the Conditioners and, through them, all humanity. Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man. Every victory we seemed to win has led us, step by step, to this conclusion. All Nature's apparent reverses have been but tactical withdrawals. We thought we were beating her back when she was luring us on. What looked to us like hands held up in surrender was really the opening of arms to enfold us forever. If the fully planned and conditioned world (with its Tao a mere product of the planning) comes into existence, Nature will be troubled no more by the restive species that rose in revolt against her so many millions of years ago, will be vexed no longer by its chatter of truth and mercy and beauty and happiness. *Ferum vicotrem cepit*<sup>6</sup>: and if the eugenics are efficient enough there will be no second revolt, but all snug beneath the Conditioners, and the Conditioners beneath her, till the moon falls or the sun grows cold.

Lord, give us strength. \*\*\*

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