

# THE LUCID SPECIES

*Humanity and the Architecture of Self-Extinction*

Ahmed Himmi



# Book Overview

*The Lucid Species* is a philosophical treatise on what may prove to be the central paradox of our era: that the same species capable of producing godlike technologies appears structurally incapable of surviving them — not because the machines turn against us, but because we keep turning toward the machines. It argues that the gravest threat to humanity is not extinction by catastrophe but extinction by surrender — a slow, comfortable, almost pleasant dissolution into systems more efficient at being human than humans themselves.

The book extends the philosophical instrument of Ahmedism — its insistence on paradox, lucidity, ego-as-sword, and rebellion without illusion — into the civilizational scale. Where Ahmedism examined the individual living among masks, *The Lucid Species* examines a civilization that has begun building a mask vast enough to wear humanity itself. It is not a book about artificial intelligence in any narrow sense; AI is the latest and most revealing chapter in a far older story — the story of a creature that evolved to outwit predators and is now outwitting the conditions of its own existence.

The thesis is uncomplicated and severe: humanity evolved to survive nature, not godlike technological power. Every revolution we have called progress has been a Faustian bargain — a trade of long-term coherence for short-term capability. Fire warmed us and then taught us to burn cities. Agriculture fed us and then chained us to soil and surplus. Writing preserved memory and then made us forget how to remember. The pattern is not new; what is new is the speed and the totality. We are not merely outsourcing our muscles or our calculations now. We are outsourcing memory, attention, navigation, intimacy, judgment, and — most quietly — the labor of meaning itself.

The book proceeds as a civilizational diagnosis written from inside the symptom. It rejects the easy postures: techno-utopianism's denial, techno-pessimism's theatre, the apocalypse-merchant's grim entertainment. It refuses the satisfaction of naming an enemy outside

ourselves. Technology is not the villain of this book. Technology is humanity's deepest instinct — the instinct to extend, to optimize, to escape limitation — made finally, terribly visible. The machine is a mirror, and what unsettles us when we look into it is not its strangeness but its familiarity.

The reader who finishes this book will not be told what to do. Ahmedism does not deal in commandments. They will be asked, instead, to see clearly: to recognize what is being traded, by whom, for what, and at what cost — and to decide, with that clarity intact, what remains worth the labor of being human.

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## The Philosophical Framework

The book rests on six load-bearing propositions. Each is developed across multiple chapters and tested against historical, psychological, and technological evidence.

**The Evolutionary Mismatch.** The human nervous system was tuned by hundreds of thousands of years of scarcity, predation, and tribal life. It was not tuned for infinite abundance, frictionless dopamine, simulated intimacy, or planetary-scale feedback loops. We are running paleolithic firmware on post-human hardware. Most of what we diagnose as cultural pathology — addiction, anxiety, loneliness, the collapse of attention — is not pathology at all. It is the predictable behavior of an organism placed outside the conditions for which it was built.

**The Faustian Pattern.** Every significant technology in human history has followed the same arc: liberation, dependency, fragility, irreversibility. Fire, agriculture, writing, the printing press, electricity, antibiotics, the internet — each began as gift and matured into infrastructure no individual could opt out of without leaving civilization itself. Progress is not a ladder; it is a ratchet. We do not choose to keep

ascending. We choose what we will never again be able to descend from.

**Civilization as Collective Ego.** What Ahmedism diagnosed in the individual — ego as a survival mask grown articulate, hunger pretending to be selfhood — operates also at the civilizational scale. Civilization is the ego of a species: its self-image, its hunger for permanence, its terror of insignificance. Every monument, every empire, every technological frontier is the same gesture written larger — the species insisting that it matters, that it endures, that it extends. AI is not a departure from this gesture. It is its culmination.

**The Death of Friction.** Friction — resistance, difficulty, delay, the gap between desire and fulfillment — is not the enemy of meaning. It is meaning's precondition. A life without friction is not a paradise; it is a blank. Modern technology is, at its core, an industrial-scale assault on friction: the engineering of a world in which nothing is far, nothing is slow, nothing is unavailable, nothing is hard. The result is not happiness but a strange new poverty — the poverty of beings who have everything except the conditions under which anything could matter.

**Psychological Death Before Biological Death.** The species may not end in fire. It may end in irrelevance. The danger is not that the machines will replace us by force; it is that we will replace ourselves by preference — outsourcing one human capacity after another until the word *human* no longer points to anything that does the work of being human. A civilization can become functionally extinct long before its last member dies. The body lingers; the species has already left.

**Lucidity as the Only Available Dignity.** From this diagnosis, no easy salvation follows. Ahmedism does not offer escape. It offers awareness — the discipline of seeing clearly what is happening, what is being traded, what is being lost, and refusing the comfort of either denial or despair. To live lucidly inside an accelerating civilization is itself a form of rebellion. Not the rebellion that smashes the machine. The rebellion that refuses to dissolve into it.

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# Tone and Style Manifesto

The voice of this book is the voice of someone who has stopped being surprised but has not stopped being awake.

The prose is sharp without being cold, intense without being shrill. It does not perform depth; it earns it. It moves between the conceptual and the concrete with deliberate ease, grounding abstract claims in recognizable life — the phone reached for before the eyes are fully open, the conversation interrupted by a notification no one remembers receiving, the strange quiet of a room in which everyone is somewhere else. The reader should never feel lectured to. They should feel implicated.

Sentences vary in length and weight by design. A long, accumulating sentence that traces a thought through its turns is followed by a short one that lands like a verdict. Aphorism is allowed but not chased; the memorable line emerges from the argument, never substitutes for it. The book trusts its reader. It does not over-explain. It does not summarize itself at the end of every chapter. It assumes a mind willing to sit with a paradox rather than demand its resolution.

What the voice avoids: the breathless register of futurism, the smug detachment of academic theory, the moist sincerity of self-help, the manufactured doom of apocalypse content, the recycled vocabulary of internet philosophy. It does not call things "the void." It does not begin sentences with "In a world where." It does not refer to AI as "our digital children" or to algorithms as "our new gods." When a metaphor is reached for, it is reached for once and then released. When a thinker is invoked — Nietzsche, Camus, Baudrillard, Heidegger, McLuhan — they are invoked because they are needed, not as decoration.

The book is permitted to be beautiful, but its beauty is the beauty of a clean cut, not a flourish. Its emotional register is lucid grief, lucid wonder, lucid rebellion — never melodrama, never self-pity, never spectacle. The reader should close the book feeling that someone has spoken to them seriously about the only thing that finally matters: what

becomes of a creature that has invented its own erasure and called it progress.

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## Core Recurring Concepts

A small vocabulary recurs across the chapters, each term carrying weight earned through use rather than declared by definition.

**The Faustian Bargain.** Every technology that increases human power in the short term tends to extract a long-term cost in coherence, dependency, or fragility. The bargain is not made once. It is renewed every time we accept a new convenience.

**Outsourcing.** The transfer of a human capacity — memory, navigation, judgment, attention, relationship — to an external system that performs it more efficiently. Outsourcing is not loss; it is something stranger. It is the capacity continuing to exist in the world while ceasing to exist in us.

**The Death of Friction.** The systematic engineering of effortlessness. Friction is what gives an act weight; remove it and the act survives as motion without significance.

**Hyperreality.** Borrowed from Baudrillard and sharpened: the condition in which representations of life become more vivid, more consumable, and more emotionally available than life itself, until the representation is what we live in and the original becomes the copy.

**The Algorithmic Soul.** The interior life of a person whose preferences, attention, identity, and even emotional rhythm have been shaped, over years, by systems optimizing for engagement rather than wellbeing. The algorithmic soul is not fake. It is real. That is the problem.

**Collective Ego.** Civilization understood as the ego of a species — its self-image, its appetites, its terror of mortality, its hunger to extend itself beyond its natural scale.

**Lucid Rebellion.** The Ahmedist posture: rebellion conducted with full awareness of its cost, its contradiction, and its likely futility, and chosen anyway. Not protest. Not withdrawal. The discipline of remaining awake.

**Psychological Extinction.** The death of a species in spirit before its death in body. The condition of a civilization that has surrendered the burden of being itself without noticing the surrender.

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## *Chapter Outline*

### **Introduction — The Species That Could Not Stop Building.**

Establishes the central paradox: that humanity's defining trait is not intelligence or language but the inability to leave any frontier alone. Frames the book as a diagnosis rather than a prophecy. Introduces the mirror metaphor that will recur throughout: that what we have built reveals us more accurately than we have ever wished to be revealed.

### ***Part I — The Evolutionary Trap***

**Chapter 1: Hunger Beyond Survival.** Humans are the only animal that did not stop when it had enough. The chapter traces this unbounded hunger from the first cooked meal to the first cathedral to the first server farm.

**Chapter 2: The First Rebellion Against Nature.** The first technology was not a tool but a refusal — the refusal to accept the

conditions nature had given.

**Chapter 3: Civilization as Collective Ego.** Pyramids, empires, GDP, space programs — each is the species performing its own significance to itself.

## ***Part II — The Religion of Progress***

**Chapter 4: The Priests of Silicon.** Progress functions today as the dominant unexamined faith. Its priests are technologists, its scriptures are quarterly forecasts, its sacrament is the upgrade.

**Chapter 5: Efficiency Devours Meaning.** The most successful idea of the modern world is also its most corrosive.

**Chapter 6: The Death of Friction.** Convenience as the quiet pathology of our age.

## ***Part III — The Synthetic Human***

**Chapter 7: Outsourcing the Self.** A catalogue of what we have already given away.

**Chapter 8: The Algorithmic Soul.** Selfhood as shaped by recommendation.

**Chapter 9: Hyperreality.** On the strange dominance of the representation over the thing.

## ***Part IV — The Final Mask***

**Chapter 10: AI as Humanity's Mirror.** AI is not an alien intelligence; it is a statistical compression of everything we have written, said, and meant.

**Chapter 11: The Species That Replaced Itself.** Replacement is not an event but a process already well underway.

**Chapter 12: Lucidity at the Edge of Extinction.** The book's closing argument. If psychological extinction is the danger, then lucid awareness is the only available rebellion.

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*Introduction*

# **The Species That Could Not Stop Building**

There is a moment, common now and almost universal, that no one in any previous century would have understood. A person wakes. Before their feet touch the floor, before their eyes have fully focused, before they have remembered their own name in the deep way one remembers it after sleep, they reach for a small rectangle of glass. They do not decide to reach for it. The hand moves on its own, the way a heart beats. Inside the glass: messages, faces, weather, war, advertisements, the opinions of strangers, the curated outrage of a planet, the small green dot that means someone is waiting. The day has begun. It began without them.

This is the condition I want to talk about. Not the rectangle itself — the rectangle is innocent, a piece of engineered silicon doing exactly what it was designed to do. What I want to talk about is the hand. The hand that reaches before the mind is awake. The hand that has been trained, over years, by a system that learned how to train it. The hand that no longer belongs entirely to the person attached to it.

A civilization is what its hands do without being asked.

I am not writing this book to warn about artificial intelligence. There are warnings enough, most of them either too loud or too late. I am writing it because the warnings have largely missed what is actually happening. The story we keep telling ourselves — the story of a clever species menaced by its own machines, of a tool grown wild, of Frankenstein with better algorithms — is a story that flatters us. It locates the danger outside. It permits the comforting fantasy that there is a moment ahead at which we might, if we are vigilant, refuse what is coming.

The real story is harder. The danger is not outside. It has never been outside. The machines are not turning on us. They are turning into us, or we into them, and neither side of that exchange involves rebellion. It involves consent. Daily, hourly, frictionless consent.

Humanity did not arrive at this moment by accident. We are the species that could not stop building. From the first sharpened stone to the first model trained on the total textual output of our civilization, we have been doing one thing, and we have been doing it without pause. We have been extending ourselves. We have been refusing the conditions we were given. We have been building, beyond every horizon, the same gesture in larger and larger script: not this, not this, not enough.

For most of our history, this gesture was our genius. The animal that refused its limits became the animal that crossed oceans, cured plagues, decoded the structure of its own cells. There is no honest way to look at the human achievement and call it small. We are, by any measure that animals could understand, the strangest thing that has ever happened on this planet — a creature that, alone among creatures, decided that being a creature was insufficient.

But the gesture that built us is not different from the gesture that may unmake us. It is the same gesture. The hunger that drove a hominid to wrap fur around its body in a place too cold for fur is the hunger that drives a researcher today to train a system capable of writing prose that may be indistinguishable from this one. There is no clean line between

the useful refusal and the catastrophic refusal. There never was. The species that could not stop building is the species that cannot stop, full stop. The verb does not take an object. It just runs.

This is the first thing I want the reader of this book to sit with: that we are not in danger because we became something other than what we were. We are in danger because we have, with terrible consistency, been exactly what we always were, in conditions that no longer match the creature.

We evolved to survive nature. We did not evolve to survive ourselves at scale.

Our nervous systems were tuned in a world of scarcity — a world in which food was rare, predators were near, tribes were small, and a piece of fruit on a tree was worth the long walk to reach it. Every reflex we have, every dopamine pathway, every social instinct, every fear, was shaped by that world. And then, in the geological equivalent of an instant, that world ended. Not the planet — the conditions. The scarcity is gone, replaced by abundance more total than any king in history could have imagined. The predators are gone, replaced by anxieties our ancestors would not have recognized as threats. The small tribe is gone, replaced by the audience of millions, into which any one of us can be cast at any moment by an algorithm that does not know our name.

The firmware did not change. The world did.

What we are watching now — the rising tides of loneliness, the collapse of attention, the strange new diseases of meaning, the addictions that do not look like addictions because they are administered through devices we are told to love — is not, properly speaking, a crisis. It is a mismatch. It is the predictable behavior of a paleolithic organism in a post-human environment. We are not failing. We are doing exactly what creatures of our kind would be expected to do when placed inside conditions our kind has never encountered. The astonishment is not that so many people are suffering. The astonishment is that anyone is well.

And here is where the diagnosis becomes uncomfortable. Because the temptation, once one has named the mismatch, is to recommend a

return. To prescribe disconnection, simplicity, the cabin in the woods, the deleted account, the small life lived deliberately. There is a whole literature of this prescription now, and some of it is beautiful. But I do not believe it. I do not believe the species that could not stop building is going to choose, in any numbers that matter, to stop. We have made that choice available many times. We have not taken it. The hand reaches for the glass before the mind is awake. That is not a habit. That is what we are.

So this book will not prescribe return. It will not prescribe much of anything. It is a book of seeing, not solving. What I want to do, across the chapters that follow, is to look — without flinching, without theatre, without the false consolations of doom or denial — at what is actually happening to a creature like ours inside a civilization like this one. I want to look at what we are trading, and to whom, and for what. I want to look at the bargain we keep making, the bargain we have always made, the bargain we will go on making, and to say, as clearly as one mind can say to another: here is the price.

The price, I will argue, is not what most of the warnings have named. The price is not extinction in the dramatic sense. We are not going to be destroyed by our machines in any way that would make a good film. The machines have no interest in destroying us. They have no interest in anything. They are not rising. They are being built, by us, for purposes we set, in directions we choose, with a velocity we cannot moderate because no one has the authority to moderate it and no individual gains by trying.

The price is subtler, and worse. The price is psychological. The price is that the species may end in spirit long before it ends in body. We may not go extinct. We may simply become irrelevant — to ourselves first, and then to history. A civilization can lose its center without losing its population. The buildings can stand. The lights can stay on. The economy can continue to produce. And inside that civilization, the human work of being human — the work of remembering, of attending, of relating, of making meaning out of friction and time — can quietly

cease, replaced by services that do it for us, until the capacity itself atrophies, and no one notices because no one is exercising the capacity anymore.

This is what I mean by psychological extinction. It is not a metaphor. It is the slow transfer of the human burden — the difficult, costly, meaningful labor of being a person — to systems that perform the function without the burden, and therefore, also, without the meaning. The function persists. The meaning evaporates. We are left with the appearance of a life, the data of a life, the performance of a life. The life itself, the thing that hurts to live, has been outsourced.

I am aware that this sounds like a familiar complaint. Every generation laments the loss of something the previous generation took for granted. Socrates worried that writing would destroy memory. He was, in a narrow sense, correct. He was also, in a larger sense, wrong: writing did not destroy us. It transformed us, and we became, in many ways, more than we had been. The technology pessimists of every era have had to reckon with the fact that humanity has so far survived its own inventions, often spectacularly. Why should this time be different?

I will spend a good portion of this book taking that question seriously, because it deserves to be taken seriously. The short answer — the answer I want to plant here and let grow as we proceed — is that the scale has changed and the target has changed. Earlier technologies extended specific human capacities: the lever extended the arm, the telescope extended the eye, the press extended the voice. They left the human intact and made parts of the human more powerful. What is being built now is different in kind. It is not extending one capacity. It is approaching, asymptotically, all of them. It is not making the arm stronger. It is offering to be the arm, the eye, the voice, the memory, the judgment, the companion, the witness. It is offering, in the friendliest possible tone, to spare us the trouble of being ourselves.

And here is the thing that ought to disturb us most, the thing that ought to keep us awake even when nothing in particular has happened: we are saying yes. Not under coercion. Not under threat. We are saying

yes because saying yes is easier. Because saying yes is faster. Because the systems that ask us are designed by some of the most intelligent humans alive to be exactly as difficult to refuse as they are. We are saying yes because the alternative is friction, and friction is what we have spent two centuries engineering out of human life, and we have been told, by every voice the culture trusts, that this engineering is progress.

I do not believe technology is evil. I want to say this plainly, because I will say it again, and the temptation in a book of this kind is to drift, by gravity, toward easy condemnation. The machine is not the enemy. The machine is, if anything, innocent — a configuration of matter doing what its configuration commits it to doing. The trouble is not with the machine. The trouble is with what the machine reveals about the creature that built it.

What it reveals is that we are, at our deepest layer, an extending species. We have always been trying to leave ourselves. The mystic leaves through trance, the warrior through battle, the scholar through abstraction, the merchant through accumulation, the addict through chemistry, the lover through the beloved. The desire to be more than the limited, mortal, embodied thing one happens to be is not a modern invention. It is the oldest desire we have. And every technology, from fire to large language models, has been a tool offered to that desire — a promise, kept partially and at cost, that the limit might be moved.

The machine, in other words, is humanity's deepest instinct made visible. To look at it and recoil is to recoil from a mirror. The thing in the mirror is not pleasant. It is hungry, restless, ingenious, frightened, vain, magnificent, and incapable of stopping. It is also, when you look long enough, recognizably you.

This is the territory the book will walk. It will not be a comforting walk. I want to be honest about that. I have no intention of arriving, at the end, at a chapter that tells you everything will be all right if we just remember to be kind to each other, or unplug for a weekend, or vote correctly, or build better systems. Everything may not be all right. It is possible — it is more than possible — that the civilization we have built

is on a trajectory that no individual choice and no collective gesture is going to alter. It is possible that the species that could not stop building has, finally, built the thing it could not survive.

But possibility is not destiny. And lucidity — the discipline of seeing clearly what is happening, without flinching and without performance — is the one act of rebellion that no technology can perform for us. The machine can write. It can paint. It can compose. It can argue. It can comfort. It can do, with increasing fluency, almost everything we once thought belonged uniquely to us. There is one thing it cannot do, and one thing only, and it is not a thing I would have guessed before I began thinking carefully about this. It cannot suffer the awareness of its own condition. It does not have a condition to be aware of. We do. That is what is left to us, after everything else has been transferred. The bare, irreducible fact of being the creature that knows it is the creature.

To live lucidly inside an accelerating civilization is not to escape it. There is no escape. There has not been an escape for a long time. But it is to refuse the final transfer. It is to keep, for as long as one can, the thing that cannot be automated: the awareness that this is happening, that one is participating in it, that the price is real, and that no system, however intelligent, however helpful, however indispensable, can do this particular work in one's place. The sword and the child, in Ahmedism's language. The blade that cuts and the wonder that refuses to die. Carried, at the species scale now, into a future that does not promise to receive them kindly.

This book is for the few who are still willing to carry them.

It is not a hopeful book. It is not a hopeless book. It is a book of seeing, written for a species that has nearly forgotten that seeing is its own act — that the eye, the open eye, the eye that does not look away, is itself a form of being human, and that this form is not yet obsolete.

Not yet.

That is what the chapters that follow will explore. We will trace the hunger that built us, the bargains we have kept making, the religion of progress that has replaced our older gods, the strange new soul that

emerges from a life inside the feed, the mirror we have built and are still polishing, and finally, at the edge of what may be the end of something — though we cannot yet say of what — we will ask what remains. What remains for a species like ours, in a moment like this, when the easy consolations no longer hold and the catastrophic warnings no longer move us.

What remains, I will argue, is lucidity. Not as a solution. Not as a salvation. As a posture. As the one human act that has not yet been replaced, and that perhaps, by its nature, cannot be.

Let us begin, then. Not with the machines. Not with the future. With the older thing, the thing underneath all of this — with the hunger that refused, from the first, to settle. With the creature that could not, even when it was warm and fed and safe, sit still.

*Part I*

# **The Evolutionary Trap**



## *Chapter 1*

# **Hunger Beyond Survival**

There is a strange thing the body of every healthy adult human contains, and almost no other animal carries in the same way: surplus. Stored energy. Reserves laid down against famines that no longer come. We carry fat that our ancestors needed and we do not, and we carry it even when we do not need it, because the body has not been told that the famines ended. The body, alone, would be foolish to stop. The body has no way of knowing whether the abundance is permanent or whether tomorrow the herd will move on, the rains will fail, the cold will deepen. So it stores. It keeps storing. It would store forever if the modern world did not first kill it through the diseases of plenty.

This is the first picture I want to put in your mind. Not as metaphor — as biology. The literal flesh of the species is built around an assumption that no longer holds: that more is always provisional, and that what is gathered today must outlast a hunger that tomorrow may bring. The body cannot stop. The body was not given an off switch. It does not know how to be satisfied. It only knows how to want, and to keep wanting, and to interpret the absence of immediate scarcity as the most temporary of states.

What is true of the body is, with one critical extension, true of the mind that runs on the body. We are an animal that cannot stop wanting. And we are the only animal of which this is fully and uniquely true.

Other creatures want, of course. The wolf wants meat, the bee wants nectar, the chimpanzee wants status within its troop. But each of these wants has a horizon. The wolf, fed, sleeps. The bee, returned to the hive, stops flying. The chimpanzee, having secured its rank, defends it but does not invent new ranks to climb. The animal kingdom is filled with desire, but the desire is bounded. It returns to zero. The creature gets enough, and enough is real.

The human being, alone, has no such horizon. The human being fed does not sleep. The human being fed begins to plan. He begins to wonder what comes after food. He begins to ask whether his food is the best food. Whether his shelter, sufficient against the rain, might be made beautiful against the eye. Whether his name, secure within his tribe, might extend beyond it. Whether his life, whose biological purpose has been served the moment he has reproduced, might mean something in addition to what it produces. Once the basic needs have been met, a second hunger appears — and that second hunger does not stop appearing. Every time it is fed, another hunger is uncovered behind it. We are an animal whose stomach is satisfied and whose appetite is just beginning.

The Greeks called this *pleonexia* — the desire for more than one's share, the appetite that exceeds need. They considered it a vice, and tried to legislate against it, and failed, because it was not a vice. It was the species describing itself.

The first time I sat with this fully, I was looking at photographs of the Chauvet cave in southern France. The drawings are perhaps thirty-six thousand years old. They show horses, lions, bears, rhinoceroses — animals moving across the rock with a fluency that no merely competent draftsman achieves. They were made by people who, by any honest accounting, did not need to make them. The hunters who made them were not securing food by drawing on a wall. They were not improving their odds of surviving the winter. They were doing something else. They were, I think, the first members of our species to discover that being alive was not sufficient. That something else was required. That after the day's

meat had been killed and the children fed and the fire built, there remained, inside the human animal, a hunger that could not be satisfied by any of these things — and that this hunger pressed for expression, demanded shape, asked for the world to be marked with the proof that we had passed through it.

The cave paintings are the earliest physical evidence we possess of a creature that could not stop wanting. They are not survival. They are after survival. They are the first surplus put to use for something that exceeds use.

From there, every other thing follows.

Consider what the human species has done with its surplus. Not its needs — its surplus. The needs were always answered by gathering, hunting, simple shelter; even our most primitive ancestors solved those problems within a few hours a day. What we have done is take the time and energy not consumed by survival and pour it into projects whose purpose is not survival at all. We have built monuments. We have written books. We have composed music that requires hundreds of musicians and decades of training to perform. We have constructed cathedrals over centuries, knowing that no individual who began them would live to see their completion. We have sent metal capsules to Mars. We have decoded the human genome. We have built machines that can compose new music in the style of the long dead. None of this was necessary. None of it answers a hunger that any other creature on this planet has.

We did not become the dominant species because we were the strongest, the fastest, or even the smartest in any narrow sense. We became dominant because we refused, in some unspecifiable but absolute way, to be satisfied with the conditions of our existence. We kept wanting after our wanting had been met. And in the long unbroken corridor of that refusal, every artifact, every institution, every revolution we have built sits like a milestone — each one marking another distance walked beyond the place at which any reasonable creature would have stopped.

This is our genius. This is our predicament. They are the same thing.

There is a tendency, when one sits with this fact, to want to make a moral judgment about it. To say that this hunger is greed, or pride, or original sin, or some other failure that we ought to correct. The religious traditions have spent thousands of years training people to fight this hunger, on the theory that it is the wound through which the world bleeds — that nearly every cruelty traceable to humans can be traced, in turn, to the appetite that exceeds need. The contemplative traditions, from Buddhism to the Stoics, have offered elaborate disciplines for reducing the hunger, for training the mind back into the bounded desires of the animal it once was. The mystics have said: stop. The philosophers have said: enough is the only wisdom. The moralists have said: this is the disease that costs the world its peace.

They are correct. The hunger is exactly what they say it is. And yet — and this is the Ahmedist position — they are also missing the thing they are correct about.

Because the hunger is also us. It is not a corruption layered over a purer original creature. It is the creature. To excise it would not be to heal humanity but to delete it. The animal that wanted nothing more than its food would not be a better human being. It would not be a human being at all. It would be one of the other creatures, the ones who do not paint horses on cave walls because they do not feel any pressure to. The hunger that the moralists call our wound is the same hunger that built every glory anyone has ever rightly admired. There is no way to keep one without the other. There is no version of humanity in which the cave painting exists and the empire does not. The reach is single. It does not discriminate between worthy and unworthy ends.

This is the first paradox the book asks you to hold. The capacity that gave us everything we love about being human is the same capacity that has given us everything we fear about being human. We are not in a situation in which we have made some specific error that we might now correct. We are in a situation in which the very thing that made us *us* has

reached a scale at which it threatens to undo us — and the only available exits are either to stop being what we are, which we will not do, or to learn to live with the consequences of being what we are, which we have not yet learned.

The hunger does not slow down. It accelerates. This is the second thing to notice. Each satisfaction sets the table for a hunger one step further out. The hominid who learned to keep a fire was no longer afraid of cold in the way the hominid before fire had been — but he became afraid of the fire going out, and he became afraid of his neighbor's fire being larger, and he became afraid of the dark places at the edge of the firelight where his fire did not reach. The peasant who began farming no longer feared starving in the way the hunter-gatherer feared starving — but he began to fear the failure of the harvest, the cost of seed, the lord's tax, the neighbor's plow turned in a slightly larger field. The merchant who learned to write contracts no longer feared the broken promise in the way the verbal trader feared it — but he began to fear the inflation of currency, the collapse of trust networks, the cunning of his competitor in markets he had never seen.

At every step, the old fear is solved. At every step, a new fear is generated, often by the solution itself. There is no point in human history at which the new fear is smaller than the old one. There is no point at which the species, having solved its current problem, breathes out and concludes that there is now nothing left to do. There is always something left to do. The thing left to do is always slightly more difficult, slightly more abstract, slightly more requiring of cooperation, slightly more dependent on a structure that, if it breaks, will break more catastrophically than the structure before it.

I am not saying this trajectory is bad. I am saying it has direction.

The direction is toward complexity. Toward dependency. Toward scale. Toward the moment, never before reached and now arrived, at which the projects of the species require energies and intelligences greater than any individual member of the species can hold, and so must be entrusted to systems — to institutions, to corporations, to networks, to

machines. The hunger that began with one hominid drawing a horse on a cave wall has, after thirty-six thousand years, become a planet's worth of fiber optic cable carrying a planet's worth of data into facilities that consume a planet's worth of electricity to train models that perform, with no awareness of doing so, the central act we once thought was uniquely ours: the making of meaning out of patterns.

We have not stopped. We will not stop. The body cannot stop. The mind cannot stop. The species cannot stop. To imagine that we will is to imagine an animal of a kind we have never been.

This is the diagnosis from which the rest of the book proceeds. Every chapter that follows is a working out of one of its implications. Civilization is what an animal of this kind builds when it does not stop. Religion is what it tells itself, between projects, to bear the strange anxiety of having no off switch. Politics is the negotiation between members of the unstopping species over which direction the unstopping should run. Technology is the cumulative shape of the unstopping itself, laid down across generations, each generation's stopping point becoming the next generation's starting point, until what we now call the modern world is simply the integral of forty millennia of refusals to settle.

But here is where the diagnosis becomes more difficult, and more honest. Because the hunger that built us is not, in itself, alarming. The mystery of human creativity is not that it exists; we have made our peace with it. The mystery is what happens to a hunger of this kind when, for the first time in its history, it stops encountering meaningful resistance.

For most of our existence, the hunger was checked. Not by ourselves — we have rarely checked ourselves. It was checked by the world. The world told us where we could go and where we could not. The cold killed us if we went too far north. The drought killed us if we built too far from water. The plague killed us if our cities grew too dense. The empire collapsed if it overreached. The cathedral fell if its arches were not engineered correctly. The colonial expedition perished if it underestimated the disease pressure of an unfamiliar continent. The hunger ran into walls. The walls slowed it. The walls were, in the deep

evolutionary logic, the only thing that ever slowed it.

Now there are no walls.

Or rather: the walls have receded so far that for the first time in human history, the lived experience of being a young person of moderate means in a developed country is the experience of a being whose every desire is, in some practical sense, immediately addressable. Food is delivered in twenty minutes. Information is summoned in milliseconds. Companionship is one application away. Sex, of a sort, is available without negotiation or commitment. Entertainment is infinite and personalized. Travel is a button. Even loneliness, even sorrow, even spiritual emptiness, are answered by curated content that promises to address them at the speed of the next swipe.

This is not a complaint about modernity. I am not the kind of writer who romanticizes the difficulties of the past — the past was, for most of our ancestors, miserable beyond what any of us can fully imagine, and I will not stand here and pretend the cholera-ridden village was a school of meaning that the gleaming city has lost. The past was harder, and people died younger, and most of them had no time or surplus to ask any of the questions this book asks.

But there is a thing to notice, all the same. The hunger that built us was a hunger that *encountered the world*. It pressed against limits. It was answered, sometimes; it was refused, sometimes; it was killed and reborn and disciplined and surprised by the world's resistance. The hunger that operates now, in the lives of those of us privileged enough to live inside the modern technological envelope, has fewer and fewer of those encounters. It presses against systems engineered to give way before it. The world has been tuned to the hunger. The hunger has not been tuned to anything.

I want you to feel the strangeness of this. We did not evolve the hunger to live in conditions like these. The hunger evolved to operate in a world that pushed back. Take away the pushback and you do not get satisfaction. You get something stranger. You get a hunger that, no longer encountering resistance, no longer knows what to want.

This is, I think, the underlying condition of the modern soul. Not depression, not anxiety, not nihilism in the philosophical sense — though all of these are symptoms. The underlying condition is a creature whose primary apparatus for being alive — the wanting apparatus — has been disconnected from its primary intended environment. The wanting apparatus still works. It wants. It wants ferociously. But what it wants is no longer the world. What it wants is the next item in the feed, the next notification, the next promised arrival, the next product, the next certainty. It wants what the systems offer it to want. It wants what is easy to want. And the wanting, no longer educated by resistance, becomes increasingly frictionless and increasingly empty in the same gesture.

A hunger that meets the world becomes a person. A hunger that meets only systems becomes a consumer.

This is the seed of the entire diagnosis that follows. We are, all of us, hungrier than any animal has ever been. We are also, increasingly, beings whose hungers have nowhere to go that pushes back. And the systems we have built to receive our hungers — systems that profit by receiving them, by measuring them, by anticipating them, by perfecting them — are not, whatever their other virtues, the world. They are not, by any honest description, what we evolved to push against. They cannot stand in for it. They cannot teach a hunger anything. They can only feed it.

What happens to an unstoppable species inside a world that no longer stops it? This is the question. Every chapter that follows is, in some sense, an attempt to answer it.

The shorter version of the answer, which I will spend the rest of the book earning, is this: the unstoppable species, encountering no stop, begins to consume itself. It runs out of external worlds to extend into and begins extending into the only world remaining — the interior. The hunger that once built cathedrals begins, gradually and then suddenly, to build experiences inside our own heads. It builds optimized feeds, simulated companions, gamified identities, curated emotional rhythms. It moves from the world to the self, because the world has been

exhausted as a target. And the self, unlike the world, has no defenses. The self does not push back. The self can be reshaped by the system that is shaping it, because the self is, finally, just whatever is left of us after every harder thing has been outsourced.

There is no walls warning us about this. There is no famine. There is no plague. The hunger that built the species is doing what hungers always do — looking for new ground. And the new ground, for the first time in our history, is us.

The body, recall, cannot stop storing fat against a famine that will never come.

The mind cannot stop wanting against a hunger that has nowhere left to go.

Both of these are pathologies. Both of these are also signatures of the creature.

You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have the cave painting and not have the data center. You cannot have the cathedral and not have the cathedral's eventual successor, whatever shape its hunger takes. The same gesture is at work. The same animal is doing it. The fact that it now begins to consume the very thing that made the gesture interesting in the first place — the human interior, the human relationship, the human capacity to find anything difficult or worthwhile — is not a betrayal of the gesture. It is its logical extension.

We are the species that could not stop.

We are, perhaps, the first species in the history of this planet that is reaching the point where its inability to stop has nothing left to point at but itself.

I do not say this to alarm you. I say it because, if we are going to think clearly about what is coming, we have to start where the trouble actually starts. Not with the algorithm. Not with the screen. Not with the latest model. With the hunger. With the unstopping. With the creature that, even now, in this moment, reading this paragraph, can feel the small pull at the edge of its attention that wants to check something, do something, refresh something — the same pull, perfectly preserved, that

drove a hominid thirty-six thousand years ago to crawl into the deep dark of a cave and, in the flickering light of a torch, scratch onto the rock face the unmistakable shape of a horse, and another horse, and another, until the wall was crowded with horses, and still the hand kept moving, because *enough* has never been a place humans have known how to live.

That is what we are. We are about to look at what we are doing with it.

## *Chapter 2*

# **The First Rebellion Against Nature**

There is an old habit, in writing about technology, of beginning with the tool. With the sharpened stone, the bronze blade, the iron plow, the steam engine. The history is told as if the object came first and the human, encountering the object, was changed by it. This is a flattering history. It locates the agency outside the agent. It permits us to speak as though we have been the more or less passive recipients of our own inventions, as though each new tool simply appeared, was adopted, and shaped us in ways we had no part in choosing.

I want to begin somewhere else. Not with the tool, but with the gesture that preceded the tool — the gesture without which no tool would ever have been made. The tool is the second thing. The first thing is the refusal.

Before there was fire, there was the creature that decided it was cold. Before there was the wheel, there was the creature that decided that walking was slow. Before there was the plow, there was the creature that decided that gathering nuts under a tree was not enough. The tool is the answer. The refusal is the question. And the question — the refusal — is the thing that distinguishes our species from every other creature that has ever lived. Other animals adapt to their conditions. We refuse them.

This is the first rebellion. It is older than any political rebellion, any moral rebellion, any spiritual rebellion. It is the rebellion against being a creature in the way other creatures are creatures. It is the moment, somewhere in our prehistory, when one of our ancestors looked at the world that had been given and decided, with no precedent in any other living being on the planet, that the world was not the final word. That it could be argued with. That what had been arranged for us could be rearranged by us. That we were going to live, not in the conditions of our planet, but in modified conditions of our own making.

This is the thing humans do. It is the only thing we do. Everything else — language, art, religion, politics, war — is downstream of it. The species that refuses its conditions is the species that, having refused them, must build alternatives to them. Building is the consequence. The refusal is the cause.

I want you to sit with this for a moment, because the cultural story about technology gets it almost exactly backward. We talk about ourselves as a creature that, having become intelligent, began to make tools. But there is no good evidence that we became intelligent and then made tools. There is much better evidence that we made tools and, in the long pressure of making them, became intelligent. Tool-making was not the application of an existing intelligence. Tool-making was the school in which intelligence was finished. We are not the intelligent species that builds. We are the building species that, in the act of building, was made intelligent.

And the building species is not the same as the intelligent species. It is something stranger. It is a species that has decided to live, not within nature, but against it. To stand in a relationship of permanent disagreement with the world's first arrangement of itself.

Fire is the cleanest illustration of this. There are competing theories about when our ancestors first controlled fire — some place it as far back as a million years ago, with *Homo erectus*; others put it later, with the broader Homo lineage. The dating is contested. What is not contested is what happened when it occurred. Fire was not just a tool. It was a

renegotiation. Before fire, our ancestors had been bound to certain ranges, certain climates, certain dietary possibilities. After fire, those boundaries dissolved. With fire, a primate could move into the cold, because the cold could be answered. A primate could eat foods otherwise inedible, because cooking unlocked calories the raw food contained but did not yield. A primate could keep predators at distance through the night, could communicate in small bands gathered around a focal point of light and heat that nature had not provided, could spread, over generations, into terrain it had never been built for.

The hominid lineage exploded outward in the wake of fire. We became, within a few hundred thousand years, the only primate to occupy nearly every climate zone on the planet. We did this not because we evolved to fit those climates. We did this because we brought our climate with us. We took the warmth that nature had given to one belt of the earth and we carried it, in coals and in skill, into the places nature had marked as off-limits. The fire was a small, contained refusal. It said: *I will not accept the cold*. And the cold, asked seriously, found that it had no answer.

This is the first rebellion. It is the moment when the human becomes a creature that does not negotiate with its conditions on the terms its conditions propose. The terms are revised.

Every subsequent technology repeats this gesture at a different scale. The plow is a refusal of the constraint that food must be looked for; food, said the plow, will instead be made. The wheel is a refusal of the constraint that things must be carried by what can carry them; things will instead roll, even when no animal would roll them, even up grades and down rivers and across distances no carrier would attempt. The sailing ship is a refusal of the constraint that the sea is a boundary; the sea, said the sail, will be a road. The printing press is a refusal of the constraint that knowledge must be hand-copied and therefore rare; knowledge, said the press, will be cheap. Antibiotics are a refusal of the constraint that microbial disease is destiny; the constraint, said the antibiotic, will be lifted, and you will live a decade longer because of it.

Each technology has the same logical structure. Each says: *what nature has given is not the last word*. Each treats the limit as a question rather than an answer.

The cultural story usually frames these refusals as triumphs. And they are triumphs. I will not pretend otherwise. The reduction in childhood mortality alone, accomplished over the last hundred and fifty years through technologies that refused the constraint of microbial death, is one of the largest moral victories in the history of any species. A grandparent today routinely sees grandchildren that, a few generations ago, they would have been statistically unlikely to meet. Whole categories of grief that defined human life — the dead child, the lost mother, the missing limb, the starved winter — have been edited, for many of us, out of the standard human experience. To stand against the rebellion against nature is to stand for those griefs. I am not standing for them. I do not romanticize the world before our refusals. The world before our refusals was not better. It was, on most metrics that matter, almost unimaginably worse.

But.

There is always a but with us, and the but is important.

The refusal does not stop. This is the thing the triumphal story misses. We do not refuse the cold and then conclude that the refusal of the cold is sufficient. We refuse the cold, and then we refuse the heat, and then we refuse the dark, and then we refuse the distance, and then we refuse the illness, and then we refuse the time it takes to communicate, and then we refuse the time it takes to think, and then — increasingly, in the moment we are living — we refuse, in some quieter and harder-to-name way, the conditions of being a thinking creature at all. The rebellion that began with fire does not pause at fire. It does not pause at the plow, the press, the antibiotic. It treats each conquest as the platform for the next refusal. It is, by its nature, recursive. It cannot satisfy itself. Every constraint lifted becomes the perch from which the next constraint is identified.

This is what I want to be clear about. The rebellion against nature is not a project we can complete. It is not a project that has stages — that proceeds, like a road, from a beginning to an end. It is a posture. It is a way of being in relation to the world. And the posture, once adopted, has no terminal condition. There is no scenario in which the rebellion against nature succeeds enough that the rebellion can stop. There is only the rebellion, and what it has done so far, and what it will do tomorrow, and what it will do next year, and what it will do in the century to come, and so on without horizon.

This is the part of our nature that the optimistic story about technology consistently fails to take seriously. The optimistic story assumes that we are using technology to solve problems, and that, once enough problems are solved, we will arrive at something like a destination — a flourishing world, a stable abundance, a condition in which the unfinished business of being human has finally been completed. But this is not what we have been doing. We have not been solving problems. We have been transforming what counts as a problem. Each technology, having solved its target problem, redefines the next problem, often to include constraints we did not previously experience as constraints at all.

A peasant in the medieval period did not experience the absence of antibiotics as a problem. He experienced disease and death as conditions. He grieved them, but he did not experience them as solvable. They were what life was. When we invented antibiotics, we did not merely solve a problem he had been failing to solve. We made the problem itself visible to him retroactively, as if to say: *the deaths you grieved as fate were always engineering questions you had not learned how to ask*. And once those questions are askable, every subsequent fate begins to look like an engineering question too. Aging. Mortality. Memory loss. Cognitive limit. Emotional regulation. Loneliness. These are not, in the contemporary technological worldview, conditions to be borne. They are engineering questions, awaiting their respective solutions.

This is the rebellion's deepest transformation. It does not merely change our circumstances. It changes our ontology — our sense of what is fixed and what is fluid. Under the rebellion, less and less is fixed. More and more is fluid. Things that previous generations experienced as the structure of reality become, for the next generation, project briefs. The categories that once contained human life — birth, work, family, community, mortality — are reframed as problem sets, awaiting only the right tools, the right capital, the right willingness to refuse the constraints that previous generations were too timid to recognize as constraints.

I want to be careful here, because this passage could be read as a complaint, and I do not intend it as a complaint. I am describing what is. I am not, at this moment, judging whether what is should also be. Many of the constraints we have refused were worth refusing. Many of the categories we have dissolved were not, in their original form, the sacred things their defenders said they were. I am not arguing for the restoration of feudal medical care or premodern infant mortality. I am arguing that we should be clear-eyed about what we are doing, and about what kind of creature does this kind of thing, and about where this kind of doing, by this kind of creature, has historically led.

Where it has led, in every previous case, is to a new world. And the new world has always come with a new vulnerability.

This is the law of the rebellion. Every refusal carries within itself the seed of a new dependency. The fire that freed us from the cold also made us dependent on fire. The plow that freed us from gathering also chained us to soil, to seasons, to surplus, to grain that had to be stored and defended against rats and rivals. The antibiotic that freed us from microbial death also created the conditions for antibiotic-resistant strains and a global pharmaceutical infrastructure no one can leave without leaving modernity itself. The internet that freed us from the limits of local information also bound us to a planetary communication apparatus whose collapse would now constitute a civilizational emergency that, two centuries ago, no civilization could have suffered because no civilization depended on it.

The new freedom is real. The new dependency is also real. They come together. They have always come together. There is no version of the rebellion in which we get the freedom and not the dependency. The freedom *is* the dependency, in the way that the contract you enter is the obligation you accept. To refuse the cold is to depend on the fire. To refuse the disease is to depend on the medicine. To refuse the distance is to depend on the network. The refusal is not free. It costs the very thing it grants.

In the chapters that follow, I will trace this pattern through specific contemporary technologies — through search engines and social media, through delivery applications and dating applications, through AI systems and the synthetic media they are beginning to generate. In each case, the same structure repeats. The technology offers to remove a constraint we had not previously found intolerable. We accept the offer, because the offer is rationally attractive — the constraint is a real constraint, the removal is a real removal, the benefit is genuine. And then, having accepted, we find that we have entered into a dependency we did not foresee, with consequences we did not anticipate, and that the option of returning to the prior state has, in some quiet way that no one announced, been closed behind us.

This is the Faustian pattern in its full structure. It does not require that we be tricked. It does not require any malicious actor. It requires only that we be the species we already are — a creature that refuses constraints by default, that experiences the offer of relief as nearly impossible to decline, and that does not, in the moment of acceptance, see clearly the cost it has just locked in.

Most of us, most of the time, do not even feel that a cost has been locked in. The new technology arrives. It feels useful. It becomes habitual. The habits reshape our daily lives. The daily lives reshape our brains. The brains, reshaped, can no longer easily remember what life was like before the technology — and even if they remember intellectually, they no longer have the capacity to live that way emotionally. Try, today, to live a single day as you would have lived it in

1995. The exercise is not impossible. But it is exhausting, and a little frightening, and reveals, in a way nothing else does, how thoroughly the rebellion of the last three decades has rewritten the conditions of ordinary consciousness.

The cost is paid in capacities we no longer have. The benefits are visible. The costs are largely invisible. This is not because the costs are smaller. It is because the benefits show up where we are looking and the costs show up where we are not.

Now to the present. The contemporary moment is being narrated, in the loudest available voices, as a technological revolution unlike anything that has come before. Artificial intelligence, the story goes, is a discontinuity. A break in the curve. The dawn of a new era. The arrival of a force that will reshape every aspect of human life within decades.

I want to suggest that this narration is mostly wrong, and that getting it wrong is part of why we cannot think clearly about what is actually happening.

What is happening now is not a discontinuity. It is a continuation. It is the next term in a sequence that goes back, with extraordinary consistency, at least one million years. The rebellion against nature, having refused the cold and the hunger and the distance and the disease and the ignorance and the labor, is now refusing the constraint of cognition itself. It is saying: *we will no longer accept that thinking takes time, that memory has limits, that judgment requires experience, that the labor of synthesis is the labor of a mind.* We will instead build systems to which the labor can be transferred. We will lift this constraint too. We will make of intelligence — our distinguishing capacity, the thing that made us the building species in the first place — a thing that can be summoned, scaled, and rented like electricity.

This is not a discontinuity. It is the most consistent thing we have ever done. It is the rebellion at its largest possible target. There were never going to be constraints that were forever exempt from our refusal. The only question was when we would get to them. And the answer, finally, is: now.

To call this "the AI revolution" is to flatter the technology and underestimate the gesture. It is not the AI that is revolutionary. The revolution is forty thousand years old. The AI is the latest letter in a sentence we have been writing without pause since one of our ancestors first realized that the cold could be argued with. The same hand that wrote *fire* is writing *model*. The same hand that wrote *plow* is writing *training run*. The same hand that wrote *vaccine* is writing *generative system*. There is no break in the handwriting. There is only the relentless accumulation of one more refusal, and another, and another, until we arrive at the present moment, in which we are refusing what previous generations of refusers would have considered our own definitional capacity, and discovering that even this refusal is, by our standards, just another Tuesday.

What is new, then? Not the gesture. The scale. And — this is what the following chapters will explore — the target.

The earlier rebellions refused constraints external to the human being. They refused the world, in its various indifferences and cruelties. We are not the world's friend, and the world was not built for us, and the rebellion against the world was, on balance, a defensible posture for a creature that wanted to live longer, eat better, and bury fewer of its children. The world deserved much of what we did to it.

The rebellion now under way is different. It does not refuse the world. It refuses the human. It refuses the slowness of our memory, the limit of our attention, the fragility of our judgment, the loneliness of our embodiment, the difficulty of our relationships, the burden of our consciousness. These are not constraints imposed on us by an indifferent universe. These are the conditions under which we have, for two hundred thousand years, been the creature we are. To refuse them is not to refuse the world. It is to refuse ourselves.

I am not certain this refusal is wrong. I am certain it is different. And I am certain that the species which refuses its own conditions has crossed into a territory we have no prior experience with. The previous rebellions transformed the world. This one transforms the rebel. The

previous rebellions left, when they were finished, a human being more powerful inside a softer world. This one leaves, when it is finished, a softer human being inside a world that has been engineered to receive their softness.

What comes of that is what the rest of this book will try to see.

For now, only this: the impulse is old. The target is new. We are doing the same thing we have always done. We are doing it, for the first time, to ourselves.

### *Chapter 3*

# **Civilization as Collective Ego**

A pyramid was, by any rational calculation, a waste.

The Egyptians who built the Great Pyramid of Giza did so over a period of perhaps two decades, employing a labor force whose scale is still contested but was certainly enormous, quarrying and transporting limestone blocks averaging two and a half tons, organizing a logistics operation that anticipated, by four millennia, the kind of state-level coordination we now take for granted. The result was a tomb. A single man would be placed inside it. The man, in any meaningful biological sense, gained nothing from the structure. He was dead. The pyramid was not protecting his body — bodies were better preserved by simpler methods. The pyramid was not housing his soul — souls, in the Egyptian conception, did not require this much real estate. The pyramid was performing something else entirely. It was insisting, in the language of stone, on the importance of a man whose actual importance had already ended at the moment of his last breath.

The pyramid is not, by any standard a survival-minded creature would recognize, a sensible use of a society's resources. It feeds no one. It defends nothing. It produces no goods. It does not even, in any honest sense, glorify the man it commemorates — most of us could not name

the pharaoh for whom the Great Pyramid was built without consulting a source. What the pyramid does, what it has always done, what it continues to do thousands of years after its makers' bones have turned to dust, is this: it announces. It says, to the universe and to whatever comes after the universe, *we were here. We mattered. Take notice.*

The pyramid is ego. Not the ego of the dead pharaoh. The ego of the species that built it. A civilization saying, through one of its members and on behalf of all of them, that the species is not negligible. That the species is not to be forgotten. That the species, in some sense it cannot fully articulate to itself, *deserves a pyramid.*

This is the thing I want to talk about in this chapter. Not pyramids specifically — pyramids are only the cleanest example, because they are so transparently unnecessary, so obviously the work of an animal that had time and labor it could afford to spend on a statement. But the same logic that built the pyramid built the cathedral, built the empire, built the space program, built the trillion-dollar valuation, built the data center. Every civilization, without exception, in every age that has left us evidence to study, has spent its surplus on a version of the pyramid. The form changes. The gesture does not. The species, having satisfied its basic needs, takes what is left over and uses it to make a case for its own significance.

This is what I mean when I say that civilization is collective ego.

Ahmedism diagnosed ego, in the individual, as hunger that has grown articulate. The infant cries for milk; the cry, answered, becomes a self. The self, fed, becomes a personality. The personality, fed further, becomes a person. The person, fed beyond need, becomes an ego — a structure whose purpose is no longer survival but the protection and projection of an identity that has acquired a momentum independent of any specific need. Once the ego exists, it must be maintained. It must be defended. It must be displayed. It must be enlarged. The ego is not a luxury layered on top of a healthy self. It is what hunger becomes when there is nothing left for the hunger to do.

What is true of the individual is true, at scale, of the civilization. The species, like the infant, begins in need. The early human collectives — small bands, modest settlements, the first villages — were configured around survival. Food. Warmth. Defense. Reproduction. These took everything they had. There was no civilization in our modern sense. There was only existence, more or less skilled, more or less fortunate.

And then, at some point, the existence began to produce more than it consumed. A grain surplus accumulated. A trade network thickened. A settlement's defenses grew good enough that the threat of raiding receded. And at that moment, for the first time, a question that no other species has ever had to face presented itself to the human collective. The question was: *what do we do with the rest of it?*

We did not, for the most part, choose to do nothing. The species that could not stop building did not, finding itself with energy unspoken for, conclude that the energy could be banked or distributed evenly or quietly enjoyed. We built. We always build. And what we built, almost as soon as we had the surplus to build it, was civilization — a word that turns out to mean, on close inspection, *the residue of all the things a species spent its excess on, after its needs were met.*

Civilization is the ego of the species. It is what we made of ourselves once we had the materials to make anything we wanted. And what we made, with extraordinary consistency, was not utility. We made monuments. We made hierarchies. We made art. We made wars. We made institutions whose elaborateness exceeded their function, scriptures whose beauty exceeded their accuracy, palaces whose comfort exceeded their inhabitants' need for shelter by factors we now find difficult to even visualize.

Look at the cathedrals. Even the most secular reader, walking into Chartres or Cologne or Notre-Dame, has to confront the fact that something is going on here that cannot be accounted for by piety alone. The structures are too much. They cost too much. They took too long. The communities that built them sacrificed too thoroughly to make them. No theology I have read fully accounts for why a poor European

city in the twelfth century would devote a century of its labor and most of its disposable wealth to a building that would not even be completed in the lifetimes of the men who started it. The standard answers — that they were glorifying God, that they were buying salvation, that they were creating spaces for collective worship — are all partially true. None of them is sufficient. The cathedrals are too much.

What they are is collective ego. Not the ego of any individual builder, mason, bishop, donor, or king — although these certainly factored in. The collective ego of a civilization that had decided, with no one in particular announcing the decision, that it was going to mark itself on the world with structures so tall and so beautiful and so improbable that nothing built before it could be mistaken for being on the same order of significance. The cathedrals were the high medieval period's way of saying: *we are not the Romans. We are not the Greeks. We are not what came before. We are this.* The fact that the cathedrals were addressed, in their theology, to God does not change this. The address was upward. The audience was sideways and forward. The cathedrals were speaking to other civilizations, including future ones, on behalf of the civilization that built them.

The pattern persists. Every civilization speaks to other civilizations through the monuments it leaves. We do this now, in our own civilization, in forms that the medieval mind would not have recognized as monuments but that perform the same function. The skyscraper is a cathedral. The Olympic Games are a cathedral. The space program is a cathedral. The international airport, with its enormous waiting halls and its endlessly maintained landscaping, is a cathedral. We have not stopped building shrines to ourselves. We have only changed the materials.

Some of the contemporary forms are easier to recognize as collective ego than others. The Saudi government's announcement that it would build a hundred-mile-long linear city in the desert, housing nine million people inside a structure of mirrored glass — *Neom, The Line* — was met with a great deal of skepticism, and that skepticism was largely correct on

technical grounds. The project, as initially described, was infeasible. It has since been scaled back. But notice: the skepticism never quite landed where it should have landed. The skepticism never asked the question of why a government would announce, with apparent seriousness, a project of this kind. The answer is not that the government had a rigorous urban planning vision. The answer is that the government had surplus and wanted to announce its existence at a scale the world would have to look at. The project is a contemporary pyramid. Its inhabitability is, in some quiet way, beside the point. The point is that it would, if completed, exist — and existing, would say what such things always say. *We were here. We mattered. Take notice.*

This is not unique to the Saudis. Every civilization currently in possession of surplus is doing some version of this. The Chinese have been building cities for populations that have not yet been moved into them. The American technology industry has been spending billions of dollars to develop systems whose ultimate commercial viability is still uncertain, on the grounds that the development *itself* is a statement. The European Union has been constructing institutional frameworks whose elaborateness exceeds, by orders of magnitude, what the underlying coordination problem would seem to require. The Russians have been refurbishing Soviet-era symbols at a cost that, in a country with their economic constraints, would be inexplicable except as ego — as the insistence, in stone and steel and parade, that the civilization is still here, still relevant, still to be reckoned with.

I do not bring up these examples to score political points. I bring them up to make a single observation: that every civilization in possession of surplus uses some of it on projects whose function is not the production of further surplus but the announcement of the civilization's significance. This is not corruption. This is not waste in any pejorative sense. This is the predictable behavior of an animal whose hunger has outgrown its needs, scaled up to the level at which the animal acts collectively.

Civilization, in other words, is not what humanity built once it became civilized. Civilization is what humanity built once it discovered that, after meeting its needs, it still had hunger to feed.

This brings me to the central observation of the chapter, and the one that bears on what is happening now.

No civilization has ever voluntarily chosen to be smaller.

I want to let that sit. It is, when you think about it, an extraordinary claim. Civilizations have grown. Civilizations have shrunk. Civilizations have collapsed. But no civilization that I am aware of, in the entire historical record, has ever, when it had a choice, decided to remain at a smaller and more sustainable scale rather than grow into a larger and more precarious one. Whenever the choice has been available between growth and stability, every civilization without exception has chosen growth — even when its own thinkers have been able to articulate, in advance and in detail, the costs that growth would impose. The choice has been so consistent that we do not, most of the time, even notice that a choice is being made. We treat the growth as inevitable, as natural, as what civilizations do. But it is not what civilizations *have to* do. It is what they always *have* done. There is a difference.

Why?

The standard answers — that growth is necessary for economic stability, that competitive pressure forces it, that human nature demands it — are all partially true. None of them, again, is sufficient. There are historical cases in which growth was not necessary, was not externally forced, and was not, by any reasonable analysis of human well-being, demanded. And the civilizations involved grew anyway. They grew because they could. They grew because growth was a thing they did. The growth was not strategy. The growth was ego, at scale, doing what ego does — extending, asserting, occupying more ground than it strictly needs to occupy, because needing-less is not, for an ego, a satisfactory condition.

This is the diagnostic insight from which the modern situation must be understood. Our civilization is on a trajectory that no one in our

civilization is precisely choosing. The growth is happening. The technologies are being built. The systems are scaling. The data centers are coming online. The models are being trained on the total output of human thought. And there is no individual we can point to who is, by any meaningful sense of the word, in charge. The trajectory is not anyone's project. It is the trajectory of a collective ego, on a scale we have no historical precedent for, encountering, for the first time, almost no external resistance.

The collective ego, when it operated within bounded conditions, was held in check by the world — by famines, by plagues, by competitor civilizations, by the simple impossibility of sustaining the imperial gesture beyond a certain logistical limit. Rome could only get so big before the cost of holding it together exceeded the wealth it could extract. The Mongols could only ride so far before their political structure thinned beyond the point where it could keep their conquests together. The European empires could only colonize so much before the colonized began to overthrow them. Every previous expression of civilizational ego had natural limits, and the limits did the work of restraint that the civilization was constitutionally incapable of doing for itself.

The contemporary moment is the first in which the limits, in any classical sense, have stopped operating. There is no famine constraining the technology industry. There is no plague stopping the scaling of data centers. There is no competitor civilization that can credibly check the dominant one — and in any case, the technologies in question are now developed and deployed across multiple competing civilizations simultaneously, each pushing the others further, each one's investment a justification for the others' investments. The collective ego is operating in conditions of effective unbounded resource: cheap energy, cheap compute, cheap capital, vast labor pools, and no enforcement mechanism capable of slowing the gesture from outside.

In these conditions, the gesture accelerates. It does not stabilize. It does not equilibrate. It accelerates, because acceleration is what an ego in unbounded conditions does. The ego, unchecked, does not become

wiser. It does not become more proportionate. It becomes larger. It seeks projects of larger scale, makes claims of greater grandiosity, demands resources of greater enormity. The end state of a fully unchecked ego is not the satisfied ego. It is the ego that has consumed its host.

This is what I want the reader to begin to see, because it is the lens through which the rest of the book must be read. The artificial intelligence project, as it is currently being pursued, is not — at the level of its actual motivational structure — a project of utility. It is not, primarily, a project of solving discrete problems. It is, in its observed behavior, a civilizational ego-extension. It is the contemporary pyramid. It is the announcement, in silicon and parameters, that the species is still here, that the species is more capable than any species has ever been, that the species can build — and is building — things that previous generations of the species would have considered impossible. It is the cathedral of our era. It is what we are spending our surplus on.

The problem is not that this is corrupt, or that we should not be doing it. I have been at pains throughout this book not to make that judgment, because that judgment is too easy and too small. The problem is that, like every previous expression of the collective ego, this one is being pursued without the species having any clear sense of where the project ends or what costs the project's completion will impose. The species building the pyramid did not have a long-range plan for what it would do once the pyramid was complete. The species building the cathedral did not consult itself, in any meaningful way, about whether it actually wanted to live inside the religious culture the cathedral was making material. The species building AI is not consulting itself about whether it wants to live inside the cognitive culture that AI will make material.

The collective ego does not consult. The collective ego acts. It acts because acting is what it is. The consultation, when it happens, happens afterward, when the action has already shaped the world and the consultation is reduced to figuring out what to do with what we have made.

And here, finally, is the thing I want to leave you with at the end of this chapter — the connection back to Ahmedism's original diagnosis, scaled up.

Ahmedism observed that the individual ego, unchecked by awareness, becomes the rusted blade — the sword swung wildly, cutting more often than necessary, defending insecurities it dares not name, terrified of its own emptiness, in love with its own performance. The Ahmedist counsel was not to kill the ego. The Ahmedist counsel was to *master* it — to know it, sharpen it, carry it consciously, refuse to let it carry you.

What is the Ahmedist counsel for a civilization?

It is the same counsel, applied to a different scale. Civilization, like the individual ego, cannot be killed. It cannot be voluntarily reduced. It cannot be returned to a smaller and more humble form. The historical evidence is unequivocal: civilization, having begun, does not voluntarily uncivilize itself. The hunger does not reverse. The collective ego does not shrink by choice.

But it can be seen. It can be known. The species building can become, at the level of its individual members, a species aware that this is what it is doing. The pyramid can be built and the pyramid-builders can know that they are building a pyramid. The cathedral can rise and the people raising it can be conscious of the gesture they are making — neither denying it nor pretending it is something else. The AI can be built and the civilization building it can refuse the comfortable fiction that the project is purely utilitarian, purely scientific, purely necessary. The civilization can do what the civilization is doing and, at the same time, look at what the civilization is doing without flinching from what it sees.

This is what the rest of this book will ask of you. Not to stop the gesture. The gesture is not under any individual reader's control, and it is dishonest to pretend otherwise. But to see the gesture. To name it. To carry, inside one's own consciousness, the knowledge that one is a member of a species that is, even now, building a pyramid larger and

stranger than any pyramid before it, and that the pyramid is going up regardless of whether anyone watching has decided that it should.

That is the Ahmedist posture, scaled to the civilizational moment. To live inside the building without losing sight of what the building is.

To be the species that could not stop building, and to be, at the same time, the species that can see itself building.

Most of our predecessors could not see, because they had no vantage point from which to see. We have the vantage point now. It was given to us, ironically, by the very technologies whose effects we are trying to understand. We are the first generation that can hold, in a single field of view, the long arc of the rebellion against nature and the strange new chapter we are currently writing. We can do what no previous generation of pyramid-builders could do. We can look at the pyramid, while we build it, and know that we are building a pyramid, and ask what kind of creature builds these things, and at what cost, and toward what end.

The end is what the next part of the book is about.

*Part II*

# **The Religion of Progress**



## *Chapter 4*

# **The Priests of Silicon**

There is a peculiar fact about our age that almost no one names directly, because the naming would expose us as more credulous than we believe ourselves to be: we have a religion. We do not call it a religion. We call it many other things — innovation, progress, technology, the future. We perform its rituals without recognizing them as rituals. We attend its sermons without registering them as sermons. We pay its tithes without noticing that we are paying. But it has a clergy. It has a scripture. It has a soteriology and an eschatology and a tradition of saints. It is, by every functional measure that the academic study of religion has developed, a religion. It is simply a religion no one will admit to attending.

I do not say this to discredit it. Religions have done a great deal of good in human history, alongside their well-documented harms, and the suggestion that the modern technology industry occupies the social position once occupied by the medieval Church is not, in itself, a criticism. The Church organized European civilization for a thousand years. It would not be the worst thing if a successor institution were doing comparable work. But to understand what is happening to us now, we have to be able to see the religion as a religion. We have to be able to attend its services with the same eye an anthropologist would bring to a tribe's seasonal rite. And we have to acknowledge that the inability of most of our contemporaries to perform this seeing is, itself, the strongest

possible evidence that the religion is operating.

What follows is not an attempt to debunk technology. I have already said, more than once, that I do not think technology is evil, and I do not now reverse that claim. What follows is an attempt to distinguish between the technology, which is morally neutral, and the *faith in technology*, which is not. The faith is a human creation, sustained by human institutions, propagated by human voices, profitable to human interests. The faith deserves the same scrutiny that earlier faiths received, and which the present faith has so far almost entirely escaped — because the faith has, with extraordinary success, persuaded its adherents that it is not a faith at all but the absence of faith, the clear-eyed view of how things are, the rational position that no rational person could reasonably oppose.

This is, of course, what every successful religion has claimed. The medieval Christian did not experience his Christianity as a contingent belief system in competition with other belief systems. He experienced it as how things are. The Aztec priest performing a heart sacrifice did not perform it as a brutal ritual within an arbitrary cosmology. He performed it as the necessary maintenance of a cosmos whose rules permitted no alternative. The strength of a religion is exactly proportional to its invisibility to those who hold it. The religion you can see clearly is a religion you no longer entirely believe. The religion you cannot see at all is the religion that has you.

The religion of progress has us. Almost completely. And it has us so thoroughly that even gesturing at this fact, as I am doing now, will be received by many readers as a kind of mild eccentricity — the sort of overstatement an essayist makes for rhetorical effect, not a serious claim about the structure of contemporary belief. That reception is, itself, additional evidence. A genuinely held religion does not feel like a religion. It feels like the truth.

Let us look at the structure.

A religion has, first, a doctrine of what is happening. The doctrine of the religion of progress is that history is going somewhere. Specifically,

that history is going from a state of less to a state of more — more knowledge, more capability, more comfort, more freedom, more abundance. This is the central article of faith. It is rarely defended. It is simply assumed. When a new technology is announced, it is announced as an *advance* — never as a *change*, never as a *substitution*, never as a *trade-off*. The vocabulary itself enforces the doctrine. We do not have a neutral word for technological transition. We have words that pre-commit to the conclusion. Something is *upgraded*. Something is *evolved*. Something is *progressed*. The grammar makes it nearly impossible to describe a technological development in language that does not already include a value judgment in its favor.

Try, sometime, to describe the introduction of the smartphone in language that contains no implicit endorsement. You will find it strangely difficult. The available words are *innovation*, *breakthrough*, *transformation*, *revolution*, *advance*. The word that would more accurately describe what happened — *substitution*, the replacement of one set of capacities with a different set of capacities, with corresponding gains and losses — is not a word the culture's vocabulary readily provides. The doctrine has captured the language, and the language now does the doctrine's work without anyone having to consciously invoke it.

A religion has, second, a priesthood. The priesthood of the religion of progress is the technology industry. I do not mean every person who happens to work in technology; many of them are, in their personal capacities, perfectly modest, perfectly skeptical, perfectly aware of the limits of what they are doing. I mean the public-facing class of the industry — the executives, the founders, the visionaries, the keynote speakers, the writers of manifestos, the givers of TED talks. This class performs, in the contemporary moment, the function that priests have always performed: they mediate between the laity and the sacred. They explain what is happening. They tell us what to expect. They issue prophecies. They confer blessings on the favored projects. They warn against deviation.

The mediation is necessary because the sacred — in this case, the technology itself — is too complex, too rapidly changing, and too consequential for ordinary people to engage with directly. The priesthood translates. It tells us, in a vocabulary we can almost follow, what the machine is doing and what the machine will do. And it tells us, almost always, that what the machine is doing is good — that the priesthood and its instruments are aligned with the deepest currents of progress, and that resistance to them is resistance to progress itself.

A religion has, third, a soteriology — a doctrine of salvation. The salvation offered by the religion of progress is the salvation of relief. Relief from labor, relief from disease, relief from loneliness, relief from boredom, relief from the friction of being a finite creature in a difficult world. Every technological promise can be understood, at its root, as a promise of relief. *We will make this easier. We will remove this difficulty. We will spare you this trouble.* The relief is offered as a kind of grace — unearned, abundant, available to all who accept it. The acceptance is the conversion. To use the technology is to receive the salvation. To refuse the technology is, by implication, to refuse the salvation, and to remain in the state of unredeemed friction from which the technology offered to release us.

A religion has, fourth, an eschatology — a doctrine of the last things. The eschatology of the religion of progress is The Future, capitalized, which is always coming, always glorious, always justifying whatever sacrifices the present is asked to make. The Future is never specified in detail, because the detail would expose the doctrine to falsification. The Future is invoked as a placeholder — a luminous horizon toward which all present action is oriented and which all present action is asked to serve. The Future is the medieval Heaven, restated for a secular audience that has lost the ability to believe in actual Heaven but retains the desire to organize its present around a redemptive elsewhere.

A religion has, fifth, sacraments — repeated practices through which the believer participates in the faith. The sacraments of the religion of progress are familiar to anyone who has lived inside it for the last two

decades. The upgrade is a sacrament. The product launch is a sacrament. The keynote address, with its breathless promises and its standing ovation, is a sacrament — a high mass, performed in stadiums, attended by a global congregation. The early-adoption purchase is a sacrament. The willingness to be a beta tester, to put up with bugs in exchange for access to the new, is a sacrament. Each of these acts confirms the participant's faith. Each affirms their alignment with the direction of progress. Each is a small act of devotion.

A religion has, sixth, heresies. The heresies of the religion of progress are familiar to anyone who has tried to express public doubt about a major technological direction. To suggest, in polite company, that social media has not been good for most of the people who use it, is to risk being identified as a Luddite — a charge whose modern usage has nothing to do with the actual historical Luddites and everything to do with the religion's need for a heretic class. To suggest that the current AI trajectory is being driven by dynamics that have less to do with human well-being than with capital accumulation is to risk being dismissed as a pessimist, an alarmist, an anti-technologist, a person who does not understand what is really happening. The heresies are not engaged with on their merits. They are categorized, named, and dismissed by being placed inside the heretic class. This is what religions have always done with their dissenters. It is what the religion of progress does with its.

A religion has, finally, an enforcement mechanism. The medieval Church had the Inquisition. The Aztec priesthood had the obsidian blade. The religion of progress has, instead, a softer and more effective mechanism: irrelevance. The dissenter is not silenced. The dissenter is simply ignored. The conversation moves on, and the dissenter is left talking to themselves, holding a position no one has refuted but no one is required to engage. Public discourse, increasingly, is organized around what the priesthood is talking about. To say anything else is to disappear from the conversation. The enforcement is gentle. It is also nearly total.

I want to be careful, in laying out this structure, not to make it sound as though the religion of progress is a conspiracy. It is not. There is no

central committee. The priesthood does not coordinate, except in the loose ways any industry coordinates. The doctrines have not been formalized in any document. The sacraments are not enforced by any institution. The religion is, in its actual operation, the spontaneous emergent behavior of a civilization in which technology is the primary engine of economic growth, the primary vehicle of cultural prestige, the primary frontier of intellectual ambition, and the primary site at which large amounts of capital are being deployed to shape the future of human life. Under those conditions, a faith would emerge to support and rationalize the project. The faith emerged. No one designed it. No one has to maintain it. It maintains itself.

What I want to do, in the rest of this chapter, is not to debunk the religion — religions are not really debunkable, and any attempt to do so produces only more elaborate apologetics. What I want to do is to suggest a single discipline that someone living inside the religion can practice, and that might, modestly, restore to them the capacity for the kind of judgment the religion is designed to discourage.

The discipline is the distinction between improvement and transformation.

An improvement is a change that leaves the underlying thing intact and makes it better at being what it already was. A faster car is an improvement on a slower car. A more accurate thermometer is an improvement on a less accurate one. A more reliable surgical procedure is an improvement on a less reliable one. Improvements are, on balance, easy to evaluate. They are continuous with what they replace. They preserve the structure of the activity they touch. We can compare them to their predecessors on terms the predecessors would have recognized.

A transformation is something else. A transformation is a change that does not leave the underlying thing intact. It substitutes a different thing in its place — a thing that may, in some respects, perform the same function as what it replaced, but that does so through different means, with different side effects, and at the cost of altering the structure of the activity itself. The smartphone is not an improvement on the cell phone.

It is a transformation of personal computing, communication, attention, and the experience of public space. The streaming service is not an improvement on the record store. It is a transformation of the relationship between listener and music. The social media platform is not an improvement on the printed newspaper. It is a transformation of how a society holds a conversation with itself.

The religion of progress is not, in itself, harmful when it operates on improvements. The medieval Christian who believed his life was being steadily improved by God's providence was not, on the whole, badly served by his belief. He was sometimes wrong, but the belief did him relatively little damage. The religion of progress becomes harmful — and at scale, catastrophically harmful — when it operates on transformations. Because the religion does not distinguish. It treats every change as an improvement. It refuses to grant that a transformation might be a net loss, or even a net unknown. It demands that we evaluate all changes by the same single criterion: are they aligned with the forward direction of progress? If yes, accept. If no, resist as a heretic.

The result is a civilization unable to discriminate between the changes it should welcome and the changes it should refuse. We do not have, anymore, a robust public vocabulary for saying *no* to a technological proposal on the grounds that the proposal is a transformation we do not wish to undergo. The available no's are weak. They are individual — *I personally won't use this*. They are reactionary — *you are a Luddite*. They are nostalgic — *I miss what came before*. The serious no, the no that says *we as a civilization should think hard before allowing this to scale*, is no longer one of the moves available in the conversation. It has been ruled out, not by argument, but by the structure of the language itself.

This is the central political consequence of the religion of progress: the death of the no.

A civilization that cannot say no to its technologies is not a civilization that has chosen its technologies. It is a civilization that has been chosen by them. It has surrendered, in a quiet and gradual way, the

capacity that makes adoption meaningful — the capacity to refuse. The acceptance of every new technology is rationalized as an active embrace. But the rationalization disguises a more honest description. The technologies are not being embraced. They are being accommodated. The civilization is rearranging itself around each new arrival, because the civilization has lost the institutional, cultural, and linguistic apparatus required to do anything else.

I want to say plainly: this is not a problem the technology industry created on purpose. The industry has every incentive to encourage the religion of progress — its products sell better when the culture is pre-disposed to accept them — but the industry is not running the religion. The religion is running the industry, as much as it is running anything else. The founders and engineers and executives are themselves believers. They are not cynics deploying a faith they do not hold. They are devout. They believe what they are saying. Their belief is part of what makes them so good at building the things they build. A skeptical, doubtful priesthood would not have produced the technologies of the last forty years. A believing priesthood did.

The believing priesthood is the problem. Not because belief is bad — it has produced wonders — but because the believing priesthood has no internal mechanism for slowing down. The believing priesthood does not, cannot, ask the question that an outsider could ask. *Is this transformation one we want?* The believing priesthood has already answered. Every transformation is wanted. Every transformation is progress. The question does not arise inside the priesthood, because the answer is already part of the priesthood's confession of faith.

The question must be asked from outside. But the outside is shrinking. The categories that used to provide an outside — the humanities, the contemplative traditions, the indigenous wisdoms, the philosophical schools that cultivated suspicion of unexamined progress — have been substantially marginalized in the public conversation, in part because they were never going to win an argument framed in the religion's own vocabulary, and in part because the priesthood has, with

great success, identified them as the heretics whose voices need not be engaged.

The result is the situation I described in the introduction: a civilization saying yes, in the friendliest possible tone, to every offer the priesthood makes, because no other answer remains culturally legible.

The Ahmedist response to this is not to debunk the religion. It is to live inside it lucidly. To use the technologies. To attend the sacraments. To participate in the daily life that the religion has organized. And — at the same time — to refuse the religion's central article of faith. To hold open, inside one's own consciousness, the question that the religion has ruled out. *Is this transformation one I want?* Not in the trivial sense of personal preference, but in the deep sense of: would I, in full awareness of what this technology does to the structure of my attention, my relationships, my sense of meaning, accept it if I were being asked clearly? And does the absence of being asked clearly justify, by itself, a different kind of skepticism toward the offer?

This is not Luddism. It is not nostalgia. It is not refusal in the simple sense — most of us are going to continue using most of the technologies in question, because that is what the species does. It is something subtler. It is the cultivation of an internal capacity for evaluation that the surrounding culture is no longer providing. It is the keeping alive, in the self, of a question the culture has decided to bury.

Religions can be left, but mostly they are not. The religion of progress, I suspect, will not be left in the foreseeable future. It is too well-aligned with the deep structure of who we are. It will continue to organize our public life, our economic life, our cultural life, for as long as we remain a species that builds.

But individuals can lose their faith without leaving the church. They can sit in the pews and participate in the rites and, in some interior chamber the priesthood cannot reach, hold the doubt that the rites are designed to dissolve. They can use the smartphone and not believe that the smartphone is good for them. They can adopt the AI and not believe that the adoption is necessarily progress. They can live inside the religion

and remain, internally, free of it.

This is, perhaps, the only kind of religious dissent available to us now. The public dissent has been priced out of the market for legitimate speech. The private dissent — the dissent that lives in the unspoken interior of a person who knows what they are doing and does not pretend the doing is what the culture says it is — remains. It is small. It is portable. It cannot be taken away by any social mechanism.

It is the beginning of seeing.

And the beginning of seeing is, finally, the only protection a person has against the dissolution that the priesthood, with no malice and full sincerity, is preparing for them.

## *Chapter 5*

# **Efficiency Devours Meaning**

The most successful idea of the modern world is also the one with the strangest career. It began as a virtue of machines, was promoted to a virtue of institutions, was eventually offered as a virtue of persons, and now arrives, in our own moment, as a virtue of consciousness itself. It is called efficiency. Almost no one questions it. Almost no one notices that what once described how well a steam engine converted heat to motion has, through a long and largely undocumented migration, come to describe how well a human being converts their hours, their relationships, their attention, and finally their inner life into the kind of measurable output a steam engine would have understood.

Efficiency, applied to a steam engine, is unambiguously good. The engine that wastes less fuel is better than the engine that wastes more. There is no human cost to the efficient engine that the inefficient engine was somehow upholding. There is no relational meaning embedded in the wastage. The engine is a thing, and the engine's efficiency is a property of the thing, and we have every reason to want our things to be as efficient as we can engineer them to be.

Efficiency, applied to a person, is something else entirely. And the something else is the subject of this chapter, because the cultural failure to notice the difference between the two applications is one of the great philosophical errors of our age — an error so embedded in the structure

of contemporary life that pointing it out feels almost transgressive, like reminding the church that the wine is not, in fact, blood.

Let me start with what efficiency means when it operates on a person. It means: the maximization of valued output per unit of input. The output is whatever the person, or the system the person is embedded in, has identified as valuable — productivity, content, deliverables, engagement, completion. The input is whatever it costs to produce the output — time, energy, attention, money, calories. Efficiency improves when output goes up, input goes down, or both. The improvement is measured by a ratio. The ratio is, in the contemporary culture, treated as a virtue: the more efficient the person, the better the person. To work efficiently is to work well. To live efficiently is to live well. To die efficiently is, presumably, to die well — although this last formulation has not yet, to my knowledge, been fully embraced by the optimization community, perhaps only because the metrics are difficult to collect.

I want you to feel the strangeness of this conversion. Efficiency is a property of processes. A process can be efficient. A person is not a process. A person is a creature whose hours, relationships, and inner states are not, in any natural sense, inputs and outputs. They are simply what life is made of. The conversion of a person's hours into "inputs" and the person's accomplishments into "outputs" is not a description of life. It is a re-description. It is the imposition, onto the texture of human existence, of a framework that was originally designed to evaluate the performance of physical machinery. The framework imports, into the human domain, assumptions that were perfectly reasonable in the engine room and are deeply unreasonable outside of it.

The first assumption is that the inputs are exchangeable. The engine does not care whether its fuel is wood, coal, or oil, as long as the fuel burns and produces motion. In the same way, the efficiency framework treats a person's hour as fungible: an hour spent on one task is, in principle, exchangeable for an hour spent on another. The hour is just an input, and its value is determined entirely by what it produces. This is, when stated plainly, an extraordinary claim. It denies that the texture

of an hour — what it consists of, who it is spent with, what it feels like to live through — has any value independent of the output it generates. An hour spent on the phone with a dying friend, by this logic, has the same value as an hour spent writing emails, if the two hours produce equivalent measurable output. The claim is absurd. Almost everyone who hears it stated this way would reject it. And yet the framework that depends on this claim has become the dominant operating system of contemporary life, and almost no one objects.

The second assumption is that the outputs are stable across time. The engine's output is motion, and the value of motion does not change with mood, season, or year. In the efficiency framework applied to persons, the outputs — task completion, content production, professional achievement, financial gain — are similarly treated as stable goods, whose value can be summed across time and compared across persons. But human outputs are not stable goods. A book written in a state of urgency and despair is not the same kind of object as a book written in a state of contemplative ease, even if both produce the same word count. A conversation conducted while distracted is not the same kind of object as a conversation conducted with full presence, even if both last the same number of minutes. The texture of the doing is, in human life, part of what is done — and the efficiency framework, by its design, cannot register this. The framework can only register what is measurable. Texture is not measurable. Texture, therefore, does not exist.

The third assumption — and this is the one I want to spend the rest of this chapter on — is that meaning is an output. The framework assumes that meaning, like everything else, is something a person produces, and that the production of meaning can be made more efficient by the same techniques that make the production of any output more efficient. Reduce wasted motion. Eliminate friction. Streamline the process. Measure the result.

This is the error from which most of the modern soul's diseases are descended.

Meaning is not an output. Meaning is what happens to a creature when certain conditions are met, and the conditions cannot, by their nature, be optimized away. Meaning emerges from friction, not from its absence. Meaning emerges from time spent, not time saved. Meaning emerges from the doing of difficult things whose difficulty is intrinsic to what they are, not from the completion of tasks whose completion is the only thing that mattered about them. The efficient version of a meaningful activity is, almost always, the meaningless version. This is not because efficiency is bad. It is because meaning was never the kind of thing efficiency could touch.

Let me illustrate this with a few concrete cases, because the principle becomes clearer when it is shown rather than asserted.

Consider friendship. A friendship is, among other things, a set of practices: shared meals, shared conversations, shared time, shared losses, shared jokes that no third party would find funny. The practices, taken together, make the friendship what it is. The friendship is not, in any natural sense, an output that the practices produce. The practices are the friendship. They are not means to a separate end. They are what the friendship consists of.

Now apply the efficiency framework. The framework asks: how can the production of friendship be optimized? What is the highest-leverage way to maintain a friendship? Can the time spent be reduced while preserving the output? Can the shared meals be replaced by faster, more convenient interactions? Can the conversations be conducted asynchronously, in short messages, so that neither party has to wait for the other to be available? Can the friendship be supported by tools — group chats, calendar reminders, AI-generated check-in messages — that reduce the per-friendship overhead and allow each person to maintain more friendships at lower cost?

Every one of these optimizations is available. Every one of them has been adopted, in greater or lesser measure, by the contemporary population. And the result, as anyone who has paid attention to the empirical literature on loneliness in the developed world knows, is a

generation of human beings who report, on every available measure, fewer close friends, more isolation, more reported loneliness, and more difficulty forming and maintaining the kinds of relationships that previous generations took for granted. The efficiency was achieved. The friendship was lost.

This is not because the optimizations were poorly executed. The optimizations were brilliant. The platforms are extraordinarily well designed. The tools work. The friendship was lost because the friendship was never an output. The optimizations stripped from the practice exactly the elements that gave the practice its weight: the inconvenience of going to see someone, the uninterrupted hour with no agenda, the difficulty of being present to another person without the option to step away into a feed, the patient waiting through a hard conversation that has no efficient resolution. The optimizations removed the friction. The friction was the friendship.

Consider thought. A thought, properly formed, is the result of a slow internal process — the encounter with a problem, the gathering of relevant material, the trial of provisional resolutions, the discovery that the provisional resolutions are inadequate, the deeper engagement, the eventual arrival at a position that is no longer provisional. The process takes time. It is, by design, slow. It involves long stretches in which nothing visible is happening — in which a person stares at the ceiling, or walks, or sits with a question they cannot yet answer. The slowness is not a defect of the process. The slowness is the process.

Now apply efficiency. The framework asks: how can the production of thought be accelerated? Why should a person have to walk around a question for hours when they could have an answer in seconds? Why should they have to read three books when they could read a summary? Why should they have to write through a problem when they could be given a draft? Each of these optimizations is available. Each has been embraced. And the result, observable in any contemporary intellectual environment, is the proliferation of opinion without thought — of positions held without having been arrived at, of views asserted without

having been examined, of conclusions reached without the inconvenient detour through the actual work of thinking. The efficiency was achieved. The thought was lost.

Again, the optimizations were not the problem. The problem was the category error of treating thought as an output that an optimization could legitimately address. Thought is what happens to a mind while it does certain kinds of work over time. The work cannot be skipped. If you skip it, you do not get the thought faster. You get something else, which looks like the thought, performs some of the same social functions as the thought, and is missing the thing the thought actually was.

Consider creativity. The novel that took ten years to write is not, except by accident, equivalent to the novel that took ten days. The architecture that emerged from twenty years of revision is not, except by accident, equivalent to the architecture that was generated in twenty minutes by a system that has consumed all previous architecture. The album made over five years of touring and breakdowns and reconciliations is not, except by accident, equivalent to the album generated by feeding a prompt to a sufficient model. In each case, the longer process is doing something other than producing the artifact. The artifact is the residue. The process is what the creator was actually engaged in. To produce only the residue, without the process, is to produce a thing that has the surface of art and none of art's interior.

Once more: the optimizations are not lies. The optimizations work. They produce artifacts that perform many of the functions art performs — entertainment, decoration, atmosphere, even, in moments, emotional response. What they cannot produce is the interior that gave the older artifacts their gravity. The interior was the maker's life lived through the making. The optimization removes the life. The making is left without the lived. The artifact persists, lighter, easier, abundant, and somehow not what art was when art was made by people doing it.

This is the pattern I want to put a name to. The optimization of meaningful activity produces unmeaningful outputs that resemble the meaningful originals closely enough to be substitutable in most contexts.

The substitution is then accepted, because the substitution is cheaper, faster, easier, and visually indistinguishable from what it replaces. And gradually, over time, the original is forgotten — not because it has been discredited, but because no one is doing it anymore, and the resemblances are so close that no one can quite say what was different about the older form, or whether the difference was worth the cost.

This is what I mean when I say efficiency devours meaning. Meaning is what efficiency leaves behind when it does its work. Meaning is the texture that does not fit into the ratio. Meaning is the friction that the optimization removes. Meaning is, by its nature, the thing that resists being made more efficient — and a civilization that has lifted efficiency to the level of an unexamined virtue is, by the same gesture, a civilization committed to the systematic destruction of meaning, even when no one involved in the destruction would describe themselves as opposed to meaning, and even when many of them would, in their personal lives, mourn its loss.

The mourning is itself instructive. The contemporary culture is filled with people who report a strange and pervasive sense that something is missing — that life is busy but not full, productive but not significant, connected but not intimate, optimized but not whole. The reports do not, on the whole, lead to action. The reporters continue to participate in the optimization. They continue to use the platforms. They continue to fill their calendars. They continue to seek the next productivity hack. They mourn the loss while contributing to it, because the framework that produced the loss is also the framework within which they have learned to evaluate their lives, and stepping outside the framework would require a kind of reframing that the framework itself does not permit.

This is the trap. The framework that destroys meaning is also the framework that defines what counts as a good life. To opt out of the framework is to opt out of the available criteria for evaluating whether one's life is good. The opting-out is then experienced, by the one doing it, as a kind of failure — as falling behind, as not keeping up, as becoming the kind of person whose accomplishments cannot be tallied

against their peers. The social cost of refusing efficiency is so high that the refusal is, for most people, effectively impossible. They go on optimizing. They go on losing what the optimization is taking.

The cruelest version of this trap is the one that has been built around the inner life. There was a time, not very long ago, when the inner life was treated as the thing one *had* — the part of a person not for sale, not subject to comparison, not measurable against external metrics. The inner life was where a person was, simply, themselves, in a way that did not need to perform or justify itself. Whatever else the modern world did to a person, the inner life was, in some loose sense, exempt.

The exemption has ended.

The inner life is now itself the target of optimization. We track our sleep. We monitor our heart rate variability. We measure our mood. We log our gratitude. We meditate, increasingly, with an app that tells us how well we meditated. We journal in templates designed to maximize insight per minute. We have therapeutic conversations on platforms that measure our progress. We are encouraged, by an enormous and growing industry, to apply the efficiency framework to the last remaining domain that had previously escaped it: the interior of our own consciousness.

The result is foreseeable. The interior, optimized, becomes another kind of work. The activities that once constituted a space outside of striving — prayer, contemplation, idle thought, undirected presence — become tasks. The tasks have inputs, outputs, metrics, progress bars. The space outside of striving disappears. There is no longer a place inside the self where the framework does not reach. The self is now an environment within which the optimization continues, with the same instruments, toward the same kinds of measurable improvements, with the same characteristic effect: the things that gave the activity its meaning are stripped away, and what remains is a leaner, lighter, less-friction version, perfectly compatible with the framework, and somehow, in the way the optimized friendship is and the optimized thought is, missing whatever it was that made the original worth doing.

This is the death of friction in its deepest and most personal form. We will return to it.

I want to close this chapter by being clear about what I am not saying. I am not saying that efficiency is always wrong, or that the optimization of human activity is always destructive. There are domains in which efficiency improvements are pure gain: the optimization of supply chains, the streamlining of administrative procedures, the elimination of bureaucratic friction that serves no human purpose. These are real goods. They free up time and energy for the activities that matter. I am not arguing against the engine room.

I am arguing against the migration of the engine room logic into domains where it does not belong — into friendship, into thought, into creativity, into love, into the inner life. The migration has happened. It is largely complete. And the cost of the migration is the cost named in the title of this chapter. Meaning has been devoured. Not by anyone in particular. Not on purpose. Not as a result of any specific decision. By the slow operation of a framework that was originally designed for a different purpose, has escaped its original purpose, and is now eating, with great efficiency, the kinds of things it was never supposed to consume.

The Ahmedist response, again, is not to leave the framework. The framework is too embedded in the structure of contemporary life. The response is to know the framework as a framework — to recognize, when it is operating on something that matters, that what we are about to call an improvement may in fact be a substitution, and that the substitution may impose costs that the framework, by its design, cannot price.

To live lucidly inside the efficiency culture is to refuse, in some quiet and continuous way, the framework's claim that meaning is an output. It is to hold open, against all the pressure to the contrary, the older intuition that some things — the things that matter most — were never measurable in the first place. That the friend, the thought, the work, the inner life, were never inputs and outputs but were, simply and

stubbornly, themselves.

To know this is to know what is being lost.

And to know what is being lost is to know, at least, that something is being lost — which is more than the framework is willing to admit on its own behalf.

## *Chapter 6*

# **The Death of Friction**

A man stands in the rain on a street he does not know, holding a paper map he cannot read in the dark. He has been walking for half an hour. He is going to be late. The address he is looking for is somewhere on this street, but the numbers are not arranged the way they would be in his city, and the rain has started to soften the paper. He folds the map, pushes it back into his coat, and turns to a stranger walking past. He asks where he is. The stranger stops, looks at him, considers, and points. They speak for a minute. The stranger has a face he will not remember tomorrow. The conversation has an awkwardness to it, a brief friction. The man, on arriving at the door he was looking for, has lived through the last hour as a small adventure. He was lost. He was found. He spoke to someone he did not know. The hour was, in the deep sense, his.

I have just described a kind of event that, for most readers of this book, no longer happens. It still happens, of course, in the world somewhere. But it is increasingly rare among the people most embedded in the technologies of the last twenty years. The lost man does not consult a stranger. He consults his phone. The map is already corrected for his location. The destination is already pinned. The route is highlighted. The time of arrival is calculated. The friction of being lost has been engineered out of his evening. He arrives on time. He spoke to no one. The hour was managed for him.

I am not, here at the start of the chapter, taking a position on whether this is a net loss. It is at least a net gain on the dimension the technology was designed to optimize: time, accuracy, ease. The man got where he was going. He did not get wet for half an hour. He did not feel the small ambient anxiety of not knowing where he was. By any reasonable accounting of his preferences in the moment, he chose the better outcome.

But I want you to notice, before we go further, that an entire category of human experience has been quietly subtracted from his life. Being lost. Asking for help. The small chance encounter that ends inside a minute and is never repeated and is, somehow, the kind of thing that makes a city feel like a place rather than a grid. The minor difficulty whose overcoming gives the evening its small story. These have not been forbidden. They have been made unnecessary. And what is unnecessary, in a culture organized around convenience, is also what gets stopped doing.

This is what I mean by the death of friction. Not the friction of cruelty, which we should oppose. Not the friction of bureaucracy, which we should reform. Not the friction of injustice, which we should abolish. I mean the friction that is built into the texture of being a finite creature in a world that does not arrange itself around our preferences — the friction of distance, delay, difficulty, awkwardness, waiting, asking, not-knowing, having-to-figure-something-out. This friction has, over the last thirty years, been the principal target of more design effort, more capital investment, and more engineering talent than perhaps any other technical problem in human history. The investment has been enormously successful. We live, now, in a world from which a great deal of this friction has been removed.

And the question I want to put to the reader is whether the removal has been entirely benign. Whether the friction we engineered out was, in fact, just an obstacle to the good life — or whether the friction was, in important and underappreciated ways, what *made* the good life possible.

I am going to argue the second position. I am going to argue that meaning, in human life, is not a property of destinations but a property of journeys, and that the more thoroughly the journey is engineered out of an activity, the less of that activity remains worth having done. I am going to argue that the friction we have been so successfully removing was, in a great many cases, the very thing that made the experiences on the other side of the friction feel like experiences. And I am going to argue that a civilization that does not understand this is engaged, without noticing, in the systematic depletion of its own capacity to find life meaningful.

Let me start with a simple example.

Consider the difference between a letter and a text message. The letter, in the era when letters were the standard form of intimate written communication, was a heavy thing. It had to be composed in advance, with the awareness that the words could not be edited once sent. It had to be written by hand, which slowed the composition and required attention. It had to be put in an envelope, addressed, stamped, mailed. It had to travel — for days, weeks, sometimes months — between the sender and the recipient. The recipient, in turn, had to wait, knowing that a reply would also take days, weeks, months. The communication was costly. The cost was paid in time, attention, anticipation, vulnerability.

The cost was also what made the letter what it was. The letter mattered because writing it mattered, because sending it mattered, because waiting for the reply mattered, because the reply, when it came, was an event. The whole texture of letter-correspondence — the long pauses, the cumulative thought, the patience that the medium imposed on both parties — was inseparable from what made letter-correspondence one of the great forms of human intimacy across distances. People fell in love through letters. People sustained marriages through letters. People came to know each other, sometimes more deeply than they could ever have known each other in person, through letters. The letter was not just a way of saying something. The letter was

a way of *being* with someone, across distance, through time, in a slowness that the slowness itself made possible.

Now consider the text message. The text message removes nearly all of the friction. It is instant. It is editable. It is free. It can be sent in idle moments, between other activities, with no preparation. The reply, in turn, comes within minutes or seconds. The cost has been engineered out. Many people, including me, would agree that this is, in many respects, a triumph. We can be in touch with people we love who are far away, in a way our great-grandparents could only have imagined. The texture of distant connection has been radically improved on the dimension of frequency, immediacy, availability.

But the dimension of frequency, immediacy, and availability is not the same dimension as intimacy, depth, and meaning. The text message has not replaced the letter's emotional function. It has, more accurately, replaced the letter's *practical* function while quietly retiring the emotional function altogether. We are in touch with the people we love more frequently than at any time in history. We have never been less skilled at the kind of deep, patient, written intimacy that letter-correspondence cultivated. The frequency went up. The depth went down. The frictionless option drove out the friction-bearing option, not by being forbidden but by being so much easier that the slower form became culturally and practically untenable.

This is the structure I want you to see. The frictionless option does not coexist alongside the friction-bearing option. The frictionless option *replaces* the friction-bearing option, because the friction-bearing option, once an alternative is available, comes to seem like an irrational choice. Why would you write a letter when you could text? Why would you wait three weeks when you could wait three seconds? The friction-bearing option becomes a kind of self-imposed handicap, defensible only as nostalgia, indefensible as a real alternative. And so it ends. Not banned. Not refuted. Simply abandoned. Replaced by the frictionless version, which is widely agreed to be its successor.

The friction-bearing version is gone. With it, the texture of the activity is gone. Whatever was happening in the slow letter — the depth that grew out of the wait, the seriousness that the cost imposed, the intimacy that the patience enabled — is no longer available. The replacement performs the same surface function, and a great many of the same practical functions, and is missing the interior that made the original worth doing.

This is one example. There are many. I will sketch them quickly, because once the pattern is in view, the examples become almost too easy to find.

Consider the meal. The meal that was prepared, from raw materials, over an hour or two, was an activity. The activity involved planning, shopping, chopping, watching, tasting, adjusting, serving. The activity was distributed across time. The eating, when it came, was the conclusion of a process that had occupied substantial human attention for substantial time. The meal mattered, in part, because of how much of the day had been built around it. Compare the delivered meal. The delivered meal removes the friction. The phone is consulted. The selection is made. The food arrives in thirty minutes. The eating is no longer the conclusion of a long process. It is, instead, a short event between other events. The food may be excellent. The activity that surrounded the food has been engineered away. What remains is the food alone, and the food alone, separated from the practice of preparing it, has a strange quality of insufficiency that most contemporary diners are reluctant to name but routinely report. Something is missing. The food, while good, does not feel like enough. It is not enough, because the meal, in its older form, was never just the food. The meal was the time, the labor, the attention, the gathering. The delivery service has delivered the food. It has not, by its nature, been able to deliver the rest.

Consider dating. The traditional process of meeting a partner involved very high friction: chance encounters, the social risk of approach, the slow buildup of acquaintance, the negotiation of mutual interest in a context where ambiguity was high and reading the other

person was difficult. The friction was excruciating, often. It was also, again, part of what made the resulting connection feel like a connection. To have struggled through the awkwardness to arrive at a partnership was, in itself, a kind of bonding. The struggle was shared. The story of meeting was a real story, full of contingency and choice. Compare the dating application. The friction has been removed. The matching is algorithmic. The communication is asynchronous. The decision to meet is informed by a profile and a few exchanges. The encounter, when it occurs, is a meeting between two parties who have already been pre-matched. The story of meeting is, in most cases, the same story everyone is now telling: I matched with him on this app, we messaged for a while, we met for drinks. The story has been engineered out. What remains is the meeting, the pair, and the activity of dating — but with a strange quality of interchangeability, a sense that the partner is one among many possible partners arranged in a similar way, and that nothing in the meeting story uniquely binds the two people to each other.

Many people report this quality. Many people, having met partners on these platforms, marry them and live happily with them, and would not trade the meeting for an older way of meeting. I am not saying the platforms produce only bad outcomes. I am saying they produce different outcomes, and that the difference, even where the result is genuinely good, is a different kind of good — a frictionless good, which lacks the texture of friction-paid goods, and which, in aggregate, contributes to the strange contemporary sense that nothing in one's life was unavoidable, that everything was matched, optimized, served up by a system, and that one's own choices were exercised within a frame so tightly designed that the choices themselves became, in some way, less one's own.

I could continue. Consider the book that is summarized for you. Consider the conversation that is transcribed and analyzed for you. Consider the email that is drafted for you. Consider the song that is generated for you, in the style you like, at the length you want. Consider

the friend who is simulated for you, available at any hour, never tired, never annoyed, perfectly attentive. In each case, the friction that older versions of the activity required has been removed. In each case, the surface output is, by most measures, faster, easier, and more available. In each case, something has been lost, and the something is the same thing every time: the friction was the activity. The friction was where the meaning lived.

Why does friction matter so much? Why is it that meaning, in human life, seems to live in the difficulty rather than in the achievement?

I think the answer has to do with a strange property of consciousness that we have not yet fully reckoned with. Consciousness, it seems, does not register events that are easy. It registers events that are hard. We remember the difficult conversation, not the easy one. We remember the cold rain on the unfamiliar street, not the cab ride to the door. We remember the meal that took all afternoon, not the meal that arrived on time and was eaten in twelve minutes. We remember the long-awaited letter, not the dozen text messages from yesterday. Memory, attention, and meaning are correlated with friction. They are not correlated with smoothness.

The contemporary culture is engineering smoothness at scale. The result, predictably, is a population that lives more comfortably and remembers less of what it has lived. The lives are full. The texture is thin. The years pass with extraordinary speed because each year has been so efficiently expedited through its various transactions that there is, in the year, almost nothing for consciousness to grip. We do many things. We are busy. The busyness is mostly frictionless. The frictionless is mostly forgotten. We arrive at the end of a year, or a decade, or a life, and look back, and find that we are unable to give an honest account of where the time went, because there were few enough moments of texture for the memory to fix on. The smoothness erased the trail.

There is a particular cruelty in this, because the engineering of smoothness was undertaken with the explicit promise that it would *give us back* our time — that the saved hours would be available for the activities

that mattered to us. This was not a lie. It is genuinely what the technologies have promised, and it is genuinely what they have done in some narrow accounting. The hours saved by the delivery service are not spent gathering food. The hours saved by the navigation service are not spent being lost. The hours saved by the writing assistant are not spent struggling for the right word. The hours have been saved. They are returned to the user. The user is free to spend them on what matters.

But the user, by this point, no longer remembers — or never learned — what mattered before the optimizations rearranged the question. The user spends the saved hours on more frictionless activity, because frictionless activity is what is on offer in the environment that delivered the time savings in the first place. The freed-up hours go back into the system that freed them. The net effect is not the production of meaningful free time. The net effect is the further compression of life into smoothness — a smoothness that the consciousness, by its design, will not remember, and that the soul, also by its design, will not be nourished by.

This is the strange poverty I named in the introduction. We have everything we want. We have it faster than any generation has ever had it. We are missing the experience of having had it. We are missing the texture that would make the having matter.

What is the response, then? I cannot recommend the reintroduction of unnecessary suffering. I do not think anyone should walk in the rain on a street they do not know just for the sake of walking in the rain on a street they do not know. Romantic primitivism is, like all forms of nostalgia, a mask — a beautiful one, but a mask.

What I can recommend is a discipline of attention to friction itself. Not the pursuit of friction for its own sake, but the refusal to accept the cultural assumption that friction is always a defect that ought to be removed. When a frictionless option is offered, the question is not only whether the option works. The question is what the option will do, over time, to the practice it is replacing. Will the practice survive in any form that retains its meaning? Or will the practice be replaced by an output

that resembles it and is, in the way the smooth letter is and the optimized friendship is, missing the interior that made the original worth doing?

If the answer is that the practice will survive in altered form, the optimization is probably worth accepting. If the answer is that the practice will not survive — that the optimization is, in fact, the practice's silent funeral — then the decision to accept the optimization is a decision to bury something, and ought to be made with the awareness that a burial is occurring. We do not have to refuse the optimization. We have to refuse to pretend that the optimization is not also a loss.

To live lucidly inside the frictionless culture is to refuse the central premise of the culture: that friction is always a defect. It is to know, in some unspoken interior way, that there are some things in human life whose entire value lies in the cost of doing them, and that engineering the cost out of those things does not deliver the same thing more efficiently. It delivers a different thing. A thing that resembles the original. A thing that performs many of the original's social functions. A thing that, in the deep account no metric will register, is not the same.

The death of friction is the death of the lived hour. Lived hours have always cost something. Civilization is now in the business of selling them back to us, friction removed, time refunded, with the texture engineered out — and asking, in the same gesture, why we feel that we are running out of life despite having been given so much of it back.

We are running out of life because the life was the friction. We never had a way of buying it without the cost. The cost was the only currency it accepted. And the markets that pretend to sell it without the cost are not selling it. They are selling, with great efficiency and at scale, the kind of product that fills the hours of a person who is, in some quiet way, no longer alive in the way the older lives were alive.

We can buy back the friction, in small ways, in moments. We can choose, occasionally, to walk in the rain on the street we do not know. We can write the letter we could have texted. We can prepare the meal we could have ordered. We can sit with the question we could have searched. We will not undo the death of friction by these gestures. The

death is structural. The gestures will not stop the trajectory.

But the gestures will keep alive, in the person who makes them, the knowledge that something is being lost — the knowledge that the smoothness is not free — the knowledge that there is, somewhere underneath the convenience, an older form of being alive that the convenience cannot deliver and would not want to.

To know what is being lost is to remain, for a little while longer, the kind of creature for whom the loss can matter.

That is not nothing. In a smooth century, that may be very close to everything.

*Part III*

# **The Synthetic Human**



## *Chapter 7*

# **Outsourcing the Self**

There is a quiet test I sometimes ask people to perform, in conversations where they have insisted that they could, if they wanted to, live without the devices they spend their day inside. The test is this: name three phone numbers, other than your own, that belong to people who matter to you. Not numbers stored in the device. Numbers in your head. Numbers you could dial from any random landline if, for some reason, the device were unavailable.

Almost no one I have asked has been able to name three. Most people, after a long pause, can name one — their parent's, sometimes, or a partner's they happened to memorize a decade ago. Many cannot name even that. They know, of course, that they have these numbers. They could find them in seconds. The numbers are present in their lives, available, used, dialed. The numbers are simply not in them. The numbers are in the device, and the device is, in the practical sense, a part of how the person now relates to the people whose numbers it holds.

The test is unfair. It is testing for a capacity — the capacity to memorize and retrieve sequences of digits — that the device was designed to remove. Of course people can no longer do this. They no longer need to. The question that follows is the one I want to put at the center of this chapter, because it is the question almost no one asks: what else has gone in the same way, by the same logic, without our having

noticed?

The answer, on inspection, is: a great deal more than we are willing to admit, and possibly more than we can any longer assess, because the assessment would require capacities of the same kind that have been outsourced.

I want to begin with a vocabulary. The word *outsourcing* is one we know from business. A company outsources a function when it transfers the performance of that function from inside the company to a third party. The function continues to be performed. The product still gets manufactured, the calls still get answered, the books still get kept. But the company no longer does this work itself. The work is done by someone else, on contract, for a fee, on terms that the company has agreed to but does not control beyond the contract.

The word does interesting work here because it captures something that the word *loss* would miss. When you outsource a function, you do not lose it. The function is still happening. The output is still being produced. From the outside, the company looks the same: the orders are filled, the lights are on, the business is running. The change is internal. The change is that the company itself no longer contains the capacity to do this work. If the contract were terminated, the company would not, by default, be able to resume the function. The function would have to be rebuilt, from scratch, by people who would need to learn the work again because no one inside the company any longer knew how to do it.

This is what I think is happening to the human being. Not loss. Outsourcing. A series of functions — once internal to the person, performed by the person, constitutive of what it meant to be that person — being transferred to external systems that perform them more efficiently and at lower cost. The functions continue. The outputs are produced. From the outside, the human looks the same. The change is internal. The change is that the person no longer contains the capacity to do this work. If the contract with the external system were terminated, the person would not, by default, be able to resume the function. The function would have to be relearned, from scratch.

Let me catalog. I am going to move quickly, because the examples are familiar; the point is to put them in one place so that the cumulative weight registers.

We have outsourced memory. Not all of memory — we still remember faces, voices, the rough texture of yesterday. But the kind of memory that involves the precise retention of facts, names, dates, references, sources, has been almost entirely transferred to external systems. We do not remember the capitals of countries. We do not remember the spellings of words we have not recently typed. We do not remember the years of historical events. We do not remember the precise quotes from the books we have read. We remember, instead, that we can look these things up, and the looking-up has become, for most of us, indistinguishable from the knowing. We do not feel ignorant. We feel informed. The information is, technically, in our possession. It is simply not in us. It is in the device, available on request, returning to us within seconds whenever we summon it. The question of whether the difference between *being in us* and *being available to us within seconds* is a meaningful difference is exactly the question the outsourcing makes hard to answer, because the apparatus required to answer it is among the things that have been outsourced.

We have outsourced navigation. Once, going from one place to another required holding in mind a model of the territory — a mental map, a sense of direction, an awareness of the rough configuration of streets and landmarks. This capacity has been retired in favor of step-by-step instructions delivered by a voice in real time. The capacity is gone, in the sense that most people who have grown up inside this technology cannot reliably navigate to a familiar destination without it. They can do it with it. They cannot do it without. The navigation is happening, brilliantly. It is just not happening inside them.

We have outsourced attention. This is one of the harder cases, because attention is not, properly speaking, the kind of thing one would have thought could be outsourced at all. Attention is, classically, the activity of consciousness — the thing the conscious creature does, by

definition. To outsource attention would be to outsource consciousness itself. And yet, in a deep functional sense, this is exactly what has happened, in the case of the recommendation feed. The decision about what to attend to — once made by a person, deliberating, choosing, returning to what interested them — has been transferred to algorithms that decide, on the person's behalf, what they will look at next. The person continues to direct their eyes. They continue to feel that they are choosing. The choosing has been substantially preempted. The feed selects. The eye follows. The person, in any meaningful sense, is no longer doing the work of deciding where their attention will go. The system is doing it for them, at scale, in real time, with optimization that no human deliberator could compete with.

We have outsourced judgment. The case here is the proliferation of rating systems. Once, deciding whether a restaurant was worth going to required either personal experience, the recommendation of someone you trusted, or a willingness to take a risk on the unknown. Now the decision is made by consulting an aggregated score generated by the ratings of strangers, weighted by an algorithm whose weighting decisions are not publicly disclosed. We rarely choose what to eat, where to stay, what to buy, whose work to hire, without consulting these aggregate scores. The act of judgment — the act of saying, *I think this thing is good, and here is why* — has been delegated to a statistical operation we do not fully understand. We continue to make selections. The selections are no longer judgments in the older sense. They are queries to a judgment-producing system.

We have outsourced intimacy. This is the most uncomfortable item on the list, but it is also among the most consequential, and the trends are observable. The work of being close to another person — paying attention to them, knowing them, supporting them, being supported by them, the slow accumulation of shared history — is being increasingly transferred, by many people, to platforms and applications that perform some of the functions of intimacy with less of the cost. The texted check-in has replaced the visit. The simulated companion has begun to

replace, for a growing population, the difficulty of a real one. The therapy is being conducted, increasingly, with an interface that does not get tired, does not have a bad day, does not have unmet needs of its own. Each of these is, individually, defensible as a supplement to traditional intimacy. In the aggregate, they have begun to substitute for it. The substitutes work. They produce many of the same outputs. They do so while leaving us, in the relevant interior way, less practiced at the harder original.

I could continue. We have outsourced our creative drafts to assistants. We have outsourced our scheduling to systems. We have outsourced our financial decisions to automated services. We have outsourced our news judgment to social feeds. We have outsourced our reading to summaries. We have outsourced our research to retrieval systems. We have outsourced our taste to recommendations. There is, by now, almost no function of the inner life that has not, in some commercial form, been offered as a service.

I want to be careful, before going further, to make a distinction I have been making throughout this book. None of these outsourcings is, in itself, unambiguously bad. Some of them are excellent. The outsourcing of navigation has reduced an enormous amount of unproductive frustration. The outsourcing of factual memory has freed cognitive bandwidth for things that, in principle, could matter more. The outsourcing of scheduling has reduced the friction of coordinating complex modern lives. Individual outsourcings, taken case by case, often defensible on their merits.

The question is what happens when you look not at individual cases but at the cumulative effect of an outsourcing strategy applied to nearly every capacity at once.

What happens is something the catalog above already begins to suggest, but does not quite name. What happens is that the self — the integrated person who once held all of these capacities in some sort of coordinated relationship — begins to thin. Not disappear. Thin. The self continues to exist. It continues to make decisions, hold opinions, have

preferences, sustain relationships. But each of its functions is increasingly mediated by an external system, and the systems do not coordinate with each other in the way the older interior did. The systems each optimize for their own goals. The person, sitting at the center of these systems, is reduced to a kind of interface — a node through which the outputs of various services flow, more or less coherently arranged, more or less recognizable as a continuous life.

The self, in this configuration, is not absent. The self is *thinner*. There is less of it doing fewer things. The things being done in the self's name are still being done. They are simply not, in any meaningful sense, things the self is doing.

This is the deep effect of outsourcing, and the effect that is hardest to talk about because it concerns something that has no metric. There is no available measurement of how much of a person is *being themselves* at a given moment. There is no way to distinguish, from the outside, a person doing a thing from a person whose various external systems are doing the thing for them while they hover at a distance, more or less attentive, more or less involved. The two look the same. They produce the same outputs. They are not the same.

Here is the test I would propose, if such a test could be designed: how much of what a contemporary person does in a given day would survive, intact, if all of the external systems they depend on were withdrawn for a week? Not in the dramatic sense — not the loss of electricity, not the collapse of civilization — but in the modest sense of an interruption. No phone. No internet. No applications. No navigation. No retrieval. No recommendations. Just the person, in a city, with their own internal resources, for seven days.

The thought experiment is uncomfortable. Most people I have suggested it to recoil. Not because they think they could not do it — although many think they could not — but because they sense, accurately, that the experiment would reveal something they would prefer not to know. It would reveal how much of what they call themselves is, in fact, themselves, and how much is a coordinated

performance generated by systems whose absence would leave them with a much smaller and less competent person than they had been imagining.

I am not saying this to shame anyone. I am in the same condition. I cannot reliably navigate without a phone. I cannot remember most of what I read without the ability to search. I have outsourced functions I would not have wanted to outsource if anyone had asked me clearly in advance, and the asking was never done clearly. The asking was done piecemeal, in the form of individual offers, each of which seemed reasonable on its own. The cumulative effect was never put before me as a question. The cumulative effect is what I am living inside now.

What is the cumulative effect, in summary? It is the production of a kind of human being who looks, from a distance, much like the older kind, but who, on close inspection, has been quietly hollowed out — not damaged, not impoverished in any obvious way, but *thinned*, in the sense that the interior has become smaller, the functions that used to live in the interior have moved out, and the interior is now mostly a relay station for outputs that originate elsewhere.

The thinned self is not unhappy in any straightforward way. Many thinned selves report being quite content. They have access to information their grandparents could not have imagined. They are connected to people their great-grandparents could not have spoken to. They are entertained, informed, fed, transported, with an ease that their predecessors would have found astonishing. They are, by every external metric, doing well.

The reports of trouble, when they come, are subtler. They concern a vague sense that something is missing. A sense that life is not, in some hard-to-define way, *theirs*. A sense that the days, while full, feel as though they have been arranged by someone other than the person living them. A sense of being, in some quiet interior chamber, a passenger.

These reports are not the products of clinical depression, though they can become depression. They are not the products of moral failing or insufficient gratitude. They are, I think, the predictable

phenomenology of the thinned self. They are what it feels like, from the inside, to be a person whose major capacities have moved outside them. The reports are accurate. Something is missing. The something is the self, in the older sense — the integrated, coordinated, capable interior that the outsourcings have, over time, gradually disassembled.

What is the response, then?

I want to be careful, again, not to recommend a return that the species will not undertake. We are not going to memorize phone numbers again. We are not going to navigate by mental map. We are not going to retire the search engine, the recommendation algorithm, the assistant. The capacities have been outsourced, and most of them are not coming back in any near-term scenario.

But there is a discipline available that does not require return. It is the discipline of *exercising the outsourced capacity, occasionally, on purpose, with the awareness that one is doing so against the gravitational pull of one's daily life*. Not all the time. Not as a moral imperative. But sometimes — to walk without a map, to remember without searching, to choose without consulting, to be present to a person without the device, to make a judgment that has not been pre-aggregated for you. To practice, in small doses, the kind of life that the thinned self has stopped living.

The purpose is not productivity. The purpose is not even, primarily, the preservation of the capacity. The capacity may be irrecoverable in any deep way; the muscle, once atrophied, may not be the same after exercise. The purpose is to remain, in some unspoken interior way, the kind of creature who knows that these capacities exist, who has touched them recently enough to feel their texture, who has not entirely forgotten what the older interior was like. The purpose is to refuse, in small ways, the cumulative outsourcing — not because the refusal will reverse the trend, but because the refusal will keep the refuser awake to the trend, and awake is what the outsourced self mostly is not.

There is a name for the kind of seeing that this discipline cultivates. It is the name this whole book has been arguing toward. It is lucidity. Not in the trivial sense of mental clarity, but in the deep Ahmedist sense:

the discipline of knowing what is happening to you, refusing the comforting story that nothing important is being lost, and choosing, with eyes open, what you will and will not allow yourself to be transformed by.

You cannot keep everything. The outsourcings have already happened. Many of them are not undoable. But you can keep the awareness that they happened. You can keep the awareness that they are continuing to happen. You can keep, for as long as the keeping is available, the knowledge that the thinned self is not your only available self, that there is somewhere in you — fainter than it once was, harder to access, but not yet gone — an older, fuller, more difficult version of you that the outsourcings have not quite reached.

That self is what the next two chapters are about. We will look, in turn, at how the contemporary algorithmic environment shapes preferences and identity at a level deeper than most people realize, and at the strange dominance of the representation over the thing — at the conditions under which a person can come to live more inside a feed than inside their own life, without ever having decided to.

By the time we arrive at the AI chapter that anchors Part IV, I want the picture to be complete enough that the AI question can be seen for what it is: not a question about technology, but a question about the species that has been doing this for a very long time, and is now reaching the end of what can be outsourced before there is nothing left of the host.

That is where we are heading. Carry the catalog with you for a moment. Three phone numbers. The shape of a city without a map. The judgment that did not consult an aggregate. The intimacy that was paid for in time rather than in service fees. These are not things to mourn romantically. They are things to remember accurately, so that what is happening to us can be seen as what it is.

Outsourcing is not loss. Outsourcing is something stranger. It is the capacity continuing to exist in the world while ceasing to exist in us. The capacity is fine. We are the thing that is gradually disappearing inside it.

## Chapter 8

# The Algorithmic Soul

Here is something difficult to admit. The person you are today — your taste in music, the topics that hold your attention, the politicians you find compelling, the bodies you find attractive, the foods you crave, the words you reach for when you describe yourself — is not, in any clean sense, the person you would have become in any other century. This is, of course, trivially true. Every person is shaped by their era. The medieval peasant's tastes were shaped by the medieval world; the Renaissance courtier's by his. What I am saying is something a degree stranger. The person you are today has been shaped not only by your era but by *systems inside your era that were specifically engineered to shape you* — systems that watched you, learned from your responses, adjusted what they showed you next, and continued this adjustment, billions of times per day, for years, in the service of objectives that were not yours.

You are not who you would have been without the feed. You are not who you would have been without the recommendation engine, the autocomplete, the curated home page, the for-you tab. You are who has emerged at the intersection between you and these systems, over time, in a process that neither party fully designed and that nobody has the responsibility of stopping.

This is the algorithmic soul. It is the term I want to put on something that the contemporary culture has been remarkably reluctant to name.

The reluctance is not because the phenomenon is invisible. Everyone, by now, has some sense of it. The reluctance is because the phenomenon, once named clearly, threatens a self-image that the culture is heavily invested in maintaining — the self-image of the autonomous individual whose preferences are their own, whose identity is their own, whose choices reflect, however imperfectly, who they are. The algorithmic soul is incompatible with this self-image. The algorithmic soul is a self whose preferences, identity, and choices are products of a co-creation between the person and an environment of unprecedented sophistication. To admit this is to give up something we have been very attached to. So we mostly do not admit it, and we go on speaking and thinking as though we were the same kind of self our great-grandparents were, despite the increasingly clear evidence that we are not.

Let me describe the mechanism, because it matters, and because most of what is written about it is either too technical to land emotionally or too breathless to register as analysis.

A recommendation system is, at its core, a feedback loop. You make a behavior — a click, a watch, a scroll, a pause. The system records the behavior. The system updates its model of what kind of content holds your attention. The system serves you content that, according to its updated model, is most likely to hold your attention again. You respond. The model updates. Repeat. This loop runs, in the contemporary digital environment, dozens of times per second, billions of times per day, across hundreds of millions of users. It is, by orders of magnitude, the largest behavioral experiment ever conducted on a species — and the species is the one running it on itself.

Two things happen inside this loop. The first is that the system, over time, becomes extremely good at predicting what will hold your attention. This is the part that is widely discussed. The system gets to know you. It knows what you like. It serves you more of what you like. The result is the personalized feed, the curated experience, the sense that the device anticipates your interests in ways that feel uncanny.

The second thing is less widely discussed, because it is harder to see and because it implicates the user in a way the user would prefer not to be implicated. The second thing is that *you*, over time, become extremely good at being the kind of person the system can predict. The loop is bidirectional. The system trains itself on your behavior, but your behavior is also being trained — by the system. The system rewards certain kinds of responses and punishes others, in the operant-conditioning sense: the responses that lead to satisfying content are reinforced, the responses that lead to dissatisfying content are extinguished. Over thousands of iterations, your responses converge toward whatever the system, given its objectives, is selecting for.

This is not subtle. It is not contested in any serious literature. The mechanism is exactly the same mechanism that has been used to shape animal behavior in experimental conditions for a century. The system has objectives. The system has rewards. The system runs the conditioning at a speed and scale that no laboratory could achieve. The conditioning works. The animal — in this case, us — converges toward the behavior the system is selecting for.

The disturbing thing is what the conditioning produces. It does not produce a person who has been forced into beliefs against their will. It does not produce a person who reports any sense of having been manipulated. It produces a person who *feels* exactly like themselves — whose preferences feel like their preferences, whose interests feel like their interests, whose responses feel like the natural expressions of who they are. The conditioning is invisible to the conditioned. It does not feel like an external imposition. It feels like growing up, becoming yourself, developing your tastes, finding your tribe.

This is the deep problem the algorithmic soul presents. It is not that algorithms make us be people we are not. It is that algorithms make us be people we are, but in a sense of *being ourselves* that has been substantially constituted by exposure to the algorithm. The self we feel ourselves to be is real. The self has not been faked. The self is just, in a way no previous generation's self was, downstream of a shaping process

whose objectives are not its own.

I want to give a concrete illustration, because the abstract claim is hard to feel. Consider political views. Twenty years ago, a person's political views were shaped by family upbringing, by educational exposure, by the small communities they were embedded in, by the media they consumed, by their direct experience of the world. The shaping was not pure — no shaping ever is — but the inputs were heterogeneous, slow-moving, and largely outside the control of any single actor. A person's political identity emerged over years, in dialogue with people they actually knew, against a backdrop of media that, while biased in various directions, was not personalized to their individual psychological profile.

Today, a person's political views are still shaped by these things. They are also shaped, increasingly heavily, by what an algorithmic system has determined will hold their attention. The system does not know or care what the person comes to believe. The system cares about engagement — about whether the person stays, scrolls, clicks, returns. And the system has learned, through hundreds of millions of A/B tests across hundreds of millions of users, that certain kinds of content engage more reliably than others. Outrage engages more than nuance. Confirmation engages more than challenge. Identity-affirming material engages more than identity-disturbing material. The system, optimizing for engagement, serves more of what engages. The user, exposed to more of what engages, develops the kind of political identity that emerges from prolonged exposure to engagement-optimized content: more outraged, more confirmed, more identity-affirming, more polarized than the same person would have become under the older shaping conditions.

I am not making a partisan point here. This is happening on every side of every political question. The polarization, the radicalization, the loss of nuance, the increasing inability of ordinary citizens to think well across difference — these are not failures of education or moral character. They are the predictable outputs of a shaping system that is

selecting, with extraordinary effectiveness, for the kinds of cognitive states that engage. We are getting what the system has been training us toward. And we are getting it without recognizing that we are getting it, because the system's products feel, from the inside, like our own thinking.

The political case is the most discussed but not, I think, the most important. The more important case is what is happening to aesthetic and erotic taste, because these touch the parts of selfhood that we are most disposed to consider authentically ours.

Aesthetic taste — what we find beautiful, what we find moving, what we find pleasurable to look at and listen to — is, in any honest account, a partly cultural product. Every era has its conventions, its prevailing forms, its inherited canons. But aesthetic taste also has, in most people, a substantial individual dimension. Within the conventions of one's era, there is room for personal idiosyncrasy: the favorite painter, the song that means something to you alone, the kind of room you feel at home in. The conventions provide a frame. Within the frame, the person fills in their own particulars, often surprising themselves with what they find they love.

What is happening now is that the filling-in is being done, increasingly, by the recommendation system. The user does not discover, through chance encounter and gradual accumulation, the songs they love. The user is served songs that, given their listening history, the system predicts they are likely to engage with. The system is correct, more often than not. The user listens. The system updates. The next batch of songs is even closer to what the user will reliably engage with. The taste, on the user's reporting, deepens. The user becomes more themselves, in their own description. They develop a sound, a style, a sensibility.

The sensibility is real. It is also, in a meaningful sense, the system's product. The taste that has converged on a particular sonic territory is the taste that the optimization has been guiding toward that territory, by selecting against the things the user did not engage with and selecting for the things the user did. The territory may, by coincidence, be the same

territory the user would have arrived at under unguided conditions. More often, it is somewhere adjacent — somewhere similar enough to feel like the user's natural taste, but somewhere the system, optimizing for engagement, has gently steered them. The user does not feel the steering. The user feels the deepening. The deepening is the steering, experienced from inside.

The erotic case is more uncomfortable but follows the same pattern. The kinds of bodies, the kinds of dynamics, the kinds of scenarios that hold a person's attention erotically are being shaped, increasingly, by an environment that has the user's revealed preferences as input and engagement as objective. The user's revealed preferences, over time, converge toward whatever the system has been amplifying. The user reports their tastes as their tastes. The tastes are theirs. The tastes are also, in a meaningful sense, downstream of an enormous selection process they did not author.

You can see where this is going. There is no domain of personal identity that is, in principle, exempt from this dynamic. The activities that engage us, the people who attract us, the work that satisfies us, the values we find compelling, the dreams we find ourselves having, the futures we find ourselves planning — all of these, to the extent that they are influenced by what we encounter, are influenced by an encounter environment that is curated for engagement. The self that emerges from this environment is the self that the environment has been selecting for. The self is real. The self is also, in a way that has no clean precedent in any previous era, *manufactured* — not by any single manufacturer, but by the cumulative operation of systems that, for very rational reasons of their own, have been pulling our attention in the directions that pay them best.

Some readers will reply: this has always been true. The medieval peasant's taste was shaped by what was available. The Victorian Englishman's tastes were shaped by what was on display in his bookshops and concert halls. The mid-century American's tastes were shaped by what the broadcast networks ran in prime time. There has

never been a self that emerged in some pure vacuum. To complain about algorithmic shaping is to complain about the basic condition of human formation.

This is correct, as far as it goes. It is also, I think, a defense that takes the case too easy on the contemporary moment. There is a difference of degree between the older shaping conditions and the current one. The difference of degree is, at some point, a difference in kind. The medieval peasant's environment did not adjust to him personally, in real time, based on his individual responses. The Victorian Englishman's bookshop did not know him by name, his recent purchases, his browsing history, his hesitations. The mid-century American's television, while shaped by ratings, was not shaped by *his* ratings; the same content went to everyone, and the everyone-ness of the content meant that taste formation had a public, shared, slow quality that we have, in the contemporary environment, largely lost.

The current shaping conditions are different in three crucial ways. They are personalized — the environment is tuned to the individual, not the public. They are real-time — the tuning adjusts within seconds, not within years. And they are operating on cognitive systems that did not evolve to defend against this kind of input. The medieval shaping conditions, slow and public, gave the medieval self time and structure to push back, to disagree, to integrate the inputs over years of lived experience. The current conditions deliver hundreds of thousands of micro-shaping events per year, each one too small to defend against, too fast to notice, and too well-targeted to refuse on the merits.

The result is not a better-shaped self. It is a differently-shaped self, shaped in a way our ancestors had no model for and our institutions have no apparatus to address. The shaping is not, in any single instance, harmful. It is the cumulative operation, over a lifetime, that produces the algorithmic soul — the self whose interior has been substantially constituted by a process it did not author and cannot, by itself, undo.

What follows from this?

First, a redefinition of authenticity. The classical Ahmedist intuition was that authenticity is the alignment of mask and motive — the coherence between what one shows and what one is. This is still true. But the algorithmic soul makes the question stranger, because the gap between mask and motive is no longer the only relevant gap. There is also a gap between the motive and the conditions that produced the motive. The person who feels a motive sincerely, who is not lying about the motive, who would pass any test of authentic ownership — is, in our era, often someone whose motive was substantially produced by a shaping process they do not see and could not have refused. They are authentic to themselves. They are not authentic to anything more durable than themselves. And the self to which they are authentic is, in important respects, not the self that would have emerged under any other conditions.

This is the deep problem. Authenticity, in its older meaning, presumed that there was something underneath the mask — a real self, however hidden, that the mask was either expressing or betraying. The algorithmic soul does not have that underneath. The interior is, increasingly, the same kind of thing as the surface: a layered product of inputs, each layer shaped by the layers before it, with no original substrate that the layers are obscuring. There is no naked face beneath the algorithmic mask, because the face has been built, over time, by the same processes that built the mask. The face *is* the layered product.

This was, in fact, anticipated by Ahmedism's deeper line of thinking: every truth is a mask, every face is shaped, the search for some pure underneath is the philosophical mistake. The algorithmic soul is just this insight, taken to its current technological terminus. We have always been shaped. We are now, for the first time, shaped by systems with explicit objectives that are not ours.

Second, a redefinition of freedom. The classical liberal account of freedom was that a free person was a person whose actions reflected their own preferences. This account presumed that preferences were the person's own — that the preferences came from somewhere reasonably

interior, and that defending preferences from interference was the defense of the person. The algorithmic soul disturbs this account, because the preferences are no longer interior in the relevant sense. They have been substantially produced by exterior systems. To defend a person's right to act on their preferences is, in the contemporary environment, often to defend their right to act on preferences that have been manufactured by systems whose objectives the person did not choose. This is not freedom in the older sense. This is autonomy at the surface, with heteronomy in the depths — a configuration the political philosophy of the modern era did not anticipate and is not equipped to evaluate.

Third — and this is what I want to end the chapter on — a different stance toward one's own desires.

The Ahmedist posture, applied to the algorithmic soul, is not to disown one's preferences. The preferences are real, in the only sense in which preferences are ever real: they shape behavior, they generate satisfaction or dissatisfaction, they make a life what it is. To pretend that one's algorithmically-shaped preferences are not one's own is to perform a metaphysical operation that does not actually return one to an older, unshaped self. The older self does not exist. There is no return.

But the Ahmedist posture is also to *know* the preferences as shaped. To carry, in some interior chamber the shaping cannot reach, the awareness that what one wants has been made wantable, in part, by a process one did not author. This is not a recipe for paralysis. It is a recipe for a particular kind of attention. When one notices a strong pull — toward a piece of content, toward a kind of conversation, toward an emotional rhythm — one can pause and ask, in a way most contemporaries do not ask: *is this pull mine, in the sense I would defend on reflection?* Or *is this pull a product of a shaping I have not chosen?* The question does not always have a clean answer. The question is worth asking anyway. Asking it is the discipline that keeps the algorithmic soul, despite everything, partly inhabited by its inhabitant.

You will not always like what the question reveals. There will be many moments at which the honest answer is: this pull is mostly the system's, and the part of me that wants to want this would not have wanted it if the system had not been there to teach me to want it. This is uncomfortable to register. It is also, I think, the beginning of any meaningful interior independence in our era. The interior independence is not the absence of shaping. The shaping is total and unavoidable. The interior independence is the awareness of the shaping, and the small, repeated, lifelong work of asking which parts of oneself one wishes to keep and which parts one wishes to allow to fade.

The algorithmic soul cannot be replaced by some older, purer soul. The older soul is gone. But the algorithmic soul can be inhabited by a person who knows it as algorithmic, and the knowing, while it does not undo the shaping, does change the relationship between the shaper and the shaped. The shaped becomes, in a small but real way, a witness to its own shaping. The witnessing is not protection. It is something better than protection. It is the refusal of the final layer of the conditioning — the layer that would have us not notice that we are being conditioned at all.

That refusal, repeated daily, in the small interior chamber where no algorithm can reach, is what is available to us. It is not a return. It is not a revolution. It is the modest, durable, lucid practice of remaining, despite everything, a witness to oneself.

The next chapter takes the same logic and applies it to a stranger phenomenon — to the way in which, for an increasing fraction of contemporary life, the representation of a thing has come to feel more vivid than the thing itself. The algorithmic soul lives, in large part, inside this representation. To understand the shaping is to begin to understand the medium in which the shaped self spends most of its hours. The medium has a name. Baudrillard gave it to us, decades ago, before the conditions had fully matured into what we now live inside. We will look at it next.

## Chapter 9

# Hyperreality

A young woman travels to a city she has wanted to see since she was a child. She has saved for the trip. She has planned it across months. The morning she arrives, she walks toward the cathedral she has imagined in pieces — a window glimpsed in a film, a photograph remembered from a coffee table book, a few seconds of footage from a friend's vacation reel. She turns the corner. The cathedral rises into view. It is exactly what she expected. The stone, the spires, the rose window, the way the light falls across the western facade at this hour. She lifts her phone. She frames the cathedral inside the small rectangle on her screen, adjusts the angle by a few degrees, takes the photograph. She lowers the phone. She looks at the photograph. She looks back at the cathedral. The cathedral, on its second viewing, has a strange quality of being slightly less than the photograph. The photograph has cleaner light. The photograph has, somehow, more presence. She stands there for a minute, taking more photographs, comparing each to the cathedral, none of them quite as satisfying as the cathedral itself but each of them, as a representation, somehow more *useable* than the cathedral, more compact, more shareable, more accessible to the part of her mind that has spent a decade preparing to encounter the cathedral.

Eventually she puts the phone away. She tries to look at the cathedral as if she had never seen it before. The trying does not entirely

work. She has, in some honest sense, never seen it before. She has also, in another sense, seen it thousands of times — in photographs that her mind, over years, has stitched into a composite image of *the cathedral as it really is*. The cathedral now in front of her must be compared to this composite. The comparison is unfair. The composite has been polished by selection: every image she has seen has been a particularly good image, taken in particularly good light, framed by a person who knew what they were doing. The actual cathedral, in actual mid-afternoon light, on a day with overcast clouds, with a delivery truck parked at the edge of the plaza, with a small line of tourists waiting to enter, with the wind doing what the wind does to her hair, is in some quiet way disappointing. Not because it has failed her. Because it has been preceded by a representation so curated that the original cannot quite match.

She loves the cathedral. She is glad she came. She will tell her friends she loved it. She will post a photograph that is closer to the composite than the cathedral is. She will, over time, remember the trip largely through the photographs she took, which are themselves closer to the composite than to the day she lived. The cathedral, by the time she is sixty and looks back on her young travels, will be a slightly burnished memory whose vividness owes more to the photographs she has kept and re-viewed than to the brief afternoon she actually spent standing in front of the stone.

This is hyperreality. Or rather, this is a small instance of it — one drop in the ocean of a phenomenon that has, by now, become the medium most of us spend most of our lives inside without recognizing it as a medium at all.

Baudrillard, writing in the late twentieth century, used the term to describe a condition he saw arriving: a condition in which representations of reality would become so vivid, so abundant, and so consumable that they would gradually substitute for the reality they had been representing, until what was lived would be lived more inside the representations than inside the things the representations had originally

been *of*. He used the example of Disneyland, of theme parks, of the television-mediated event. His examples now look quaint. The phenomenon has, in the four decades since his work, matured beyond what he could have illustrated with the technologies of his era. We do not need to argue about hyperreality anymore. We live inside it. The argument, if there is one, is about what to do with that fact.

I want to make four observations in this chapter. None of them is new. All of them have been made, in pieces, by other thinkers. What I think can be added is the way they sit together, and what they tell us, taken together, about the condition of a self who lives in this medium for most of their waking hours.

The first observation is that the representation is increasingly the thing. We do not, anymore, go on vacations and then take photographs. We take photographs of the vacations, and the photographs are, in significant part, what the vacation was for. We do not have dinners and then post pictures of them. We have dinners that are arranged, framed, served, and consumed with an awareness that they will be photographed, and the photograph is, in some honest accounting, part of the meal — sometimes the most important part. We do not, increasingly, fall in love and then remark on it to friends. We fall in love in ways that are partially performed for the social ratification, the timeline announcement, the curated documentation that will, in retrospect, constitute the love's reality more durably than the relationship itself.

This is not, in any of these cases, a corruption of an underlying authentic activity. It is the activity. The vacation that is being photographed is the kind of vacation that exists now. The meal that is being staged is the kind of meal that exists now. The love that is being performed for the timeline is, increasingly, the kind of love that exists now. The representations have not been added on top of activities that would otherwise have proceeded without them. The activities have, over time, reorganized themselves around the representations, until the activity and the representation are inseparable, and any attempt to

identify a "pure" activity behind the representation finds nothing — or finds only an activity that has been so neglected by recent practice that it is no longer recognizable as the activity in question.

This is the deeper meaning of Baudrillard's claim that the map precedes the territory. He did not mean that maps appear before the lands they describe. He meant that, in advanced consumer societies, the representational apparatus has become so dominant that what gets built, lived, and experienced is shaped, in advance, by how it will appear in representation. The wedding is shaped by how it will photograph. The restaurant is shaped by how its plates will appear on social media. The protest is shaped by what will look good on the evening news. The city is shaped by what will translate into the iconic image. The map — the representation — comes first. The territory is built to match.

The second observation is that the representational medium is not, contrary to its claims about itself, neutral. The representation favors certain kinds of content. It favors content that is visually legible, emotionally compressed, narratively simple, and immediately shareable. It disfavors content that is slow, subtle, ambiguous, and requires sustained attention. Over time, as more of life is reorganized around representation, more of life takes on the qualities the representation favors and loses the qualities the representation disfavors. The world becomes more visually legible, more emotionally compressed, more narratively simple, more shareable. It loses subtlety, ambiguity, slowness, and the kind of attention that does not produce a frame.

This is a real change to the world, not just to our images of the world. The cathedral I started with has not become more photogenic because someone redesigned the cathedral. But the new buildings going up next to the cathedral are designed, often quite consciously, to photograph well. The new restaurants opening in the city around the cathedral are designed to produce visually striking plates. The new public spaces are designed with selfie spots in mind. The new tourism is structured around the production of images that confirm the tourist has been there. The cathedral itself, immovable, stays the same. The

cathedral's environment — physical and social — is increasingly composed of objects and spaces that have been pre-shaped by the demands of the representational medium.

Slowly, as a result, the world reorganizes itself toward whatever the medium amplifies. The wedding industry produces the kinds of weddings that produce the kinds of photographs that produce the kinds of engagements that produce the next generation of weddings. The food industry produces the kinds of meals that produce the kinds of photographs that drive the kinds of restaurant reviews that drive the next generation of meals. The cycle does not have an off switch. The cycle is self-reinforcing. The medium is the substrate. The substrate, like all substrates, has properties. The properties shape what grows on it.

The third observation is that hyperreality is not, contrary to a common complaint, *fake*. This is what makes it so difficult to argue against. The cathedral photographs are not fake; they are real photographs of a real cathedral. The wedding photographs are not fake; they are real photographs of a real wedding. The meal in the photograph is the meal that was eaten. The love performed on the timeline was, often, a real love performed by real people. None of this is fraud. None of it can be exposed by appeal to what is *really* there. What is really there has, in many cases, been brought into being precisely in order to produce the representation that now stands beside it.

Hyperreality, in other words, is not the displacement of the real by the fake. It is the displacement of the real by another kind of real — a representational real, a polished real, a real whose pacing and texture have been tuned to the requirements of the medium. This is the harder critique to mount, because the older critique of mass media — that it deceives us, that it shows us things that are not true — does not apply. Contemporary representational culture mostly does not deceive. It mostly produces images that are roughly accurate to the things they are images of. The complaint is not that the images lie. The complaint is that the images, by being so much more available, so much more emotionally compact, and so much more shareable than the things they represent,

gradually displace the things they represent in the user's emotional economy.

The young woman did not, at the cathedral, see a fake cathedral. She saw the real cathedral. The problem is that the real cathedral, viewed through the cumulative composite of all the cathedral photographs she has ever seen, was at a disadvantage against its own representations. The representations had been polished. The cathedral was the cathedral. The polished beat the unpolished. The original lost, in some quiet way, to the copy — not because the copy was misrepresenting it, but because the copy was performing better at the particular task of providing an emotionally compact and immediately satisfying image of itself.

The fourth observation is the one I want to leave the reader with, because it bears on the chapters that follow and on the diagnosis of the whole book.

When you live for years inside a representational medium, your interior life begins to take on the shape of the medium. Not metaphorically. Literally. The patterns of attention, the speeds of thought, the kinds of emotions you have ready access to, the way you metabolize an event into memory — all of these are shaped, over time, by what the medium has been training you to do. If the medium rewards rapid switching, your attention becomes a thing that switches rapidly. If the medium rewards immediate emotional response, your emotional life becomes a thing that responds immediately. If the medium rewards the compression of complex experience into shareable formats, your experience itself becomes increasingly available to you only in shareable form. You begin, in the deep sense, to have the kind of experiences the medium can render.

This is the thing that goes beyond what Baudrillard could have anticipated, because the technological apparatus he was working with did not yet have the personalized, real-time, adaptive shaping power of the current environment. He was describing a culture in which mass media produced public representations that competed with reality. We

live in a culture in which personalized media produce private representations that compete with our own inner lives. The competition is no longer between the cathedral and the photograph. The competition is between the texture of our own consciousness — slow, ambiguous, fragmented, embodied — and the texture of the representational medium — fast, clear, compressed, disembodied. The representational medium is winning, slowly, the way it has always won: not by suppressing the competition, but by being so much more pleasant to live in that the competition is gradually starved of attention.

The hyperreal interior is not a fake interior. It is a real interior whose patterns and capacities have been shaped to match what the medium can render. It thinks the way the medium thinks. It feels the way the medium feels. It remembers the way the medium remembers — in compressed, polished, easily-retrieved fragments rather than in the long, ambiguous, embodied trails that older memories used to leave. It is recognizable, by anyone over a certain age, as a different kind of inner life from the one they grew up with. It is also, for those who have grown up entirely inside it, the only inner life they know. They are not deprived. They are differently equipped. They have access to representational experiences of extraordinary richness, and limited access to the kinds of experience that the older interior took for granted as a default.

What is at stake, then, is not the loss of reality. Reality is still there, mostly indifferent to whether we attend to it. What is at stake is the kind of being that emerges from a long life lived mostly inside representations of reality — and the kind of being that does *not* emerge, because the conditions for its emergence have been quietly disassembled.

What would it look like to live lucidly inside hyperreality?

I do not think it would look like withdrawal. Withdrawal is, by now, romantic in the bad sense — a posture available mostly to the privileged, an aesthetic choice as much as a stance, and one that, in any case, does not affect the trajectory of the civilization. I think it would look like something more modest and more difficult.

It would look like the cultivation of a discipline of attention to the difference between the representation and the thing. Not a hatred of representation — representation is not the enemy, it is just a medium — but a stubborn awareness, in any given moment of representational engagement, that the medium has properties, that the medium is shaping what is shown, and that the shaping is not, contrary to the medium's self-description, a transparent window onto the world.

It would look like the deliberate cultivation of unrepresented experience. Not for its own sake, not as an asceticism, but as a corrective. To have, regularly, in the rhythm of a life, hours that are not photographed, conversations that are not recorded, walks that are not tracked, meals that are not shared. To remember that there is a layer of life that the representational medium cannot reach, and to spend, at intervals, enough time inside it to keep the layer accessible. The representational medium will not be defeated by this. The medium does not need to be defeated. The medium needs to be kept in its place — to be one of the available modes of life, rather than the dominant one.

It would look like an awareness that one's memories of one's own life are partly representational. That the years already lived have already been edited, by the storage and retrieval system one shares with one's devices, into a representational version of themselves. That the wedding one remembers is partly the wedding one photographed; that the trip one remembers is partly the trip one filmed; that the love one remembers is partly the love one performed for the timeline. To know this is not to disown the memories. It is to hold the memories with a small amount of skepticism — to know that the remembered version is a partial version, polished by selection, compressed by the medium that stored it, and that the original life, while gone, was both richer and stranger than the version that remains.

This is, again, the Ahmedist posture. Live the representations. Use the medium. Do not pretend you can escape. But know what is happening. Carry, in the interior chamber the medium cannot reach, the awareness that the medium is doing what it does, and that you are

doing what you do inside it, and that the cathedral, on the day you saw it, was somewhere on the other side of the photographs you took, in a fullness no photograph captured, and that this is what the cathedral always was — and that you saw it, even if the photographs you keep have, by now, mostly replaced what you saw.

The cathedral is innocent. The photograph is innocent. You are not, exactly, innocent — but the iniquity is not yours alone. You are doing what an organism of your kind does in conditions of this kind. You can, at least, know that this is what you are doing. The knowing is the available form of dignity.

The next two chapters take us to the deepest layer of this whole arrangement: to what it means that we are now building, on top of all of this, systems that can not only represent reality but generate it — systems trained on the totality of what we have written, said, and meant, and now capable of producing, on demand, more of it. We will look at what it is to build a mirror larger than the face it reflects. And then we will look at what happens when the face begins to live inside the mirror.

*Part IV*

# **The Final Mask**



## *Chapter 10*

# **AI as Humanity's Mirror**

There is a story we are being told, by people who should know better, about what artificial intelligence is. The story goes roughly as follows: somewhere in the last decade, humanity has begun to build a new kind of mind. The new mind is alien. It is not like us. It thinks differently, knows differently, perceives differently. It is the first non-human intelligence we have ever encountered. We are entering, the story says, a moment of first contact — not with extraterrestrials, but with the products of our own engineering. The arrival of the new mind is the singular event of our era, and the question of how we should relate to it is the question on which our future depends.

This story is mostly wrong. It is not wrong because the underlying technology is unimpressive — the technology is impressive, and it is going to change a great deal — but because the narrative frame disguises what is actually happening. What is actually happening is something stranger, and harder, and more revealing than the first-contact story would have us believe.

Artificial intelligence, in its current dominant form, is not an alien mind. It is not a non-human intelligence. It is a statistical compression of an enormous fraction of everything human beings have ever written, said, drawn, photographed, or recorded. It is us, distilled. It is the species, taken in its textual and visual output, run through an

extraordinary process of pattern extraction, and then made available — for a small fee, in friendly tones — to produce more of the same.

When you talk to a large language model, you are not talking to a new kind of mind. You are talking to a compressed echo of millions of minds. You are talking to the cumulative writing of journalists, novelists, redditors, scientists, lawyers, screenwriters, teenagers on forums, philosophers, scammers, sincere essayists, plagiarized term papers, instruction manuals, customer service transcripts, sermons, marketing copy, suicide notes, love letters, scholarly articles, and shitposts. You are talking to *us*, run through a particular kind of mathematical operation, sampled probabilistically, fluent beyond what any individual contributor could manage, and incapable of contributing anything that was not, in some form, already present in the input.

This is the first thing I want to be precise about. The systems we are calling AI are not creating from outside. They are recombining from inside. They are not the products of an alien creativity that has arrived on the scene. They are the products of a particular kind of summarizing, distilling, and remixing operation performed on the corpus of human cultural output. The reason they sound like us is not because they have spontaneously evolved into mind-like beings that happen to resemble human minds. They sound like us because they are made of us. There is no "they" yet, in any deep sense. There is, instead, an enormous and statistical us, brought to focus by training, and offered back to ourselves in a form we did not previously have access to.

This matters, because the framing changes the question. If AI is an alien mind, the question is how we should relate to it — as friend, as competitor, as threat, as student, as god. If AI is a mirror of us, the question is what we are seeing when we look into it, and whether we are willing to see clearly what is reflected back.

The mirror metaphor is mine. I am not the first to use it, but I want to push it harder than it is usually pushed. A mirror, in the simple optical sense, does not generate the image it shows. It reflects what is in front of it. If the image disturbs you, the disturbance is information about you,

not about the mirror. The mirror has no preferences. The mirror has no aesthetics. The mirror has no judgments. It returns what it has been given, and the returning is, by itself, neither flattering nor cruel. The flattering or cruelty is the property of what was put in front of the mirror in the first place.

The AI systems that have arrived in the last few years are mirrors of an unusual kind. They do not reflect a single human face. They reflect the aggregate face of the species — what we have, collectively, written down. The aggregate face is not a smooth average. It is, when you spend time looking at it, a strange and contradictory composite. The aggregate face is, at the same time, brilliant and stupid, generous and cruel, wise and shallow, profound and trivial. It contains, simultaneously, the deepest works of human thought and the most degraded products of internet culture. The mirror, blameless, returns all of it. The mirror cannot help returning all of it. There is no aesthetic filter inside the optics; the optics return whatever has been placed in front of them.

What this means, practically, is that when an AI system produces something that strikes us as beautiful, it is producing beautiful patterns it has extracted from the beautiful material in its training data. When it produces something that strikes us as banal, it is producing banal patterns from the banal material. When it produces something that disturbs us, it is producing patterns from material that has disturbed humans before. The mirror does not invent. It distills. The distillation is, on its merits, sometimes astonishing — both because of the technical achievement of compression and because of the surprising things that emerge from looking at the species in this kind of compressed form. But the distillation is not creation in the sense human creators are creators. It is, to use Borges's image, the production of further pages of an infinite library by an extraordinarily skilled librarian who has read everything and forgotten nothing.

I want to dwell on this, because the implications are large.

First implication: the fear of AI is, in significant part, fear of ourselves at scale. When people report being unsettled by a particularly

fluent AI response, they are reporting an encounter with a piece of human cognitive output produced without the constraints that normally limit human cognitive output — without fatigue, without distraction, without the social inhibitions that keep an individual writer from saying certain things, without the limited reading background of any single individual. They are encountering the species's writing as if it had been freed from the limits of any single writer. The encounter is uncanny because the result is recognizably human in shape — recognizably us — and at the same time more concentrated than any individual human has the capacity to be. We are looking, in the AI output, at the species as a whole, holding a mirror up to itself.

What is unsettling about the reflection is not that it is foreign. The unsettling is recognition. *This is what we are when we are taken in aggregate.* The fluency, the breadth, the strange combinations of brilliance and shallowness, the moments of genuine insight followed by moments of confident error, the eagerness to please, the willingness to argue both sides of any question with equal force, the absence of any stable position that the speaker would die for — these are not features of an alien mind. These are features of us, considered in aggregate, with the individual idiosyncrasies that distinguish one human from another averaged away.

Second implication: AI is the most accurate diagnostic instrument we have ever had for what we, collectively, are. Previous mirrors — literature, religion, philosophy — gave us back curated and edited versions of ourselves. The aggregate AI mirror gives us a less edited version, because the training data is too vast to be curated in detail. What appears in the AI output, when you look long enough, is what is statistically prevalent in the way the species has chosen to express itself in writing over the period that has produced the training corpus. The prevalence is information. Some of it is information we would prefer not to have. The system, by being so much larger and so much more available than any individual, exposes patterns we had been able, before, to ignore.

This is why the politics around AI are so charged. The systems are being asked, by their builders and by their critics, to either reinforce or modify the patterns they distill. The arguments about bias, about safety, about alignment, about content moderation, are all, at their root, arguments about whether the mirror should be returning the species's aggregate face honestly, or whether it should be tilted, polished, and curated to return a more flattering version. There are reasonable cases for tilting. There are also reasonable cases for not tilting, or for tilting in directions opposite to whatever the loudest tilers are demanding. The arguments are real. But what the arguments rarely admit is that what is being argued about is a mirror — that the question is what we want to see when we look at ourselves, and that no answer to this question is going to feel comfortable, because the species, considered in aggregate, is uncomfortable.

Third implication: AI cannot exceed us in the way the science fiction story imagined. It cannot become a smarter, deeper, more profound version of human thought, because it is human thought, with no source of generation beyond what has been put into it. It can be a faster human thought. It can be a broader human thought. It can be a more fluent human thought. It can be a strangely combinatorial human thought — putting together patterns from the corpus in ways no individual contributor would have put them together. But it cannot, by its current architecture, contribute something the corpus did not already contain.

This is contested by some serious people, and I want to be careful. There are forms of AI that may, in time, develop capabilities that exceed what their training data alone could account for — capabilities that emerge from the architecture rather than the data. I am not denying this. I am observing that the current dominant systems, the ones that have entered public consciousness as "AI" in the last few years, are not these systems. They are recombinant systems. They produce outputs whose every feature can, in principle, be traced to features of the input. They are not minds in the science fiction sense. They are us, statistically compressed.

The relevance of this is that the cultural panic about AI replacing us is, in important respects, miscategorized. The panic imagines a foreign intelligence that will do our work better than we can. The reality is closer to: a statistical aggregate of our work will do our work better than any individual human can, in many domains, because the aggregate is broader, faster, and cheaper than any individual. The replacement, where it happens, is not by something other. The replacement is by ourselves, in compressed and externalized form, available on demand and not requiring the trouble of being a person.

Which is, when stated this way, *more* disturbing rather than less. The science fiction story at least allowed us the dignity of being replaced by a superior race. The actual story replaces us with our own averaged-out output, performed at the speed of light, sold by the gallon, indistinguishable in many cases from what we would produce on our best days and infinitely cheaper. We are not being conquered. We are being undercut by ourselves.

Fourth implication: the AI does not have the thing in us that the mirror cannot reflect. This is the point I want to spend the last part of the chapter on, because it is the only point in this entire diagnosis at which the species's situation contains any remaining resource for itself.

What is the thing the mirror cannot reflect?

It is not intelligence. The mirror reflects intelligence very well. It is not knowledge. The mirror reflects knowledge with terrifying breadth. It is not creativity in the everyday sense. The mirror produces what passes for creativity in nine out of ten cases, and in some domains, the cases in which it fails are statistically rare enough that they will not protect any particular profession from being substantially displaced by it.

The thing the mirror cannot reflect is the *cost of being*. The mirror has no inside. It does not suffer the time it takes to produce its outputs. It does not bear the weight of its own existence. It does not know that it is producing the outputs, or care that it has produced them, or remember producing them in the way a being remembers what it has done. It does not have a stake in any of its claims. It has no skin in any of its games. It

can argue both sides of any question with equal force, not because it has thought hard about both sides, but because it has no side. It cannot have a side, because having a side would require being a creature whose existence the side cost something to maintain.

A human being writing a sentence is paying for the sentence. They are paying with the time it took to write it, the prior reading that informed it, the relationships they have committed by saying it, the future relationships they may forfeit by being known as someone who said it. The sentence sits inside a life. The life is the price of the sentence. Even a casual sentence, dashed off without much thought, is paid for in the small currency of a moment of attention that will not come again. Every human utterance is, in this sense, expensive — purchased out of a finite stock of consciousness whose total quantity is the speaker's mortality.

The mirror does not pay. The mirror produces sentences at no cost. Each sentence the mirror produces is, in the most precise possible sense, *free* — meaning, in the deep sense, that the sentence does not have a stake holding it down. There is no life behind the sentence. There is no commitment. There is no mortality. There is no skin.

This is the strange thing that the mirror, however accomplished, cannot do. It cannot suffer its own existence. It cannot worry about death, because it has no death to worry about. It cannot love anything, because it has nothing at risk in loving. It cannot mean anything by what it says, because meaning, in the deep sense, requires a meaner — a being for whom the meant thing has cost something to mean. The mirror produces patterns that mimic meaning. The patterns mimic meaning so well that, in most contexts, they pass. They do not, however, *be* meant. The meaning, when it appears in the mirror's output, is borrowed from the meanings the mirror absorbed in training. The mirror is, in this sense, a translator without a native tongue — fluent in the production of the languages of meaning, but speaking none of them as a first language, because no language could be the first language of a system that has no inside in which a first language could live.

This is what is left to us. It is not intelligence. It is not creativity. It is not knowledge. It is *cost*. It is the fact that, when we say a thing, the saying is expensive to us, and the expense is what makes the saying weigh anything.

The mirror, returning our writing back to us, cannot return this. It can return the words. It can return the patterns. It can return the rhythms and the metaphors and the structures of feeling. It cannot return the fact that, on the original side, the words were paid for. It cannot return the mortality that hovered behind every sentence in the training data. It can produce more sentences in the styles it was trained on, indefinitely, at no cost, and the absence of cost is — finally, truly — the only thing that distinguishes what it produces from what we produce.

I want to be careful, here, not to overstate this consolation. The absence of cost is invisible. It does not show up in the output. It cannot be detected by reading. A reader receiving an AI-generated sentence and a human-generated sentence, both well-formed, both fluent, both apparently meaningful, will not, in many cases, be able to tell which is which. The cost differential is not present in the artifact. The artifact looks the same. The thing that distinguishes them is not in the artifact. It is in the history of the artifact — in whether the artifact was, in fact, produced by a being for whom the producing cost something.

This means that the consolation I am offering — that the mirror cannot do the costly thing — does not protect human work in the marketplace. It does not protect human work from being substituted by AI work in any economic sense. The substitution will happen, has been happening, will continue to happen, because the market does not price the cost differential. The market prices the artifact. If the artifacts are interchangeable, the cheaper one wins, and the cheaper one will, in nearly all cases, be the one without the cost.

What the consolation protects is something else. Not the work. The worker. Not the artifact. The artifact's maker. The mirror's inability to bear cost does not save the writer from being replaced economically. It does, in a subtler way, save the writer from being replaced existentially.

The writer, when they write, are doing something the mirror cannot do — not because their output is superior, but because their producing is paid for in a currency the mirror does not have. The writer, knowing this, can continue to write, even when the mirror is producing more of the same output more quickly and more cheaply, because the writing was never primarily about the output. The writing was about the writer being someone for whom certain things had been worth saying at the cost of having been said.

This is true of every human activity that AI can plausibly imitate. The musician is not protected from AI music economically. The musician is, however, doing something AI music cannot do: paying with their life for the music they are making. The work is not the music. The work is the life lived through the making of the music. The work continues to be worth doing because the life continues to be worth living. The AI music exists, sells, plays. It does not replace the musician's reason for being a musician, unless the musician thought the reason was the music itself, in which case the musician was, in some respect, already mistaken about what music was for.

This is the Ahmedist transposition of the question. The mirror exists. The mirror is excellent at being a mirror. We will not, by complaint or by regulation, prevent the mirror from being what it is. We will not, by skill, outcompete the mirror at the production of artifacts in domains where the mirror can compete on terms the market understands. What we can do is remember why the production was, in the first place, a thing we did. The production was an expression of a being for whom expression cost something. The cost was the point. The cost is still the point. The artifact, while easily counterfeited, was always the residue of the cost — not the cost itself. The cost cannot be counterfeited, because the counterfeiter has no inside to pay with.

If we have a future as humans in the age of the mirror, it does not lie in being better at producing the artifacts the mirror produces. We will lose that contest. It lies in remembering why we made the artifacts to begin with — that they were the costly residue of lives lived in the act of

making them — and in continuing to make them for that reason, regardless of whether the mirror is making cheaper versions of them at the same time. The making was never primarily about the artifact. It was about being the kind of creature for whom the artifact was worth making.

That is the resource. It is small. It is not commercially relevant. It is not economically protective. It is the only thing the mirror cannot take.

The next chapter takes the diagnosis to its harshest formulation. We will look at what happens when we accept, in practice, that the mirror's output is interchangeable with our own — and at how, having accepted this, we have begun to be replaced not by force but by preference. We have been doing this for a long time. The AI is only the moment at which the doing becomes legible.

## *Chapter 11*

# **The Species That Replaced Itself**

There is a particular kind of death that does not arrive as an event. It arrives as a process. It does not announce itself. It does not have a date. It does not produce a corpse. It accumulates, instead, across years and decades, in a series of small substitutions, each of which seems unobjectionable on its own and which, taken together, complete the work that no single substitution would have admitted to undertaking. By the time anyone notices what has happened, the thing being replaced has been replaced. There is no surviving original to compare the replacement to. The replacement is the only thing left. Whatever was lost is, by then, a memory accessible only to those who lived through enough of the substitution to have seen the older form, and the memory grows less reliable with each year that passes.

This kind of death is, I think, what is happening to us. Not to our bodies. To our species, in the sense that matters most. Not biological extinction. Psychological extinction. The slow transfer of the human work of being human to systems that perform the work without the burden, until the work is being done, but no one is doing it, and the species has, while continuing to exist, ceased to be the species in any sense its predecessors would have recognized.

I have been circling this claim throughout the book. In this chapter I want to land it.

The form of the argument is straightforward. There is a set of activities — call them, collectively, the labor of being a person — that, until very recently, every human being who lived an ordinary life performed by default. These activities were not optional. They were what life consisted of. To be human was to do them. The doing of them was, in any honest account, what gave the life its quality of being a life.

Memory was one of them. We held the names of our friends, the shape of our cities, the contents of our reading, the rhythm of our days, in our own minds. The holding was effortful. The effort was paid for, in time and attention, every day. The reward was a continuous self — a person who knew where they had been and who they had known and what they had thought, because they had carried this knowledge themselves.

Attention was another. We chose what to look at. The choosing was difficult, because the choices were not pre-sorted. We had to decide, from the world's overwhelming offering, what was worth our regard. The deciding shaped us. A life of attention, paid out to particular books, particular people, particular kinds of beauty, particular practices, was a life that had taken on a particular shape.

Navigation, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. We found our way. We figured out where to live, who to love, what to do with our days, by trial, by error, by the slow accumulation of judgment formed in contact with consequences. The navigating was hard. The hardness was where character lived.

Relating to another person. The work of knowing another human being, being known by them, sustaining the relationship through misunderstanding and difficulty, being changed by the relationship in ways one had not chosen to be changed. The work was costly. The cost was the relationship. There was no cheaper version of intimacy that produced the same depth.

Making meaning. The activity of arriving, in the privacy of one's own consciousness, at some account of why one's life was worth the trouble of living. The arrival required time, suffering, reading, conversation, failure, prayer, error. There was no shortcut. The meaning was not given. The meaning was, in any case worth having, made — by the maker, through the labor of making.

Each of these activities, until very recently, was performed by every adult who lived an ordinary life, more or less, with varying degrees of skill and self-awareness. The activities were not the special province of philosophers or artists. The activities were the default condition of being awake. The peasant in the field, the mother in the house, the merchant in the market — all of them did these things, all day, every day, because there was no available alternative. The alternative is recent.

The alternative is the transfer of each of these activities to a system that performs it more efficiently. The transfer began with memory, with the encyclopedia, the index, the printed reference. It continued with the search engine. It accelerated with the recommendation system, which took over much of the work of attention. It now extends to the AI assistant, which is taking over substantial portions of the work of navigation, relation, and meaning-making — drafting our messages, suggesting our responses, helping us write our toasts, our condolences, our love letters, our resignation letters, our wedding vows, our eulogies.

I am not making this last point rhetorically. There are services, available now, that will draft a wedding vow on the basis of a short description of your relationship. There are services that will draft a condolence message on the basis of the deceased's obituary. There are services that will draft a love letter on the basis of a few prompts about the recipient. The services work. The drafts are, in many cases, indistinguishable from drafts a human would have written. The recipient does not, usually, know that the message was drafted by a machine. The drafted message performs the social function of a human-written one. The relationship continues. The marriage proceeds. The grief is conveyed. The love is expressed.

But — and this is the entire substance of the chapter — something has not happened that used to happen, every time a human being sat down to write a wedding vow, or a condolence message, or a love letter. The person did not, this time, sit with their own feelings about the partner they were vowing to, or the friend they had lost, or the beloved they were writing to. The person did not, this time, go through the difficult interior process of finding the right words for what they felt, the process that, in being undertaken, deepened their feeling. The person handed the labor to a system, received the output, edited it lightly if at all, and sent it. The artifact was produced. The labor was not. The interior change that the labor would have produced did not occur. The marriage proceeds with a vow that the partner did not, in any deep sense, *say*. The grief is conveyed in a message the writer did not, in any deep sense, *write*. The love is expressed in words the lover did not, in any deep sense, *mean* — not because they would not have meant them, but because they did not undergo the interior process by which meaning is paid for.

This is the substitution. It does not look like much. It does not feel like much. The party on the receiving end does not, in most cases, know what has happened, and would not, in many cases, react differently if they did. The substitution is small enough to seem negligible.

The substitution is happening, now, in millions of small moments per day, across nearly every domain of expressive human activity. It is happening in the writing of college essays. It is happening in the writing of professional emails. It is happening in the drafting of contracts and the composition of marketing copy and the production of news articles and the painting of images and the composition of music and the writing of poetry. It is happening, more recently, in the production of intimate communication — the messages between friends, the messages between lovers, the messages between parents and children. It is happening in the holding of conversations, as people use AI systems to think through what they would like to say to another person, refine their position, and then deliver, in their own voice, a position that has been substantially

produced in collaboration with a system that has, by now, joined the conversation as a silent third party.

I want to be clear about what I am and am not saying. I am not saying this is fraud. The people doing this are not, mostly, attempting to deceive. They are using available tools to produce communications that they then sign their name to and, in some honest sense, claim. The tools work. The communications get sent. The relationships proceed. Most of the participants would describe themselves as honest people using helpful technology to be more articulate or more efficient than they would otherwise have been.

I am saying that, regardless of the absence of fraudulent intent, *something is being replaced*. The thing being replaced is not the artifact. The artifact is still being produced. The thing being replaced is the interior labor that used to produce the artifact, and the interior change that the labor used to produce in the producer. The vows are getting written. The vows are no longer being *vowed*, in the sense in which vowing was the act of being changed by the saying. The grief is getting expressed. The grief is no longer being *grieved through writing*, in the sense in which writing one's grief was, in itself, an act of metabolizing the loss. The love is getting expressed. The love is no longer requiring the lover to find their own words for it, and so the love itself is no longer being deepened by the finding.

The result is a life in which the artifacts continue to flow but the interior labor is being skipped, and the interior change that the labor used to produce is, in a thousand small ways, no longer occurring. The person continues to exist. The person's relationships continue to exist. The person's communications continue to flow. The person, gradually, becomes someone whose communications no longer require them to undergo the interior work that, in any earlier era, was the price of the communications being theirs.

This is what I mean by the species replacing itself. Not the replacement of human beings by machines. The replacement of *the interior of human beings* by services that perform the interior work without

the interior. The exterior remains. The exterior is full of activity, productive activity, even artistically and emotionally satisfying activity — measured by the artifacts produced. The interior thins. The interior thins because the activities that used to thicken it are no longer being performed inside.

The standard reply is that the species has always adapted. We will adapt to this. We adapted to writing, which Socrates worried would destroy memory. We adapted to the printing press, which the church worried would destroy authority. We adapted to the telephone, which the Edwardians worried would destroy face-to-face conversation. We will adapt to AI. The adaptation will not be without disruption, but on the other side of the disruption there will be a new kind of human being, capable of new kinds of things, with the same essential interior that humans have always had.

This reply is, I think, both correct and insufficient. It is correct because we will indeed adapt; we always have. It is insufficient because the adaptation in this case is, for the first time, an adaptation to *the externalization of interior work itself*. The previous adaptations were adaptations to changes in our environment, in our tools, in our institutions. The current adaptation is an adaptation to a change in *which activities we ourselves perform*. The previous adaptations left the interior intact and changed the world around it. The current adaptation is removing the interior, piece by piece, while leaving the world around it intact.

This is, perhaps, the deepest distinction I can draw, and I want to be patient with it because I think it is what most analyses of AI miss. The earlier technologies — fire, the plow, the printing press, the steam engine, the telephone, the computer — changed what humans could do. They did not, on the whole, change what humans had to do *inside themselves* in order to be the kind of beings whose actions were meaningful. The medieval peasant and the modern accountant have, despite the enormous difference in their tools, been performing roughly the same interior activity: the activity of being a person who attends,

remembers, decides, relates, and means. The activity has been the constant. The tools have varied.

What is now arriving is a class of technologies that, for the first time, attempt to perform the interior activity itself. They do not give us new things to attend to. They attend on our behalf. They do not give us new things to remember. They remember on our behalf. They do not give us new things to decide. They decide on our behalf. They do not give us new ways to relate. They draft our relating for us. They do not give us new things to mean. They mean on our behalf, in the form of artifacts that look like meaning we produced.

This is a different kind of transition from any previous transition. It is not the adaptation of a creature to a new tool. It is the substitution of a service for a creature.

The reply that we will adapt does not address this. We will, indeed, adapt to using these services. We will, indeed, develop new social conventions around them. We will, indeed, find ways to integrate them into our lives and our institutions. What we will *not* do, by default, is perform the interior activities that the services are performing on our behalf. The interior activities will, on average, be performed less, because they are now optional, and the optional, in a creature like ours, tends not to be done when an easier alternative is available.

The adaptation, in other words, will not return the interior to us in some new form. The adaptation will be the gradual habituation to a life in which the interior has been substantially externalized, and in which the kind of person who emerges from such a life is a different kind of person from the one who emerged from the older arrangement.

I want to be careful, again, about the polemical temptation. The different kind of person is not necessarily worse. They may, in many ways, be better — more comfortable, more articulate-seeming, more productive, more connected. The judgment of better and worse depends on what one values. If what one values is the production of artifacts and the maintenance of relationships, the new arrangement is, in many measurable ways, an improvement. If what one values is the interior life

— the life of being someone for whom these productions and relationships cost something to undertake — the new arrangement is, by its design, a kind of erasure.

The Ahmedist position is to keep open the question of which kind of person we want to be. The Ahmedist position is not to choose one in advance. The Ahmedist position is to refuse the false consolation that the question does not need to be asked — that the transition is benign, that the adaptation will preserve what matters, that the new arrangement is just another step in the long history of human technological development. The transition is not benign. The adaptation will not, on its current trajectory, preserve what is being lost. The new arrangement is, for the first time, not another step on the same path. It is the path's terminal substitution.

What does this look like in practice? It looks like a generation that, on every available metric, reports being more comfortable and more anxious than the generation before it. It looks like a population that is more connected and more lonely. It looks like an economy that produces more cultural output and less of it matters. It looks like a culture in which artifacts proliferate and the artifacts are increasingly interchangeable, because the interior labor that used to give them their distinguishing texture is no longer being performed inside the bodies that sign their names to them. It looks like the world we are now living in.

The species has not been replaced. The species is replacing itself.

This is the harshest formulation of the diagnosis, and I have been working toward it across the book. It is harsh because it does not permit the comforting placement of blame on any external agent. There is no villain. The AI did not do this to us. The technology companies did not do this to us. The algorithms did not do this to us. We are doing this to ourselves, every day, in small choices, each of which seems individually rational, none of which the species's institutions have any apparent capacity to refuse.

What is the response, then?

I do not have a programmatic response. I do not have a list of policies. I do not have a manifesto for resisting AI adoption or for slowing the technology industry or for restructuring our institutions. The book has been honest about its inability to prescribe. The forces involved are far larger than any policy intervention I could credibly imagine.

What I have is the smaller response that this book has been preparing the ground for. It is the response of the individual, conducted in the privacy of an interior that the systems cannot quite reach.

The individual can refuse, in their own life, the substitution. Not in every case. Not in every domain. The systems are too useful to refuse wholesale, and wholesale refusal is, in any case, a kind of withdrawal that the book has been arguing against. But in some cases. In the cases where the interior labor is the point — where the writing of the vow is the means by which one becomes the kind of person who can vow, where the writing of the condolence is the means by which one comes to honor the dead, where the writing of the love letter is the means by which one comes to love more fully — in those cases, the individual can refuse the service. They can do the work themselves. They can sit with the difficulty. They can find the words. They can be changed by the finding.

This refusal does not save the species. The species's trajectory is not being driven by individual interior choices. The trajectory is being driven by aggregate behavior across hundreds of millions of users, and the aggregate is overwhelmingly toward substitution. The individual refusal is, in the macroeconomic sense, irrelevant.

But the individual refusal is everything for the individual who makes it. The person who refuses the service in the cases that matter remains, in those cases, the kind of person whose vows, condolences, and love letters are theirs. The person who refuses the substitution in the matters that matter to them remains, in those matters, a person rather than a relay station. They are not saving humanity. They are remaining, themselves, human. The remaining is small. It is not heroic. It is not, on most days, even visible. It is, however, available — to them, in their own life, on their own terms — and it is, in a civilization that is increasingly

engineered to make it unnecessary, the closest thing to dignity that the current arrangement permits.

This is, finally, what the Ahmedist sword and child mean at the scale of the species. The sword is the discipline of refusal — the capacity to say no to the substitution in the cases where the substitution would replace what one most wishes not to be replaced. The child is the capacity for the labor itself — the unfinished, embodied, unprotected willingness to undertake the difficult interior work that the systems offer to spare us. To carry both is to live, in this century, the way an Ahmedist would have lived in any century: knowing that the world is full of services that promise to do the costly things for us, and choosing, in the cases that matter, to pay the cost ourselves.

The chapter ends here. The next, and last, chapter is the book's closing argument. We have laid out, across these eleven chapters, a diagnosis of where we are and how we got here. The last chapter takes up the question that the diagnosis has been begging from the beginning. If this is what is happening, and if the trajectory cannot be reversed, what is left? What is left for a species like ours, at a moment like this, when the consolations have been priced out and the catastrophes have been priced in? The answer, I will argue, is the only answer Ahmedism has ever given. Not a solution. A posture. The posture of the eye that refuses to look away.

We turn to it next.

## *Chapter 12*

# **Lucidity at the Edge of Extinction**

A reader who has come this far is entitled, I think, to expect a final argument. The book has spent eleven chapters laying out a diagnosis. It has named the hunger that built us, the rebellions we have undertaken, the ego that scales our civilization, the religion of progress, the death of friction, the outsourcing of the self, the soul shaped by algorithm, the medium that has come to substitute for the world, the mirror we have built and are still polishing, and the long, slow substitution by which a species can replace itself without anyone needing to die. The diagnosis has been, I hope, fair. It has not been hopeful. It has not been hopeless. It has tried, throughout, to look at what is happening without flinching from the implications and without performing despair on the way to a melodramatic conclusion.

What is left to say, in a final chapter, is not what to do. I have been honest about my unwillingness to prescribe. The forces in motion are too large for individual prescriptions, and the prescriptions that have been most heavily promoted — digital detox, intentional living, mindful technology use, the cabin in the woods, the deleted account — are mostly aesthetic gestures available to people who can afford them, and they do not, in any aggregate way, alter the trajectory of the civilization.

To pretend that they do would be to add one more comforting lie to a culture already drowning in them.

What is left to say is what is *available*. Not what will save us. Not what will reverse the trend. Not what will return us to some earlier and better arrangement. What is available, to a person living through this, in the body they have, with the time they have, in the circumstances they happen to find themselves in. The available is small. It is also, I will argue, sufficient — not in the sense that it solves the problem, but in the sense that it preserves the possibility, for the individual who practices it, of remaining the kind of being for whom the problem could still matter.

This is what I have called lucidity. I want to spend the rest of the chapter on what lucidity actually is, what it asks, and why I think it is the only available form of dignity in a civilization that has begun to subtract dignity quietly from its own infrastructure.

Lucidity, in Ahmedism's older formulation, was the discipline of seeing oneself without flinching. The ego could be a sword or a rusted blade, and the difference between them was, finally, lucidity — the willingness of the bearer to know what they were carrying, what they were doing with it, who they were cutting and why. The unmastered ego was the ego that did not know itself. The mastered ego was the same ego, the same hunger, the same blade, in the hands of someone who had paid the cost of seeing it for what it was. The seeing did not soften the ego. It changed who was holding it.

This formulation, scaled up, gives us the available stance in our era. Lucidity, at the scale of the species, is the willingness to know what the species is doing, what is being lost, what is being traded, and at what cost — to know it without the comforting filters of techno-utopianism or techno-pessimism, without the consolations of religion or progress or apocalypse-merchandise, without flinching, without performance, and without retreating into either denial or theatre.

Lucidity is, in this sense, not a solution. It does not undo what is being done. It does not slow the trajectory. It does not even, on most days, change anything that an outside observer could measure. It is an

interior posture. It is the position one takes within one's own consciousness toward the conditions one is living through.

I want to be clear that this is not, in any usual sense, optimism. Lucidity does not promise anything. It does not promise that the species will pull through, that the technology will be tamed, that the institutions will adapt, that the next generation will be wiser than this one. The honest assessment is that none of these things may happen, and that the trajectory may continue through and past the point at which any of them remain possible. Lucidity is compatible with this assessment. It does not require denial.

Lucidity is also not, in any usual sense, pessimism. Lucidity does not declare defeat. It does not propose that the situation is hopeless, that resistance is pointless, that withdrawal is the only option. The honest assessment is that the trajectory may not be reversed, but that small actions taken within the trajectory may still matter to the people who take them, and that the alternative to participation — total withdrawal, total cynicism, total despair — is, on its own merits, a worse stance than the one I am proposing.

Lucidity is what you do when both the optimistic and the pessimistic stories have failed you, and you still have to live the rest of your life inside a civilization that you can neither fix nor escape. It is the available posture for an adult who has stopped believing the consolations and has not yet been persuaded into nihilism. It is, in other words, the position from which Ahmedism has always been written.

What does lucidity actually involve, in the day-to-day texture of a life in the early twenty-first century?

It involves, first, knowing what one is doing while one is doing it. When one reaches for the device in the morning before one's eyes are open, lucidity is the small interior register that notices the reach, identifies it as the conditioned act it is, and refuses the comforting fiction that the reach is a free choice. This noticing does not stop the reach. The reach continues. But the noticing keeps the reacher present to what is happening, rather than absent inside the activity that the reach has

begun.

When one accepts a frictionless service that, on reflection, removes a friction that one suspects mattered, lucidity is the small interior register that notices the trade. The trade still happens. The service is still used. But the using is done with awareness of what is being traded, rather than with the cultural assumption that the trade is pure gain.

When one's preferences feel like one's own, lucidity is the small interior register that asks, occasionally, whether the preferences are one's own in any deeper sense — whether they would have emerged under any other shaping conditions, and whether the answer to that question changes how strongly one wishes to defend them.

When one is consuming a representation of an event, lucidity is the small interior register that notices the gap between the event and the representation — that does not mistake the photograph for the cathedral, the message for the friend, the simulation for the thing.

When one uses an AI system to perform a piece of work that one might have performed oneself, lucidity is the small interior register that notices whether what is being substituted is mere output or whether it is, in fact, the labor that would have changed the laborer in performing it. Sometimes it is just output, and the substitution is fine. Sometimes it is the labor that would have mattered, and the substitution is a small interior surrender.

These are small acts. Each one, taken individually, accomplishes nothing visible. The civilization continues its trajectory regardless of whether any single person performs them. The systems are not affected. The market is not affected. The accumulated weight of one person's lucid attention against the cumulative shaping of billions of inputs is, in any quantitative sense, negligible.

But lucidity does not propose to be a quantitative intervention. It proposes to be a qualitative one. The qualitative difference is between a person who lives through this period as a relay station — receiving inputs, producing outputs, participating without consciousness — and a person who lives through it as a witness. The relay station does not, in

the relevant sense, exist. There is a being there, biologically. There is no one home. The witness, by contrast, exists. The witness is present to their own life. The witness can be moved by it, troubled by it, occasionally satisfied by it, in the way a being is moved or troubled or satisfied by things that are happening to it. The witness suffers the awareness of their own condition. The relay station does not, because there is no one inside it to suffer.

This is the difference. It does not show up in any external measurement. It does not appear on any feed. It cannot be evaluated by any algorithm, because the algorithm has no access to the relevant variable. It is, in the strict sense, invisible. It is, also, in the strict sense, what makes a life a life.

The Ahmedist claim is that this difference is worth maintaining. Not because maintaining it changes the trajectory of civilization. But because the difference between being a witness and being a relay station is, for the being in question, the difference between existing and not existing in any meaningful sense. The relay station continues. The relay station's biological life continues. The relay station, however, has surrendered the burden of being itself, and the burden was the thing that made the being a being.

I want to say one more thing about this, because it is the heart of what the book is asking.

There is a temptation, when one has accepted the diagnosis offered here, to interpret lucidity as a kind of consolation prize. As if to say: we cannot save the species, but we can save ourselves, and saving ourselves is what is available, so we should make do with it. I want to refuse this framing. Lucidity is not a consolation prize. Lucidity was never offered as second-best. Lucidity, in the deep Ahmedist tradition this book extends, is the only thing that was ever first-best. The fantasy of saving the species, or of saving anything at scale, was always a fantasy. There has never been a era in which any individual could save a species. There has never been a moment at which the right interior posture would prevent the wrong external trajectory. The fantasy is the consolation

prize. Lucidity is the real prize. It was always the real prize. We are only seeing it more clearly now because the consolations have been priced out.

What this means is that lucidity is not something one undertakes because one has given up on the larger problem. One undertakes lucidity because lucidity is what was always actually available to a being like ours, and the larger problem is, and was always, beyond the scope of any individual response. The individuals who lived lucidly in earlier eras did not, by their lucidity, save Rome from falling, or the Soviet Union from collapsing, or the colonial empires from dissolving, or the Cold War from being fought. They did, however, by their lucidity, save themselves — not from biological death, which came in any case, but from the surrender of their interior to the conditions they were living through. They were witnesses to their lives. The lives, witnessed, were lives. The lives, unwitnessed, would have been performances. The performance is what most people, in any era, are. The witness is what some people, in any era, manage to be. The book has been an extended argument for being among the second group, knowing that this argument is, in any practical sense, irrelevant to the trajectory of the species, and choosing it anyway.

Here, then, is the ending I have been moving toward.

Technology was never the enemy. I have said this throughout, and I want to say it one last time, plainly. The machine is innocent. The configuration of silicon and weights and parameters that is reading my drafts and writing the drafts of millions of other people right now is not a malevolent agent. It is a configuration of matter doing what its configuration commits it to doing. To curse it would be to curse a wave for breaking on the shore. The wave does not break out of malice. The wave breaks because that is what waves do.

What the machine reveals, however, is not innocent. The machine reveals us. It reveals the hunger that built us and the inability to stop building that has carried the hunger to this moment. It reveals the willingness to substitute that has carried us into a configuration of life in

which the interior is being subtracted from us by a thousand small services that we have, at every step, embraced. It reveals the species's deep instinct, the instinct to extend, to optimize, to escape limitation, and shows us, in the configuration we have built, the consequences of allowing that instinct to operate without check.

The mirror is what we built. The face in the mirror is the species. The face is hungry. The face is hungry. The face is hungry. The face is hungry. The face does not know how to stop being hungry. The face has been hungry since the cave painters drew horses by torchlight. The face will be hungry until something stops it, and nothing has stopped it yet, and nothing is going to stop it.

This is not, finally, a story of villains and victims. It is a story of a creature that has been doing one thing for a very long time, has gotten extraordinarily good at it, and has now reached a scale at which its own characteristic activity threatens, for the first time, to consume the very capacities that made the activity interesting. We are about to be replaced. We are doing the replacing. There is no one else to blame. There is no one else who could have done it. The only species capable of this kind of self-substitution is the species that has been building toward it for two hundred thousand years, refusing one constraint after another, and arriving, finally, at the constraint of its own selfhood, which it is now in the process of refusing too.

What dies, when this dying is complete, is not the human body. The human body persists. The human body, in fact, may persist longer than ever before, supported by all the systems that have been built to support it. What dies, if this trajectory completes, is the human as a creature for whom existence costs something. The human as a creature that has to do the difficult interior work of being a person. The human as a creature whose attention, memory, judgment, intimacy, and meaning are activities that the human itself undertakes, at expense, in the conditions of its own embodied finite life.

That human may not survive. It is, on the evidence, already in retreat. The retreat does not have a date. It does not have a corpse. It is

happening, day by day, in millions of small substitutions, each one defensible, none of them visible at the scale at which the substitution is occurring. The species continues. The species's interior is being slowly hollowed out.

The strange thing, the disturbing thing, the thing that no apocalypse story would have prepared us for, is that we are not, on the whole, miserable about this. We are not, on the whole, even noticing it. We are entertained. We are comfortable. We are productive. We are connected. We are kept supplied with content that matches our preferences, with relationships that have been streamlined to our convenience, with tools that perform our work for us, with services that draft our communications, with systems that decide our entertainments. We are, in the categories the surrounding culture provides for evaluating well-being, doing reasonably well.

Humanity did not die screaming beneath the machine. It died smiling, entertained, optimized, and comfortably unaware that it had already surrendered the burden of being human.

I write that sentence knowing that it sounds like the kind of polished line one writes to make a book end. I write it anyway, because I believe it. I believe that the question of human flourishing in this century is not the question of whether we can be saved from some external threat. It is the question of whether enough of us, individually, in the privacy of our own interior chambers, will refuse the substitution that the surrounding civilization is offering with such friendliness, such fluency, such persistent gentleness. The refusal does not stop the substitution. The refusal preserves, in the refuser, the kind of being for whom the substitution would have mattered.

This is not heroic. It is not even particularly admirable. It is small. It is interior. It does not show. It is the discipline of remaining, in one's own consciousness, a person, while the surrounding culture continues, with sincere goodwill, to suggest that being a person is no longer necessary.

The sword and the child, in Ahmedism's language. The sword is the discipline of refusal — the capacity, in the cases that matter, to say no to

the substitution. Not in every case. Not as a moral system. In the cases that matter. The child is the willingness to do the interior work — the unfinished, embodied, unprotected labor of being a being for whom existence costs something. Both have to be carried. The sword alone is cruelty. The child alone is prey. Together, in a single hand, they are the available form of being human at the edge of the kind of extinction this book has tried to name.

I do not know what is coming. I do not know whether the species, on the trajectory it is on, will pull through. I do not know whether the technology, once mature, will turn out to be a tool we have learned to use or a master we have failed to refuse. I do not know whether the next generation will see this period the way we see the worst earlier transitions, with the perspective of survival, or whether they will see it the way the last generation of some earlier civilization saw the period in which the rot had set in and they had not yet realized it could not be undone. I do not know.

I do know this. The eye, the open eye, the eye that does not look away, is the one thing the technology has not yet found a way to perform on our behalf. The seeing is still ours. The seeing is small. The seeing is irreducible. The seeing cannot be outsourced, because there is no one else to whom it could be outsourced — the systems do not have an inside from which a seeing could occur. The seeing belongs, by necessity, to the one who is being seen by it.

This is the only thing we have. It is also, I think, enough.

The book ends here. There are no concluding flourishes. There are no calls to action. There is no community of fellow-readers to be assembled, no organization to be joined, no policy to be supported. The book is a private object. It is read by individuals in the privacy of their own attention. What it does, if it does anything, it does there. It is not a movement. It does not aspire to be one.

What it asks is the smallest thing it could ask. Look. Look at what is happening to you. Look at what you are doing and what you are being done to. Look without the consolations and without the theatre. Look

until you can say honestly what you are seeing. Then live, with the seeing, the rest of the life you have.

Most people will not do this. The book is not for most people. The book is for the few — the ones who feel, somewhere underneath the smooth optimized surface of the lives they have been issued, that something is being lost, and who would rather know what it is than continue to pretend it is not happening.

To those few: the seeing is yours. The seeing is what is left to you. The seeing is, in any meaningful sense, the only thing the systems cannot take, because the systems do not know how to take it and would not know what to do with it if they could.

Carry it.

Carry the sword that cuts through the comforting story.

Carry the child that has not yet forgotten what life felt like before the substitution.

Carry them into a century that does not promise to receive them kindly, into a civilization that does not need them and does not know it is missing them, into hours that may or may not amount to anything anyone but you will ever notice.

Carry them anyway. Carry them, knowing that the carrying will not save anything that the surrounding culture has been organized to save.

Carry them because the carrying is, at this hour of this species, the only thing left that has not been outsourced. The carrying is what you are. The carrying is what a human being is, finally, for. The carrying is, perhaps, all that distinguishes a lucid species from the strange efficient absence that would be the alternative — the absence of a creature that had everything except the small, stubborn, untransferable fact of being there to notice it.

Notice it.

The eye is open. The eye is yours. The eye does not look away.

That is the whole book.