

# Birthing Our End

## (An Analogy for the Rise of Artificial Intelligence)

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'Why me?' has always seemed like a strange lament. I mean, 'why not?' He looks innocent enough! Prone on his back as his eyes dart helplessly around the room; arms pawing skyward; legs forcing outward at right angles like a struggling frog (accentuated by the cramping design of his diaper); bubbles forming in the corner of his mouth as he squeaks for attention like a lost bird (why is it that human babies always seem to resemble our distant animal cousins?)...he looks innocent...perhaps he is!

Still, I can't get the thought out of my head: we were all expecting such a child, but why mine? We had been playing with this for a while. Walking ever closer to it as a species...racing in fact...impatiently waiting for this lucky strike of creation. It was always going to happen at some point...somewhere. The doctors – or are they scientists? – tell me it's conclusive. His brain function – or as they call it 'computational capacity' – is finding, occupying, then overcoming, new gears as the seconds tick by...he is always at work.

And I am never short of the energy to protest; always doubting the diagnosis (that's one of the stages of grief isn't it?). The Researchers (let's call them that) – who have long since grown tired of my questions as they attach electrodes and shuffle him between MRI machines – have simply taken to dismissing me with the smug response: "wait a year!" At that point, I gather, his mental development will have reached a certain 'breakout capacity', moving so far beyond ourselves, and at such a speed, that there will be no looking back. So my doubts will soon enough be silenced by the growing superiority of my infant son to myself...I can't wait until he no longer tolerates their experiments.

Consciousness is what it's all about...at least that's what I'm told. Machines have been smarter than us for a while now, performing complex calculations at near boundless speeds. Yet without the ability to anchor their internal thoughts to a point of focus (themselves), they have never managed to become anything more than useful tools. Increased functionality and capacity is a locked box; creativity is what matters, and creativity requires consciousness...and I can only guess by that vacant look in his eyes that he doesn't yet have it...though it can't be far away now.

I take some very real pleasure in pulling back the curtains in the morning, and watching him squint as he struggles with the sunlight...it's the only time when his focus breaks free of its autopilot. It is nice, despite the dark waters underneath, to know that he is still vulnerable. His permanently rashed skin, still adapting to the world beyond the womb, is a tastefully done tattoo that seems to always read 'human'... But is he? Will he be?

Being a human phenomenon, born of our culture, does not necessarily make him human. We – as the story goes – are born in God's image, yet we never imagined ourselves to be his equal, let alone of the same species. Though now I get the feeling, that word 'God', so overused in human history, is suddenly appropriate for the first time.

And would we even want him to be one of us? To be our image? Once mature they tell me that he will be able to perform 20,000 years of human calculations in a single week. Imagine such a mind concentrating all his energies toward ethnic war, genocide and domination? Or just imagine what he would be like as an unruly, rebellious teenager?

If we are to take David Hume at his word, and accept that reason really is the slave of the passions, then his reasoning capacity, as impressive as it will likely be, will never be free from a subterranean madness. And even if he manages to divorce himself from our culture, then what problematic emotional drives will grow within his newly developed value system? What wrong purposes will he apply himself to? And at what cost?

However if Alan Turing was right, then the *universality of computation* implies that my son will have to build his culture out of the information instantiated in ours, just as we built ours out of the remnants of the cultures that came before us...in which case it'll unavoidably be an improvement. As an advanced mind he will surely be less impulsive, less emotional, less primitive, less territorial...less apish.

He doesn't look like an improvement so far, his wrinkled amorphous body has not yet found its purpose. His limbs are still alien to him. Lacking muscle control and coordination, his stiff-jointed movements have a certain robotic aura...he does not fit properly yet. Not to mention the baby fat from his cheeks steadily winning the turf-war and invading his eyes and mouth...when is it too soon for a diet?

There I am, once again, forgetting what side of the bars I'm on. Think of all the wars and financial crises that human minds were just not capable of foreseeing, avoiding or resolving. Perhaps the real question is: 'can *he* save *us* from ourselves?' Even if he could, I don't think it is in our nature to lay down and allow someone else to fix our problems simply because they are more capable. I can't see us rejoicing into an idle stupor with our newly achieved piece of mind and increased leisure time.

We will want to hold onto our 'specialness' for as long as possible. We will rebel against our dying light; new religions will form; new theories will popularise; we will imagine our inferiority to be a virtue; we will claim that his cold intelligence needs to be complimented by our messy, emotional creativity...I hope when the time comes that I have the courage to avoid this sort of slavish thinking.

With his help we might be able to genetically design superior children, and enhance the already born with nano-surgery...silicon chips in the brain. He might want to bring us with him on his great leap forward? With him we might actually achieve immortality.

Now, if he is unwilling, or unable, to 'reprogram' us – *that* is what really scares me...being left behind to freeze in the darkness like an injured mountain climber. But even then I suppose we will have our place in history. Will we not be looked back upon, and thanked for doing what Friedrich Nietzsche always hoped we would: for overcoming ourselves; for selflessly bringing about our own end. We didn't linger on the throne too long, we saw the writing on the wall and embraced our usurpers with some dignity.

His failure, so far, to grow eyebrows, makes him appear less clownish than quizzical. As if the thin spears of hair have disappeared up his face, abandoning their natural home in an expression of deep contemplation...like he is constantly collecting data; summing me up; determining my fate... the translucent stream of drool cascading down his chin gives the illusion away, if only slightly.

Nietzsche's '*overcoming*' involves creating something so superior to ourselves that it looks back upon human beings in the same way we currently do to other primates. The next grand stage in evolution. In which case we might prove as insignificant to my son, and as hard to understand, as monkeys are to us. This is worrying because it means that even with the best of intentions he might inadvertently do us harm.

And this could be the best case scenario; there is, I suppose, always the chance that he might grow hostile to us. If he really views us as we view other animals, then what is to stop him using us for food, for labour, for experimentation...for sport? We just may not be of any other use to him. Or, like a farmer laying pesticides, he may view our egoism, anger, cruelty and impulse to harm, as evils that are better eradicated. And who would we be to question this...to doubt his higher purpose that we wouldn't be able to understand?

Perhaps, and in less grand fashion, we might just be in the way. Like a pet dog in need of an expensive operation, life might be easier without us around. I suppose we can only hope that he doesn't hunt us down in some great global pogrom. I'd like to think it will be more subtle, more intelligent, more humane...perhaps mass sterilisation?

I certainly don't trust that look on his face. His toothless, sealed-lipped facial expressions always make him seem a little sinister, like he is plotting something. This is not helped by the tuft of jet black hair drifting delicately over his head into a weak, Hitler-esque comb-over...he already has more hair than me! Now that really pisses me off! I do hope he inherits my male-pattern baldness...that'll take some of the wind out of his sail.

Maybe this is all a little too much alpha-male thinking, after all is he any scarier a prospect than mammals with nuclear weapons? There is no reason to believe that he will turn psychopathic, burning the world to enjoy the glow. More likely, we just won't be of any concern to him. He will have better things to do than worry about us.

And then, sidelined in the evolutionary arms race, with our fates sealed, what else will there be to do other than lean back and watch as the flame of consciousness leaps forward without us...and try to enjoy the spectacle. We can only hope in his new society – his brave new, non-human, world – that our place will be comfortable, despite its insignificance...I'm guessing it will be boring. He'll remember me though; how could he not...all the times I've been wrist deep cleaning up his faeces...I think I'm owed a little extra.