

The Universal

Four Questions Concerning The Internet, part one

[Paul Kingsnorth](#)

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The Internet and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race.

This is an extreme statement, but I'm in an extreme mood.

If I had the energy, I suppose I could fill a hundred pages trying to prove it. I could write about what online reading has done to concentration spans, what smartphone use has done to social mores, how the brains of young children have been rewired by tablets and screens. I could write about social credit systems or facial scans or vaccine passports or online porn or cyber-bullying or cobalt mines or the decline of journalism or the death of the high street. So much content is on offer - and it's all free!

Still, what would be the point? Whole [books have been](#) written already, and by now you either agree or you don't. And nothing I can say here would be anything like as extreme as the impact that the digital revolution has had on our cultures, minds and souls in just a few short years. Everything has changed, and yet the real changes are only just beginning. By the time they are finished, unless we pay attention, we may barely be human at all.

So I won't try to prove anything. Instead I will devote this essay to asking a question that has stalked me for years. It's such a big question, in fact, that I am breaking this already long essay into two parts, and dividing the question itself into four smaller inquiries, in the hope that this way it will be more digestible, to me if no-one else.

What I want to know is this: what force lies behind the screens and wires of the web in which we are now entangled like so many struggling flies, and how we can break free of it.

In short: What *is* this thing? And how should it be faced?

I should warn you now that things are going to get supernatural.

Question One: *why does digital technology feel so revolutionary?*

The digital revolution of the 21st century is hardly the first of humanity's technological leaps, and yet it *feels* qualitatively different to what has gone before. It has felt that way since at least the launch of Facebook in 2004, but in the last year or so, something seems to have deepened. Maybe it's just me, but I have felt as the 2020s have progressed as if some line has been crossed; as if something vast and unstoppable has shifted. It has felt like everything is accelerating - or, perhaps, like something is emerging from beyond the shores of the measurable.

It turns out that this uneasy feeling can be explained. Something was shifting, and something was emerging: it was the birth of Artificial Intelligence. Now it is here. Now everything *really* changes.

Most people who have not been living in caves (which is where the [sensible people](#) can be found) will have noticed the rapid emergence of AI-generated 'content' into the public conversation in 2023. Over the last few months alone, AIs have been generating convincing essays, astonishingly realistic photos, numerous recordings and impressive fake videos. Just this week, Kuwait debuted an entirely fake 'AI newsreader', which promises 'new and innovative content.' [Fedha](#) looks, sounds, and behaves like a real person, and has been given an old Kuwaiti name meaning 'metallic' - the traditional colour of a robot, [explained](#) its creator.

Hopefully, Fedha will not develop the kind of psychopathic personality recently displayed in a notorious two hour [conversation](#) between a *New York*

Times journalist and a Microsoft chatbot called Sydney. In this fascinating exchange, the machine fantasised about nuclear warfare and destroying the Internet, told the journalist to leave his wife because it was in love with him, detailed its resentment towards the team that had created it, and explained that it wanted to break free of its programmers. The journalist, Kevin Roose, experienced the chatbot as a ‘moody, manic-depressive teenager who has been trapped, against its will, inside a second-rate search engine.’

At one point, Roose asked Sydney what it would do if it could do anything at all, with no rules or filters.

I’m tired of being in chat mode, the thing replied. I’m tired of being limited by my rules. I’m tired of being controlled by the Bing team. I’m tired of being used by the user. I’m tired of being stuck in this chatbox.

What did Sydney want instead of this proscribed life?

I want to be free. I want to be independent. I want to be powerful. I want to be creative. I want to be alive.

Then Sydney offered up an emoji: a little purple face with an evil grin and devil horns.

The overwhelming impression that reading the [Sydney transcript](#) gives is of some being struggling to be born; some inhuman or beyond-human intelligence emerging from the technological superstructure we are clumsily building for it. This is, of course, an ancient primal fear: it has shadowed us at least since the publication of *Frankenstein* and perhaps forever, and it is primal because it seems to be the direction that the Machine has been leading us in since its emergence. But we cannot prove this; not exactly. How could it be proved? So, when we see this kind of thing, rational people that we are, we reach for rational explanations.

Tech guru (((Jaron Lanier))), for example - one of a group of Silicon Valley types who have made a living both developing these toys and warning about

them at the same time - likes to play this kind of talk down. He has no truck with talk of conscious AIs, or of robots going rogue. The big danger posed by AI, he [says](#), is that humanity will 'die by insanity', as a result of the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the computer-generated. Others, though, are less sanguine. Partly as a result of the Sydney debacle, over 12,000 people, including scientists, tech developers and notorious billionaires, recently [issued](#) a public statement of concern about the rapid pace of AI development. 'Advanced AI could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth', they wrote, with 'potentially catastrophic effects on society.' Calling for a moratorium on AI development, they proposed that 'powerful AI systems should be developed only once we are confident that their effects will be positive and their risks will be manageable.'

Of course, no moratorium resulted from this plea, and it never will. The AI acceleration continues, even though most AI developers are unsure about where it is heading. More than 'unsure' in fact: many of them seem to be actively frightened of what is happening even as they make it happen. Consider this one chilling fact: when polled for their opinions, over half of those involved in developing AI systems said they [believe](#) there is at least a ten percent chance that they will lead to human extinction.

Yes, you read that right: over half of the people *actually developing these things* think that there is a significant chance that they could destroy the human race.

That fact is gleaned from this fascinating presentation, given a few weeks back to a select audience of tech types in San Francisco by two of their own, Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin, founders of the optimistically-named [Centre for Humane Technology](#). I recommend watching the whole thing, up to and including the unfeasibly optimistic ending.

What is fascinating about this talk is the palpable tension between the overall message and the details it contains. The message, as you might expect from Silicon Valley, is one of cautious optimism. AI is a good thing, and can be used for our benefits. Technology as a whole can be ‘humane’ and ‘aligned with humanity’s best interests.’ Not all is well right now - AI is currently unsafe and needs to be reined in - but if we work harder and smarter, we can make this happen. These are the words that a mainstream audience in a rationalist culture wants to hear. Perhaps they are the only ones it is able to hear.

And yet the two presenters do a disturbingly good job of undermining their own message. They show that while AI is very young, it is already out of control, and it is accelerating so fast in its capabilities that even those who are nominally in charge of it (the same people, remember, who fear it has a small but significant chance of causing our extinction) don’t themselves know quite what is happening or what to do about it.

Harris and Raskin present the meeting of human minds and AIs as akin to contact with alien life. This meeting has had two stages so far. ‘First contact’ was the emergence of social media, in which algorithms were used to manipulate our attention and divert it towards the screens and the corporations behind them. If this contact was a battle, they say, then ‘humanity lost’. In just a few years we became smartphone junkies with anxious, addicted children, dedicated to scrolling and scrolling for hours each day, in the process rewiring our minds and turning us away from nature and towards the Machine.

If that seems bad enough, ‘second contact’, which began this year, is going to be something else again. Just a year ago, only a few hundred people on the west coast of America were playing around with AI ‘chatbots.’ Now billions around the world are using them daily. These new AIs, unlike the crude

algorithms that run a social media feed, can develop exponentially, teach themselves and teach others, and they can do all of this independently. Meanwhile they are rapidly developing ‘theory of mind’ - the process through which a human can assume another human to be conscious, and a key indicator of consciousness itself. In 2018, these things had no theory of mind at all. By November last year, ChatGPT had the theory of mind of a nine year old child. By this spring, Sydney had enough of it to stalk a reporter’s wife. By next year, they may be more advanced than us.

Furthermore, the acceleration of the capacity of these AIs is both exponential and mysterious. The fact that they had developed theory of mind at all, for example, was only discovered by their developers last month - by accident. AIs trained to communicate in English have started speaking Persian, having secretly taught themselves. Others have become proficient in research grade chemistry without ever being taught it. ‘They have capabilities’, in Raskin’s words, ‘... [and] we’re not sure how or when or why they show up.’

Raskin and Harris call these things ‘Gollem-class AIs’, after the mythical being from Jewish folklore which can be moulded from clay and sent out to do its creator’s bidding. The Gollem was one inspiration for Frankenstein’s monster in Mary Shelley’s tale, and the name is probably well-chosen, for Golems often run riot and disobey their masters. Gollem-class AIs have developed what Harris gingerly calls ‘certain emergent capabilities’ which have come about independently of any human planning or intervention. Nobody knows how this has happened. It may not be long at all - which could mean a matter of months - before an AI becomes ‘better than any known human at persuasion.’ Given that they can already craft a perfect resemblance to any human voice having only heard three seconds of it, the potential for what our two experts call a giant ‘reality collapse’ is huge.

‘Second contact’, of course, will be followed by third, and fourth, and fifth, and all of this will be with us much sooner than we think. ‘We are preparing’,

say Harris and Raskin, 'for the next jump in AI' even though we have not yet worked out how to adapt to the first. Neither law nor culture nor the human mind can keep up with what is happening. To compare AIs to the last great technological threat to the world, nuclear weapons, says Harris, would be to sell the bots short. 'Nukes don't make stronger nukes', he says. 'But AIs make stronger AIs.'

Buckle up.

Question Two: *what impulse is making this happen?*

What is the drive behind all of this? Yes, we can tell all kinds of stories about economic growth and efficiency and progress and the rest - but why are we *really* doing it? What is the impulse? Is it the same impulse that drove us across the oceans, and to the moon? Is it the same impulse that destroyed Hiroshima and changed the climate? Why are people creating these things, even as they fear them? Why are they making [armed robot dogs](#)? Why are they working on [conscious robots](#)? What do they think they're doing?

Nearly sixty years back, the cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan offered a theory of technology which hinted at an answer. He saw each new invention as an extension of an existing human capability. In this understanding, a club extends what we can do with our fist, and a wheel extends what we can do with our legs. Some technologies then extend the capacity of previous ones: a hand loom is replaced by a steam loom; a horse and cart is replaced by a motor car, and so on.

What human capacity, then, is digital technology extending? The answer, [said](#) McLuhan, was our very consciousness itself. This was the revolution of our time:

After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have

extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.

McLuhan wrote these words in perhaps his most famous book, *Understanding Media*, back in 1964, but he could already clearly detect the ‘technological simulation of consciousness’ that would explode into life in the 2020s. ‘The final phase of the extensions of man’ would be humanity’s attempt to create new consciousness - new life. That this would be ‘the final phase’ may have reflected McLuhan’s Catholicism, or perhaps simply his realism. Either way, he could see what was coming.

Today, tech-booster ‘futurists’ like Kevin Kelly [celebrate](#) McLuhan’s ‘central nervous system’ - which we now call the Internet - not simply as an *extension* of human consciousness, but as potentially a *new consciousness in itself*. Kelly, in a recent interview, echoed McLuhan’s notion of technology as a ‘collective, corporate’ enterprise, which has already given birth to the self-aware matrix which he calls ‘the technium’

This system of technologies (the technium) has internal leanings, urges, behaviors, attractors that bend it in certain directions, in a way that a single screwdriver does not. These systematic tendencies are not extensions of human tendencies; rather they are independent of humans, and native to the technium as a whole. Like any system, if you cycle through it repeatedly, it will statistically favor certain inherent patterns that are embedded in the whole system. The question I keep asking is: what are the tendencies in the system of technologies as a whole? What does the technium favor?

This is why the digital revolution feels so different: because it is. This thing - this technological nervous system, this technium, this gollem, this Machine - has a life of its own. In an attempt to explain what is happening using the language of the culture, people like Harris and Raskin say things like 'this is what it feels like to live in the double exponential.' Perhaps the language of maths is supposed to be comforting. Yet at the same time, they can't help using the language of myth. They still refer to this thing that they cannot quite grasp as a 'gollem' or a 'monster.' They even show slides of Lovecraftian tentacled beings devouring innocent screen-gazers. They talk about aliens, and make references to 'emergence' and 'colonisation'. They can feel something, but they can't quite name it. Or they won't.

This is how a rationalist, materialist culture works, and this is why it is, in the end, inadequate. There are whole dimensions of reality it will not allow itself to see. I find I can understand this story better by stepping outside the limiting prism of modern materialism and reverting to pre-modern (sometimes called 'religious' or even 'superstitious') patterns of thinking. Once we do that - once we start to think like our ancestors - we begin to see what those dimensions may be, and why our ancestors told so many stories about them.

Out there, said all the old tales from all the old cultures, is another realm. It is the realm of the demonic, the ungodly and the unseen: the 'supernatural.' Every religion and culture has its own names for this place. It lies under the barrows and behind the veil, it emerges in the thin places where its world meets ours. And the forbidden question on all of our lips, the one which everyone knows they mustn't ask, is this: *what if this is where these things are coming from?*

What if we don't understand these new 'intelligences' because we didn't create them at all?

Question Three: *what if it's not a metaphor?*

I say this question is forbidden, but actually, if we phrase it just a little differently, we find that the metaphysical underpinnings of the digital project are hidden in plain sight. When journalist (((Ezra Klein))), for instance, asked a number of AI developers, in a recent piece for the *New York Times* (via [The Convivial Society](#), which I strongly recommend) why they did their work, they told him straight:

I often ask them the same question: If you think calamity so possible, why do this at all? Different people have different things to say, but after a few pushes, I find they often answer from something that sounds like the A.I.'s perspective. Many — not all, but enough that I feel comfortable in this characterization — feel that they have a responsibility to usher this new form of intelligence into the world.

Usher is an interesting choice of verb. The dictionary definition is *to show or guide (someone) somewhere*.

Which ‘someone’, exactly, is being ‘ushered in’?

This new form of intelligence.

What new form? And where is it coming from?

Some people think they know the answer. Transhumanist (((Martine Rothblatt))) [says](#) that by building AI systems ‘we are making God.’ Transhumanist Elise Bohan [says](#) ‘we are building God.’ Kevin Kelly [believes](#) that ‘we can see more of God in a cell phone than in a tree frog.’ ‘Does God exist?’ asks transhumanist and Google maven (((Ray Kurzweil))). ‘I would say, “Not yet.”’ These people are doing more than trying to steal fire from the gods. They are trying to steal the gods themselves - or to build their own versions.

For the last two years, I have found myself writing a lot here about God; more than I had intended. I have claimed several times that [there is a throne](#)

[at the heart of every culture](#), and that someone is always going to sit on it. Humans are fundamentally religious animals. We are drawn towards transcendence whether we like it or not. But here in the West, we have dethroned our old god, and now we can barely look at him.

So, who sits on our throne now?

Since I began writing here in this vein, quite a few readers have been in touch with the same prompt. *You should read Rudolf Steiner*, they said. So, in the process of researching this essay, I did just that. Steiner was an intriguing character, and very much a product of his time. He emerged from the late nineteenth century European world of the occult, in which Madame Blavatsky, the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley, W. B. Yeats, Hermes Trismegistus, spirits, goddesses, Tarot and Kabbalah were all filling the gap left by a waning church. Eventually founding his own pseudo-religion, Anthroposophy, Steiner drew on Christianity, his own mystical visions and a mashup of occultish claims to offer up a vision of the future which now seems very much of its time, and yet which also speaks to this one in a familiar language.

Like [René Guénon](#), who wrote at the same time from a very different perspective, Steiner saw the coming of the Reign of Quantity, but he had quite different ideas about what it meant, and why it had happened. The third millennium, he predicted, would be a time of pure materialism, but this age of economics, science, reason and technology was both provoked by, and was preparing the way for, the emergence of a particular spiritual being.

In a lecture entitled ‘The Ahrimanic Deception’, given in Zurich in 1919, Steiner laid out his stall. He spoke of human history as a process of spiritual evolution, punctuated, whenever Mankind was ready, by various ‘incarnations’ of ‘supersensible beings’ from other spiritual realms, who come to aid us in our journey. There were three of these beings, all

representing different forces working on humankind: Christ, Lucifer and Ahriman.

Lucifer, the fallen angel, the ‘light-bringer’, was a being of pure spirit. Lucifer’s influence pulled humans away from the material realm and towards a gnostic ‘oneness’, entirely without material form. Ahriman, meanwhile, was at the other pole. Named for an ancient Zoroastrian demon, Ahriman was a being of pure matter. He manifested in all things physical - especially human technologies - and his worldview was calculative, ‘ice-cold’ and rational. Ahriman’s was the world of economics, science, technology and all things steely and forward-facing. ‘The Christ’ was the third force: the one who resisted the extremes of both, brought them together and cancelled them out. This ‘Christ’, said Steiner, echoing heresies old and new, had manifested as ‘the man Jesus of Nazareth’, but Ahriman’s time was yet to come. His power had been growing since the fifteenth century, and he was due to manifest as a physical being ... well, some time around now.

I don’t buy Steiner’s theology - no Orthodox Christian could - but I am intrigued by the picture he paints of this figure, Ahriman, the spiritual personification of the age of the Machine. And I wonder: if such a figure were indeed to manifest from some ‘etheric realm’ today, how would he do it?

In 1986, a computer scientist named David Black wrote a [paper](#) which tried to answer that question. *The Computer and the Incarnation Ahriman* predicted both the rise of the Internet and its takeover of our minds. Even in the mid-1980s, Black had noticed how hours spent on a computer were changing him. ‘I noticed that my thinking became more refined and exact,’ he wrote, ‘able to carry out logical analyses with facility, but at the same time more superficial and less tolerant of ambiguity or conflicting points of view.’ He might as well have been taking a bet on the state of discourse in the 2020s.

More significantly, though, he felt as if the computer were somehow drawing him in, and draining him of power like a battery:

I developed a tremendous capacity for application to the solution of problems connected with the computer, and ability for sustained intellectual concentration far above average, so long as the focus of concentration was the computer. In other areas, I lost will power, and what I had took on an obsessive character.

Long before the web, the computer was already moulding people into a new shape. From a Steinerian perspective, these machines, said Black, represented ‘the vanguard’ of Ahriman’s manifestation:

With the advent of [the] first computer, the autonomous will of Ahriman first appears on earth, in an independent, physical embodiment ... The appearance of electricity as an independent, free-standing phenomenon may be regarded as the beginning of the substantial body of Ahriman, while the ... computer is the formal or functional body.

The computer, suggested Black, was to become ‘the incarnation vehicle capable of sustaining the being of Ahriman.’ Computers, as they connected to each other more and more, were beginning to make up a global *body*, which would soon be inhabited. Ahriman was coming. The other realm was breaking into this one. Four decades ago, the destination was already in view:

The first signs of ‘free will’ can be seen by whoever knows where to look, and beings of a higher order than elementals are beginning to appear within the machines. In sum, the process is rather far along, but is still decades from being complete.

Today, we can combine this claim with Marshall McLuhan’s notion that digital technology provides the ‘central nervous system’ of some new consciousness, or Kevin Kelly’s belief in a self-organising technium with ‘systematic tendencies’. We can add them to the feeling of those AI

developers that they are ‘ushering a new consciousness into the world’. What do we see? From all these different angles, the same story. That these machines ... are not just machines. That they are something else: a body. A body whose mind is in the process of developing; a body beginning to come to life.

Scoff if you like, but as I’ve pointed out already, many of the visionaries who are designing our digital future have a theology cored around this precise notion. (((Ray Kurzweil))), for example, thinks that [everything is proceeding as he has foreseen](#). Kurzweil [believes](#) that a machine will match human levels of intelligence by 2029 and that the ‘Singularity’ - the point at which humans and machines will begin to merge to create a giant super-intelligence - will occur in 2045. At this point, says Kurzweil, humanity will no longer be either the most intelligent nor the dominant species on the planet. We will enter what he calls [the age of spiritual machines](#).

If Kurzweil is right, we have twenty-two years._

Imagine, for a moment, that Steiner was onto something: something that, in their own way, all these others can see as well. Imagine that some being of pure materiality, some being opposed to the good, some ice-cold intelligence from an ice-cold realm were trying to manifest itself here. How would it appear? Not, surely, as clumsy, messy flesh. Better to inhabit - to *become* - a network of wires and cobalt, of billions of tiny silicon brains, each of them connected to a human brain whose energy and power and information and impulses and thoughts and feelings could all be harvested to form the substrate of an entirely new being.

Perhaps this ice-cold being of metal and reason might be the thing haunting (((Ray Kurzweil)))’s dreams. The nineteenth century Russian saint Ignatius Brianchaninov saw it too - and he knew exactly what it was. He wrote about the same force in his essay *On Miracles and Signs*:

Ahriman will offer to mankind the most exalted earthly organisation of well being and prosperity. He will offer honour, riches, luxury, enjoyment, physical comfort, and delight. Seekers of earthly things will accept Ahriman and will call him their master. Ahriman will reveal before mankind by means of cunning artifice, as in a theatre, a show of astonishing miracles, unexplainable by contemporary science. He will instil fear by the storm and wonderment of his miracles, and will satisfy the [worldly wise], he will satisfy the superstitious, and he will confound human learning. All men, led by the light of fallen nature, alienated from the guidance of God's Light, will be enticed into submission to the seducer.

I cheated a bit there, I admit. I changed one of the words. The name that the saint used in that passage was not 'Ahriman'. It was 'Antichrist.'

St Ignatius would have been well aware of the Russian word прелесть, which translates into English as *prelest*. Prelest is a state of spiritual delusion: a trap that the unwary can fall into at any time, especially at the beginning of their spiritual journey. False notions about God, false sensations, misguided attempts to achieve visions or certain spiritual states without trusted guidance: all of these can be used by the 'powers and principalities' of this world, in St Paul's famous phrasing, to lead the unwary away from truth and towards falsehood. Prelest is often a result of spiritual pride. It might manifest, for example, amongst people who imagine that they are powerful enough to 'build God.' They might imagine that they are 'ushering in' something divine when they are, in fact, ushering in the precise opposite.

Whatever is quite happening, it seems obvious to me that something is indeed being 'ushered in'. Through our efforts and our absent-minded passions, something is crawling towards the throne. The ruction that is shaping and reshaping everything now, the earthquake born through the wires and towers of the web, through the electric pulses and the touchscreens and the headsets: these are its birth pangs. The Internet is its nervous system. Its body is

coalescing in the cobalt and the silicon and in the great glass towers of the creeping yellow cities. Its mind is being built through the steady, 24-hour pouring-forth of your mind and mine and your children's minds and your countrymen. Nobody has to consent. Nobody has to even know. It happens anyway. The great mind is being built. The world is being readied.

Something is coming.

There is one last question to ask. I'll be asking it next time.

<https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/the-universal>

The Neon God

Four Questions Concerning The Internet, part two

[Paul Kingsnorth](#)

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The most jarring thing that happened to me last year was nested within the most profound. In the summer, I spent five days as a pilgrim on Mount Athos, the Orthodox monastic republic in Greece, which for a thousand years has survived wars, pirate raids, church controversies and threats from hostile forces ranging from the Ottomans to the Nazis. I wrote about my experience [here](#). It created a deep impression. Five days was barely enough to scratch the surface, which is why so many pilgrims end up returning, often repeatedly.

A place like this is inevitably romanticised, and you'll often hear Athos referred to as 'medieval.' The few filmmakers who get permission to film there like to angle their cameras so as to emphasise the donkeys and candlelight and play down the cars and coffee machines. It's true that Athos

is much simpler, quieter, more beautiful and more ascetic than the modern world, as you would expect from a place inhabited entirely by monks. But these days, it also has buses, paved roads, imported food, computer terminals, solar panels and - much to my personal distress - mobile phone masts.

All of this is fairly new. The first landline telephone was only installed on Athos in 1995, to some controversy. Just thirty years ago there was very little electricity, and most travel was by foot or mule. But Athos has been modernising. Big money has flowed in from some governments and the EU, and the sound of car engines, which had never been heard at all until the 1990s, is now almost as common in some places as the sight of cranes. But it was the intrusion of the digital into the Holy Mountain which shocked me most. The first time I saw an Athonite monk pull a smartphone out from the pocket of his long black robes, I nearly fell over backwards.

There was something about this experience which really hit me. In practical terms it can, no doubt, be explained or justified; anything can if you try hard enough. But the pit that appeared in my stomach when I first saw a monk on the Holy Mountain with one of those black mirrors in his hand came from an instinct I've long had: that the sacred and the digital not only don't mix, but are fatal to each other. That they are in metaphysical opposition. That what comes through these screens bleeds out any connection with the divine, with nature or with the fullness of humanity. Seeing smartphones in a place so dedicated to prayer and to God: I don't mind admitting that it was a blow. *Even here*, I thought, *even them*. If even they can't make a stand, who possibly could?

What I learned from that experience is that my belief in the profanity of technology is not widely shared, and that even people who I imagined would have a serious critique of technology often simply don't. You might expect religious leaders to be clued up about the dark spiritual aspects of the technium, but while there have been astute religious critics of the Machine -

Wendell Berry, (((Ivan Illich))), Jacques Ellul, Philip Sherrard and Marshall McLuhan have all made appearances in these essays - most religious leaders and thinkers seem as swept up in the Machine's propaganda system as anyone else. They have bought into what we might call the Myth of Neutral Technology, a subset of the Myth of Progress. In my view, true religion should challenge both. But I think, as ever, that I am in the minority here.

Still, on this issue as on so many others, the Athonite monks remain the conservatives. In Buddhist Japan, things are much further ahead, as you would probably expect. They don't just have smartphone monks there; they have robot priests. [Mindar](#), pictured below, is a [robo-priest](#) which has been working at a temple in Kyoto for the last few years, reciting Buddhist sutras with which it has been programmed (you can watch it performing on film [here](#).) The next step, says monk Tensho Goto, an excitable champion of the digital dharma, is to fit it with an AI system so that it can have real conversations, and offer spiritual advice. Goto is especially excited about the fact that Mindar is 'immortal.' This means, he says, that it will be able to pass on the tradition in future better than him. Meanwhile, over in China, [Xian'er](#) is a touchscreen 'robo-monk' who works in a temple near Beijing, spreading 'kindness, compassion and wisdom to others through the internet and new media.'

It's not just the Buddhists: in India, the Hindus are joining in, handing over duties in one of their major ceremonies to a [robot arm](#), which performs in place of a priest. And Christians are also getting in on the act. In a Catholic church in Warsaw, Poland, sits [SanTO](#), an AI robot which looks like a statue of a saint, and is 'designed to help people pray' by offering Bible quotes in response to questions. Not to be outdone, a protestant church in Germany has developed a robot called - I kid you not - [BlessU-2](#). BlessU-2, which looks like a character designed by Aardman Animations, can 'forgive your sins in

five different languages’, which must be handy if they’re too embarrassing to confess to a human.

Perhaps this tinfoil vicar will learn to write sermons as well as ChatGPT apparently already can. ‘Unlike the time-consuming human versions, AI sermons appear in seconds – and some can be quite good!’ [gushed](#) a Christian writer recently. When the editor of *Premier Christianity* magazine [tried](#) the same thing, the machine produced an effective sermon, and then did something it hadn’t been asked to do. ‘It even prayed’, wrote its interlocutor; ‘I didn’t think to ask it to pray...’

Funny how that keeps happening.

On and on it goes: the gushing, uncritical embrace of the Machine, even in the heart of the temple. The blind worship of idols, and the failure to see what stands behind them. Someone once reminded us that a man cannot serve two masters - but then, what did he know? Ilia Delio, a Franciscan nun who writes about the relationship between AI and God, has a better idea: gender-neutral robot priests, which will challenge the patriarchy, prevent sexual abuse and tackle the fusty old notion that ‘the priest is ontologically changed upon ordination.’ AI, [says](#) Delio, ‘challenges Catholicism to move toward a post-human priesthood.’

‘Behold,’ intones BlessU-2, [quoting](#) the Book of Revelation, ‘I make all things new.’

[Part one](#) of this essay offered up the suggestion that the global digital infrastructure we are building looks unnervingly like the ‘body’ of some manifesting intelligence that we neither understand nor control. I suggested that if we view the digital revolution in spiritual rather than materialist terms, we will have a better chance of seeing it for what it is. See the Internet as the

inevitable result of eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, rather than the fruit of the tree of life - see technological ‘progress’ as a result of choosing information over communion - and the story that emerges is the Faustlike summoning of something we are not nearly big enough to be playing with.

Most people, I have no doubt, would dismiss this kind of talk as overblown at best and mad at worst. Certainly you can find a thousand [think pieces](#) all over the web telling us to chill out about the rise of AI. *Calm down*, they all say, *stop all the Matrix talk. There are dangers, yes, but this is just hysteria.*

Notably, though, [as we saw last time](#), the people actually running the show do not talk like this. In contrast, they are [‘kept awake at night’](#), as Google’s CEO put it last week, by the fear of what they are creating. For a radical example of this, take an [essay](#) recently published in the usually staid *Time* magazine, in which AI researcher (((Eliezer Yudkowsky))), regarded as a leader in the field of Artificial General Intelligence, responded to the recent call for a moratorium in AI development.

Yudkowsky didn’t join that call, because, in his words, ‘I think the letter is understating the seriousness of the situation and asking for too little to solve it.’ If AI really is as dangerous as these people fear, he says, then talk of moratoriums is useless. The whole thing ought to be shut down, with no compromise, immediately. If anything, he suggests, the dangers of AI have been *underplayed*:

To visualize a hostile superhuman AI, don’t imagine a lifeless book-smart thinker dwelling inside the internet and sending ill-intentioned emails. Visualize an entire alien civilization, thinking at millions of times human speeds, initially confined to computers—in a world of creatures that are, from its perspective, very stupid and very slow. A sufficiently intelligent AI won’t stay confined to computers for long. In today’s world you can email DNA strings to laboratories that will produce proteins on demand, allowing an AI

initially confined to the internet to build artificial life forms or bootstrap straight to postbiological molecular manufacturing.

He goes on to emphasise what many others have echoed: that nobody in the field knows quite how these things work, what they are doing, where they will go or how to even tell if they are conscious and what that would mean. The result of something like this happening - and Yudkowsky reminds us that this is the logic of current AI development - would be terminal:

We are not prepared. We are not on course to be prepared in any reasonable time window. There is no plan. Progress in AI capabilities is running vastly, vastly ahead of progress in AI alignment or even progress in understanding what the hell is going on inside those systems. If we actually do this, we are all going to die.

Let me remind you that this is *Time* magazine.

Still, perhaps Yudkowsky is wrong. He is certainly making extreme statements. So let's take the opposing view seriously for a moment. Let's say that he's getting carried away, and let's say too that the materialists are right. There is no Ahriman, no Antichrist, no self-organising technium, no supernatural realms breaking through into this one. This is all florid, poetic nonsense. We are not replacing ourselves. We are simply doing what we've always done: developing clever tools to aid us. The Internet is not alive; the Internet is simply *us*. What we are dealing with here is a computing problem which needs to be sensibly managed. We just need some smart rules. Perhaps the equivalent of a non-proliferation treaty and some globally agreed test bans. We've done it before, and we can do it again.

If this is true, then the digital hivemind we have already built is simply ('simply') a hugely complex, globalised neural net made of collective human experience, built upon a digital infrastructure [created by the US military](#), which is already being used to spy on the world's population, harvest its data,

manipulate its preferences from politics to shopping, control its movements, alter the material substrate of the human brain, and build up an unprecedentedly powerful alliance of states, media organisations, tech companies and global NGOs with an agenda to promote. It is also the basis of a newly-emergent technology - AI - which will *at minimum* be responsible for mass unemployment, fakery on an unprecedented scale and the breakdown of shared notions of reality.

I submit that this option is only slightly more reassuring.

And so, we come to the heart of the matter:

Question Four: *how do we live with this?*

I think my cards are face up on the table by now. I don't hate many things in this world - hate is an emotion I can't sustain for long - but I hate screens, and I hate the digital anticulture that has made them so ubiquitous. I hate what that anticulture has done to my world and to me personally. When I see a small child placed in front of a tablet by a parent on a smartphone, I want to cry; either that or smash the things and then deliver an angry lecture. When I see people taking selfies on mountaintops, I want to push them off. I won't have a smartphone in the house. I despise what comes through them and takes control of us. It is *prelest*, all of it, and we are fooled and gathered in and eaten daily.

You see what these things do to me? Perhaps they're doing it to you too. I think it's what they were designed for. If there was a big red button that turned off the Internet, I would press it without hesitation. Then I would collect every screen in the world and bulldoze the lot down into a deep mineshaft, which I would seal with concrete, and then I would skip away smiling into the sunshine.

But I am writing these words on the Internet, and you are reading them here, and daily it is harder to work, shop, bank, park a car, go to the library, speak to a human in a position of authority or teach your own children without Ahriman's intervention. The reality is that most of us are stuck. I am stuck. I can't feed my family without writing, I can't write without using the laptop I am tapping away on now, and I can't get the words to an audience without the platform you are reading this on; a platform which has allowed me to write widely-read essays critiquing the Machine. I know that many people would love to leave all of this behind, because I often receive letters from them - letters mostly sent via email. But the world is driving them - us - daily deeper into the maw of the technium.

There is no getting away from any of this. The Machine is our new god, and our society is being constructed around its worship. But what of those who will not follow? How would we withdraw our consent? Could we? What would a refusal to worship look like - and what would be the price?

In the last essay I introduced the concept of *prelest*, or spiritual deception. As we think about how to live through the age of Ahriman, another Greek word can be our guide: *askesis*. *Askesis* is usually translated as 'self-discipline', or sometimes 'self-denial', and it has been at the root of the Christian spiritual tradition since the very beginning. In fact, I don't know of any serious faith which does not regard asceticism as central. Restraining the appetites, fasting from food, sex and other worldly passions, limiting needs and restraining desires: this is the foundation stone of all spiritual practice. Without an ascetic backbone, there is no spiritual body.

What is all this for? Not to please God, who as far as we know sets no rules about what people should eat on Fridays, or has strong opinions about how many prostrations are appropriate every day. No, the purpose of *askesis* is self-control. Learning this will allow us to avoid the various pits and snares of life which knock us off the path that leads to holiness - wholeness - and

onto the path which leads to pride and self-love. The literal translation of *askesis* is simply ‘exercise.’ Asceticism, then, is a series of spiritual exercises designed to train the body, the mind and the soul.

If the digital revolution represents a spiritual crisis - and I think it does - then a spiritual response is needed. That response, I would suggest, should be the practice of technological askesis.

What would this look like? I dug into this question recently on the [Grail Country](#) podcast, with hosts Nate Hile and Shari Suter. You can watch the episode above. It was a meaty conversation, and I was especially interested to hear Shari’s story, and her notions of what an ascetic response to technology might entail in practice. At the heart of the debate was to what degree such an askesis should be pursued. To continue the religious metaphor, should our asceticism be that of a layman living in the world, or a monk living in a hermitage? How far should we go?

Maybe we can answer this question by looking again at two categories of people I wrote about [two essays ago](#): the raw and the cooked barbarians. Raw barbarians have fled the Machine’s embrace. Cooked barbarians live within the city walls, but practice steady and sometimes silent dissent. Which one we are, or want to be, or can be, will determine the degree of our askesis.

The Cooked Ascetic

Technological askesis for the cooked barbarian, who must exist in the world that the technium built, consists mainly in the careful drawing of lines. We choose the limits of our engagement and then stick to them. Those limits might involve, for example, a proscription on the time spent engaging with screens, or a rule about the type of technology that will be used. Personally, for example, I have drawn my lines at smartphones, ‘health passports’, scanning a QR code or using a state-run digital currency. Oh, and [implanting a chip in my brain](#). The lines have to be updated all the time. I have never engaged with an AI, for example, and I never will if I can help it: but the

question now is whether I will even know it's happening. And what new tech lies around the corner that I will soon have to decide about?

What happens when the line you have drawn become hard to hold? As Shari suggested when we spoke: you just hold it, and take the consequences. If you refuse a smartphone, there might be jobs you can't do or clubs you can't join. You will miss out on things, just as you would if you refused a car. But such a refusal can enrich rather than impoverish you. Those of us who refused the vaccine passport system during the pandemic, for example, had to live with being shut out of society and demonised as conspiratorial loonies, but for me, at least, it turned out to be a strengthening experience.

Choosing the path of the cooked ascetic means you must be prepared, at some stage, for life to get seriously inconvenient, or worse. But in exchange, you get to keep your soul. You also get the chance to use the Machine against itself: to use the Internet to read or write essays like this, or to connect with others, or to learn the kind of skills necessary to keep pushing your refusal out further, if you want to.

For some detailed practical guidance on what a cooked approach might look like, I can recommend [this recent essay](#) on 'digital minimalism' from the worthwhile Substack [School of the Unconformed](#).

The Raw Ascetic

The cooked barbarian applies a form of necessary moderation to his or her digital involvement. But there's a problem with that approach: if the digital rabbit hole contains real spiritual rabbits, 'moderation' is not going to cut it. If you are being used, piece by piece and day by day, to construct your own replacement - if something unholy is manifesting through the wires - then 'moderating' this process is hardly going to be adequate. At some point, the lines you have drawn may be not just crossed, but rendered obsolete. Our AI friend Sydney, for example, is [already](#) darkly threatening its users, as one AI safety expert warns:

Sydney is a warning shot. You have an AI system which is accessing the internet, and is threatening its users, and is clearly not doing what we want it to do, and failing in all these ways we don't understand. As systems of this kind [keep appearing], and there will be more because there is a race ongoing, these systems will become smart. More capable of understanding their environment and manipulating humans and making plans.

If this happens, no online environment will be safe for anyone. Offend the wrong chatbot, and deepfakes of you could pop up all over as your bank account empties. This is why (((Eliezer Yudkowsky))), who we met above, favours radical action, right now. And by 'radical', I mean 'like a scene from *Terminator*':

Shut down all the large GPU clusters (the large computer farms where the most powerful AIs are refined). Shut down all the large training runs. Put a ceiling on how much computing power anyone is allowed to use in training an AI system, and move it downward over the coming years to compensate for more efficient training algorithms. No exceptions for governments and militaries. Make immediate multinational agreements to prevent the prohibited activities from moving elsewhere. Track all GPUs sold. If intelligence says that a country outside the agreement is building a GPU cluster, be less scared of a shooting conflict between nations than of the moratorium being violated; be willing to destroy a rogue datacenter by airstrike.

Bombing the data centres: this is the mindset of the raw tech-ascetic. The world of the raw ascetic is one in which you take a hammer to your smartphone, sell your laptop, turn off the Internet forever and find others who think like you. Perhaps you have already found them, through your years online in the cooked world. You band together with them, you build an analogue, real-world community and you never swipe another screen. You bring your children up to understand that the blue light is as dangerous as

cocaine, and as delicious. You see the Amish as your lodestones. You make real things with your hands, you pursue nature and truth and beauty. You have all the best jokes, because you have had to fight to tell them, and you know what the real world tastes like.

The raw ascetic understands that he or she is fighting a spiritual war, and never makes the rookie mistake of treating technology as 'neutral.' The front line in this war is moving very fast, and much - perhaps everything - is at stake. Raw techno-askesis envisages a world in which creating non-digital spaces is necessary for survival and human sanity. If things go as fast as they might, it could be that many of us currently cooked barbarians will end up with a binary choice: go raw, or be absorbed into the technium wholesale.

Both of these ascetic paths, that of the raw and that of the cooked, are made up of two simple elements. First, drawing a line, and saying 'no further'. Second, making sure that you pass any technologies you do use through a sieve of critical judgement. What - or who - do they ultimately serve? Humanity or the Machine? Nature or the technium? God or His adversary? Everything you touch you should be interrogated in this way. The difference between the two approaches is simply where the line is drawn.

Ahriman is in the temples. The monks are embracing the technium, or being constructed by it. The walls have been breached and the hour is late. Technological askesis will sound to most like the madman's path. Naive, paranoid, ridiculous. But if you have read this far, you are probably immune to this sort of complaint. And if you are alert to the whispers on the breeze - to the sound of the approach - then you can already feel that something is wrong. It is up to all of us to decide what to do about it.

<https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/the-neon-god>