AI as the New Plague:

When Mimicry Reveals What Makes Us Human

Harry Luo

ILS 400 Creative Paper

Introduction

Historical plagues transcended biology; they acted as societal accelerators that tore through norms, tested resilience, and compelled brutal adaptation or collapse. Their arrival was swift, their spread persistent, their demand for change absolute. Today, we can view the proliferation of Generative Artificial Intelligence through this stark lens – a modern contagion sweeping through our digital and cultural landscapes. Its influence initially spreads unseen within algorithms, then erupts into view across schools, workplaces, and creative spaces, upsetting established practices and raising uncomfortable questions. This paper contends that while the AI "plague" generates fundamental disruptions, its deepest challenge is existential. By capably mimicking human cognitive outputs, AI compels us to look beyond apparent abilities to locate our unique value. Effective adaptation necessitates an "inward turn"—a recognition and cultivation of intrinsic human qualities like consciousness, intentionality, lived experience, and the drive for meaning as the bedrock for human-AI co-evolution. This exploration analyzes AI through the plague framework, draws lessons from historical adaptations, and articulates a vision of redefined human purpose for an increasingly automated world.

Parallels in Disruption

Analyzing the appearance and ascent of generative AI via the historical plague metaphor reveals parallels in communal trajectory and impact. Like pathogens incubating in silence before causing widespread illness, AI development occurred largely within specialized research communities; tools like ChatGPT and Midjourney then burst into public awareness in late 2022. This event marked the transition from quiet escalation to rapid

diffusion. Suddenly, AI capabilities became accessible realities, quickly integrated into search engines, creative software, coding assistants, and numerous applications. This swift infiltration often outpaced cultural comprehension or regulatory foresight, much as the Antonine Plague overwhelmed Roman systems before its full nature was grasped, leaving even skilled physicians like Galen with limited descriptive power (Eliot, 2024, pp. 77-81).

This rapid spread immediately began exposing and exacerbating existing inequalities. Access to powerful AI models, the requisite hardware, and the skills for effective use (AI literacy) carve a new digital divide. Furthermore, AI systems trained on vast datasets laden with historical biases risk perpetuating, even amplifying, societal inequities in hiring, lending, and content generation. Concerns also escalate regarding disproportionate job displacement in sectors reliant on automatable tasks, potentially widening economic disparities absent equitable transitions. The contagion, in this manner, inflicts the heaviest burden on vulnerable populations.

Confronted by such a pervasive force, demands for collective action inevitably surface, akin to the public health mobilizations sparked by epidemics past. Nascent global attempts appear, from the EU AI Act's attempt at comprehensive regulation to international AI Safety Summits. Researchers, ethicists, and the public issue widespread calls for robust safety protocols, transparency requirements, and ethical guidelines. Achieving equilibrium between beneficial innovation and harm mitigation requires coordinated responses among governments, industry, and civil society – a complex undertaking reminiscent of organizing collective defenses against biological threats, complicated further by the difficulty in separating the plague's impact from other societal factors (Flemming, 2023, S300-S302).

Simultaneously, AI substantially reshapes behaviors and norms across core human activities. In education, easily generated text destabilizes traditional learning assessments while simultaneously offering novel pedagogical instruments. The workplace confronts automation anxiety alongside potentials for AI-human collaboration; new roles like prompt engineering emerge while familiar workflows alter. Creative fields experience disruption as AI generates art, music, and text, thereby blurring authorship lines, challenging originality concepts, and igniting debates over copyright and artistic merit. Even our information

ecosystem shifts, altered by AI-driven content personalization and the ominous potential of sophisticated deepfakes to erode shared reality.

Most critically, this technological contagion spurs cultural evolution through an existential challenge. By generating outputs previously considered exclusive hallmarks of human intelligence – sophisticated language, logical code, evocative art – AI, the "good parrot," directly confronts traditional definitions of human exceptionalism built upon these demonstrable abilities. When a machine convincingly replicates these outward markers of thought and creativity, we must question what truly distinguishes humanity. This capability extends beyond changing lifestyles and work patterns; it mandates a deeper inquiry into our value and purpose. Such inquiry paves the path for the necessary adaptation: the inward turn toward intrinsic human qualities.

Lessons from Historical Plagues

History demonstrates that devastating plagues, while tragic, often catalyze substantial societal adaptation, though the long-term consequences remain debated and complex (Cantor, 2015, Ch. 10). The Black Death in the 14th century, for example, demonstrably contributed to major labor realignments and accelerated the decline of serfdom as survivors gained new bargaining power (Cantor, 2015, Ch. 10). Similarly, the Antonine Plague in the 2nd century CE coincided with pervasive fear and an "age of angst," fostering the rise of charlatans selling false hope and contributing to the scapegoating of Christians, who were blamed for angering the gods (Eliot, 2024, pp. 122-129).

These historical precedents offer a clear lesson: progress seldom arises automatically from catastrophe. Instead, it emerges from deliberate, though often messy and contested, human responses—the innovations, the reorganized social systems, and, significantly, the shifts in understanding imposed by the crisis. Scholarship increasingly emphasizes this need to analyze human agency and response alongside the biological event itself (Flemming, 2023, S304-S306). The AI "plague" demands a comparable adaptive leap. Its disruption requires more than technical fixes or reactive policies; it necessitates a corresponding evolution in

societal frameworks and, centrally, in our conception of human value adjacent to non-biological intelligence.

Adaptation: Redefining Value in the AI Era

The AI "plague" induces unease, a philosophical vertigo stemming from its core capability: mimicry. As artificial intelligence, the "good parrot", crafts arguments, code, and art indistinguishable from human efforts, it forces a stark question: Are these outputs the ultimate measure of human worth? If machines can replicate what we do, where does our unique value reside? This challenge moves beyond industry disruption; it strikes at our self-concept, confronting us with the potential devaluation of human life if worth remains tethered solely to demonstrable abilities. Resisting requires navigating a difficult, perhaps painful, reorientation of what society prizes.

This reorientation compels us to look beyond performance toward qualities intrinsic to our existence. However, suggesting value lies in the unseen depths of consciousness, the unique signature of lived experience, the quiet force of intention, the complex reality of empathy, the burden of moral wisdom, or the meandering search for meaning presents a direct challenge. Our cultures relentlessly elevate productivity, visibility, and quantifiable results—the very arenas AI increasingly dominates. To champion internal states within systems built for external validation is to swim against a powerful societal current. It invites skepticism; it feels impractical. Decoupling worth from output involves a genuine struggle, potentially carrying a grief for familiar identities built on capability. It demands we question the very foundations of what we have been taught to value.

This difficult reassessment, this turn inward, is not a retreat but a necessary exploration catalyzed by AI's challenge. It involves consciously identifying and elevating the human dimensions AI cannot replicate. Recognizing the machine's inherent limitations—its lack of genuine comprehension, embodied feeling, subjective awareness, or existential stake—helps define the territory where human distinctiveness endures. This understanding fuels the arduous, yet vital, process of centering our value on these intrinsic truths. This exploration itself, the very act of searching and re-evaluating, becomes part of the adaptive

human response. Even in the wake of immense historical trauma, societies eventually find ways to process and move forward, illustrating resilience without necessarily offering overt commentary on the disaster itself, as seen in Chaucer's work post-Black Death (Cantor, 2015, Ch. 10).

Undeniably, coexistence with AI promises liberated productivity on an unprecedented scale. This very power, however, establishes a dynamic tension, a constant negotiation. While AI manages complex calculations, processes vast information, and automates countless tasks—a potent instrument indeed—its prowess serves as an unsettling reminder: human focus must cultivate the internal landscape AI cannot inhabit. Consequently, this technological "plague" offers no simple liberation; it forces a critical choice. Do we compete with AI on its terms, optimizing for output and risking spiritual obsolescence? Defining ourselves purely by output ensures a losing battle against ever-improving machines. Or do we undertake the demanding work of societal and personal transformation, building a culture that cherishes our intrinsic being? Education, governance, and ethics become the crucial arenas for enacting this choice. Within them, we must consciously build systems prioritizing wisdom over cleverness, empathy over cold efficiency, and authentic human experience above simulated performance, recognizing perhaps, as Christians did during the Antonine plague, that alternative ways of valuing life and community offer resilience amidst crisis (Eliot, 2024, pp. 129-136). Only this path secures a future where technology serves our deepest essence, not just our outward capabilities.

Conclusion

The arrival of Generative AI, interpreted as a historical plague, demonstrates its power to destabilize industries and fundamentally question societal norms alongside self-perception. By mimicking human cognitive output with uncanny prowess, this technological force precipitates an existential crisis; it interrogates the foundations of human value traditionally linked to demonstrable abilities. This paper has argued that navigating this disruption requires more than technological management. It demands a

difficult, necessary struggle towards an "inward turn"—a societal and personal re-centering upon intrinsic human qualities like consciousness, intentionality, empathy, and the search for meaning. Similar to the aftermaths of past plagues that compelled advancement, often unevenly and painfully, through societal adaptation (Flemming, 2023, S304-S306), our collective response to the AI challenge will dictate our future. We face a decision: engage the hard work of redefining and cherishing our essential humanity, or risk diminishing it in the shadow of the machine.

References

Cantor, N. F. (2015). In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made. Free Press.

Eliot, C. (2024). Pox Romana: The Antonine Plague and the End of the Roman Golden Age. Princeton University Press.

Flemming, R. (2023). “Pandemics in the Ancient Mediterranean World.” Isis, S1(S1), S288-S312.