If I remember correctly, a majority of us in here are students in engineering, science, technology. That being said, I think we can all agree, efficiency is very important. We will be tasked with building efficient machines, writing efficient code, everything is about efficiency. But there are costs associated with the pursuit of efficiency. Machines get more expensive, code becomes harder to read. We have to know when to stop looking for efficiency. Similarly, I know I, and maybe others have looked at government, institutions, and society and thought, “this could be a little more efficient..” Then what are the costs of efficiency on a societal scale? What is the relationship between a society that prioritizes efficiency, and the individual? For such a society, individuality and uniqueness are not an asset, but a weakness. In such a society, the individual is simply forgotten

Take a brave new world for example, where all people are designed to fit their assigned role in society. Society is the machine. A machine that ensures there is never starvation, never homelessness, and never any doubt or sadness. But at what cost? Helmholtz, despite having immense potential as a poet or writer is permanently confined to writing childish propaganda rhymes. Mond cant continue his scientific research despite his passion, because it doesn’t align with what society wants. Neither individual’s talents or skills mattered, though, because the society of a Brave New World prioritized efficiency, and from that perspective, it was already perfect. Or take Vincent in Gattaca, like Helmholtz or Mond a driven, smart, talented. Yet unless he had broken laws to gain his position at the space center, he was destined for a life of menial work. That society believed the only way to maximize efficiency was through eugenics. Had that society had its way, GATTACA would have lost its most talented analyst. In both cases, society is a machine, and the individual a cog in that machine, designed for maximum efficiency. A unique cog is a defective cog, and a defective cog makes the machine break.

From another angle, take Jerome. When his accident cripples him and his genetic engineering becomes naught, he is useless to society, and becomes a hermit, only valued for the identity he can sell. Or Linda, who upon returning from the savage reservation, broken, is simply discarded. A broken cog in a machine isn’t something to cry over, it should just be replaced as quickly as possible so the machine can keep running.

But then I ask, what good is the most efficient machine in the world, that can produce enough food to feed everyone, if there aren’t any individuals to feed? People sure, but if it doesn’t matter whether someone dies or not, why feed them at all?

What about in the real world? A hundred years ago, the western world saw homosexuality as dangerous, a threat to societal order, efficiency. Yet Alan Turing was a homosexual, and without him, we wouldn’t have the computer. A hundred years ago in Russia, when individuals sought to spread the idea of genetics to the Soviet education system, they were executed, because genetics didn’t totally agree with the party line. The people lived in ignorance of genetics for upwards to 25 years. What happens when we throw away a unique cog to make our machine more efficient? We don’t get the computer. We don’t get genetics.

In both the stories we have read, or watched, and in the real world, we see examples of how the push for efficiency on a societal level is detrimental to the individual, and in the long term, to society as a whole. A totally efficient society never changes, it cant change, and cant operate with unique individuals. Uniqueness throws a wrench in the perfection of an efficient system. So when we think about making society more efficient we must ask, would we rather be cogs, or humans?