What interests me about artificial intelligence is the same thing that interests me about human intelligence: how does it work? How does a bundle of electrochemical or straight up electrical impulses become a conscious, self-aware, sentient creature? How do qualia result from something as simple as a synapse, even multiplied several trillion times? In the process of constructing an artificial intelligence, perhaps we can learn something about how natural intelligences came about.

While evolutionary programming seems to be the path to pragmatic success in terms of building an actual AI – after all, evolution is the only process that has accomplished this feat thus far – it saddens me to think that we might abandon the quest to understand natural intelligence by creating it. If we let an AI “build itself” through evolutionary computing, then we may very well understand it no better, or even worse, than we understand the human brain. While a fully functional, human-level artificial intelligence would no doubt have a massive impact on the world (a positive one, we hope), and while evolutionary computing may be the fastest way to create such an intelligence, I think it is also worth continuing the pursuit of “hand-crafting” AI, so to speak. Maybe it’s impossible to do so, but at the very least, the attempt will teach us a lot about ourselves.

On a separate note, let’s return to that massive impact a human-level artificial intelligence would have. The possibility of a negative impact hardly needs description, as literally hundreds of science fiction movies and stories have done that work already. Some may scoff at this concern and dismiss it as nothing more than fanciful worry-warting. But the fact is that we have absolutely no idea what a human-level intelligence produced through evolutionary computing would be like. It might, and in fact probably won’t be, human-like. It might be benevolent, or malevolent, or outside such judgements altogether for reasons we simply *cannot understand*. While human-level artificial intelligence may be far away right now, it is worth considering these questions as we press forward.

Finally, it is also worth considering what will happen to the intelligence itself. If we were to create a truly conscious AI, who gave us as good a reason as any human to believe that it was self-aware and sentient, what would our duties towards it be? Would it have rights? Would it have freedom? Giving birth to a race of sentient robots has the potential for disastrous consequences not just towards us, but towards the machines. How easy would it be to dismiss them as “just a bunch of circuitry” and treat them as slave labor? Yet it is no unreasonable to believe that, if they were intelligent on the level of human intelligence, that they would be conscious and self-aware on that level as well.