

# Life With AI

## Humanity's Next Great Upheaval

An Essay by Reed Meher | May 2024

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## Economy over Ethics

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is here to stay with humanity. Many are excited to race into the future and bring AI to every possible area to find out what is possible. Many are terrified to see AI so rapidly sweeping through familiar technologies, and they clamor for restrictions. Most of us are somewhere between those two extremes. It is the goal of this essay to address the excitement, the terror, and the ambiguity of AI by exploring what I believe to be a simple fact: AI is here to stay. I believe that accepting the reality of that fact will help guide our various responses and fears related to the coming AI infused world. It is not a matter of whether we should embrace AI or not, because that has already occurred the world over. It is not even a matter of defining and setting ethical parameters for AI, though, as I will demonstrate in this essay, it is essential that we do so quickly. Our goal rather needs to be oriented around *the economy* where AI is to live and grow. If we can arrive at a clear understanding and consensus of that as a society, maybe even as a species, we will be able to weather the very strange, terrifying, and wonderful hurricane of AI development and AI implementation to come.

## Reorientation of a Species: What does Humanity Really Want?

AI, at its best, reflects the will and desire of the human species who brought it into being on this planet Earth. We cannot really come to a decision about how we can limit or guide AI if we do not have a basic understanding of ourselves and our goal as a species. If we were chinchillas, we could easily answer the question of AI: it would tell us where to find shelter, how long we would be safe in that shelter, where the food is, where the predators are, and offer some version of chinchilla Tinder so that we may find a good mate. We are not chinchillas. Humans, having discovered tools and the art of storytelling to tell what has been, what could be, and what we dream might be. Because of these developments in our species, we are faced with infinite desires, a sense of infinite possibilities, and endless individual and shared stories about what life is and what life is at its best.

Over the ages, we have dealt with the overwhelming infinity of our imaginations and desires, by developing religions, superstitions, contracts, and laws (to name a few things that limit societies and individuals). Increasingly, we are not separated regionally or by regionally held beliefs. The

rise of ingenuity and the mastery of matter has led us to be incredibly effective in traveling physically and informationally at rapid speeds across all manner of barriers, be they physical, linguistic, or conceptual. We are fast, but our imaginations and our desires are faster than our bodies, so we have been developing tools that augment the limitations of our bodies and minds. We as a species are too hungry for our desires to wait for some abstract evolution in our bodies or minds; we believe that we can bring about that higher level of experience with our mastery over matter and our vast wonder for our own seemingly endless capabilities.

The dilemma of reorienting the goals of humanity has not been a need that came about at the inception of Artificial Intelligence. I would argue that the need became desperate at the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution is often something we like to look back on as a purely economic revolution, but I think it is better to say that it was a symptom of a larger revolution, or perhaps rejection. The Industrial Revolution was predated over several hundred years by a growing change among the wealthy: a few people the world over held most of the world's wealth, and they got that wealth by oppressing and/or enslaving the many. As the wealth of the wealthy grew, the scope of wealth grew, and as the scope of wealth grew the craft and art of those sponsored by the wealthy grew: the wealthy wanted finer and finer things because of desire, power, and status, and so some of their finest workers grew in craft and skill to make wondrous textiles, architecture, mechanical things, jewelry, artworks, and so on. This class of workers became revered and sought after: the wealthy fought for access to the best makers' goods, and the best makers taught others in their craft.

Long before the Industrial Revolution, there were those fighting over what the shape of the world should be. Adam Smith is often credited with coming up with the new economy of the new global economy, but really, he was only putting into words that which had already happened to the world economy: "let us do it", or as famed French 1600s business owner, Thomas Le Gendre said to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the French Finance minister at the time, "Laissez nous fair" (OpenStax, 2022). What Gendre was referring to is the conundrum that all of Europe was facing: the market had gotten too complex and widespread for mercantilism, the former economic structure wherein the wealthy controlled the market entirely, to continue to function. Businesses and finance ministers took up the perspective inspired by Gendre's words to let the market forces grow 'naturally', which is to say let them go unchecked and unregulated. This argument caught hold with business owners who got out of the yoke of all the laws and regulations they felt had them strapped and limited. With the birth of the laissez-faire economy, we find our current world: technology has leapt fast and far, but that, too, has been the symptom of the "let us do it" period of human development.

Too often when we talk about orienting the ethics and shaping the growth of AI, we are talking about it from the lofty position of philosophy. Philosophically, ethical AI is best, the United Nations is good, war is bad, and harmony is good.

The market and philosophy have never walked the same path, though. For the market, war is good despite what philosophy says: most of the world right now is manufacturing and selling arms if it doesn't purchase them to fight or fend off forces foreign or domestic. According to statista.com, there are 66 countries producing arms and the United States produces 40% of the world's arms (Statista, 2023). In 2023, 38 countries were at war or in war-like conflict. There are 195 countries in the world, so that means 104 of those countries, or 53%, were selling or using arms in 2023.

It is redundant to outline what the ethics of AI should be because AI may be more capable and powerful technology, yet our ethics for technology both have not changed and have not ever really been applied across the board. As Floridi states, our consensus about the four core principles of bioethics easily applies to AI: *beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice* (Floridi, p.60). The principles of bioethics have been around almost as long as modern medicine, and yet modern medicine struggles to adhere to them as much as it always has: a lot. The issue with guiding AI has little to do with establishing ethics: that is a slight of hand from the businesses and governments developing and using it just as much as it is a fancy pass time for academics to ignore the perpetual fact that ethics and philosophy have not overlapped with the market in any meaningful way for perhaps all recorded human history.

Will AI be the nail in the coffin of the “let us do it” economy that has defined all human endeavor in the 400 years? If we are not laying out ethics for AI, what are we doing? Is it hopeless to do anything? As a rule with all human endeavor, the answer to each of those questions is: yes and no.

## At the Next Station

If the shape of the coming century is more of the same and the laissez-faire economy continues, outcomes are predictable and fall under two general categories:

- Our “let us do it” attitude reduces the planet to a state that is mostly inhabitable, though for the few that survive life is a struggle. A few prepared of the mega-wealthy paranoid-type will have some amount of lasting security in state-of-the-art facilities, but things will be grim all the same.
- A global tragedy on an unprecedented scale destroys most populations, economies, countries, and utilities that forces a resurgence of mercantilism or some older form of economy structure that is far less global and more local. This tragedy would prevent the full-speed destruction of the climate, which would be good for the species of the world, even if humanity is set back.

Neither of those outcomes sounds great to live through, though they make good science fiction. A better set of outcomes can be found when we look at the quote from Floridi that I started this essay with:

*“The best way to catch the technology train is not to chase it, but to be already at the next station. We need to anticipate and steer the ethical development of technological innovation. And we can do this by looking at what is actually feasible. Within what is feasible, we can privilege what is environmentally sustainable, then what is socially acceptable, and then, ideally, choosing what is socially preferable.” (Floridi, p.88, 2023).*

Being at the next station is crucial. However, if the next station is another stop on the “let us do it” economy story, it won’t make any difference unless you are a shareholder in an AI company. The next station needs to be the last stop on a flawed economy track, and the first stop on a more informed economy.

As I said in the previous section, defining ethics is fruitless for setting the future of AI. AI is a technology that was born from the laissez-faire economy, and philosophy has no bearing over

the market. The problem is to create an enticing new body for the market. The market is used to getting what it wants, that is the whole concept of the market: let it do whatever it wants, and it will take care of us. That is not true now, and it never has been. The notion that an economy allowed to run “wild” exposes a lack of understanding of the “wild”.

Now that we have talked about how AI is a child of an economic structure, you can see that we can't talk about AI without talking about human economies. AI will only ever serve humans as a symptom of AI serving the economies that create it, but it will not primarily serve people: it will serve economies. Adam Smith and Gendre wanted us to believe that the economy only exists to serve humanity, but if you have been around for a few decades lately, you will no doubt disagree with their outlook on the matter. To get at an understanding of how their view on human markets and economies is so incorrect and dangerous, we must understand the flawed principles that their ideas are based on the idea the “wild” or “natural” means unchecked activity. Connecting some truths about the “wild” about what an economy should look like is the key to understanding how to get to the next station ahead of Artificial Intelligence.

## The Invisible Hand

Adam Smith in “The Wealth of Nations” (Smith, 1776), argued that the marketplace, if left unchecked and allowed to run wild, would naturally produce the goods and services that society most needed. He called this the “invisible hand” of the marketplace and pushed the idea that no one should interfere with the marketplace. Smith's ideas took hold in the budding new empire, the United States of America, and the ideas of Smith were infused in the rising economy that would become one of the wealthiest in human history.

What Smith and the founders of the USA lacked, though, was a basic understanding of nature. Natural systems, food chains for example, are not made up of any part being unchecked. No plant or tree, spider, deer, or wolf live in an unchecked system where they exist outside of checks and balances. Each life is impacted by the rise and fall and changes in every animal around it. Humans are the first to suffer the illusion of concept of “freedom” that involves being outside any kind of checks or balance. The notion that the marketplace should go unchecked is preposterous. The notion that the marketplace will always act to support human populations is a farse. If cicadas were told that they have been given a raw deal and are too limited by their breeding and metamorphosis patterns, they would really enjoy feasting until all the food was gone from the earth. Then they would be very sad when they all, in their ranks of billions, starved to death and ate each other until they went extinct or became unrecognizable.

## The New Rail System

It would be unwise to wait until the world around us collapses because of the free pass we gave ourselves to feed without thought for the things to come. The laissez -faire economy needs to end, and we need to be ready to guide it to a new set of stations and tracks: a train line not divorced from the realities of nature that govern all beings, ecosystems, and economies. This new rail system cannot be built on philosophy because philosophy and the market do not align. The new rail system should be appealing to the old market; at least enough to coax it along as willingly as possible. All things in nature are skittish about changes, yet all things in nature are drawn to the comfort of balance. The market likes security, and it likes to know what it is around and what is to come. It likes to know where it can go, what it can and can't do. If the new rail

system makes a point about taking wealth and power from those who hold power, the new rail system will be under threat of destruction.

Ethics are important in the world today and the world to come, but the work of establishing ethics has been done. There are sound ethics at the core of every religion that has survived the centuries. The core principles of bioethics cover everything we need to not only use artificial intelligence safely, but to use anything we create safely. We have plenty of ethics. What we don't have is a reasonable economy. They didn't have a reasonable economy in 1776 when Adam Smith made his pitch for the laissez-faire. Artificial intelligence may be the crown jewel of the laissez-faire economy, and it might be the one human tool that is disruptive enough to our current economies that we are forced to come up with something better, just like Gagne and Smith had to do in their day.

The New Rail system should have core ethics, but that should not be what drives it. We shouldn't waste time trying to modify our current economy with long established and long unheeded ethics. The New Rail system should not just think about where we want to go, but it should be in tune with the energy of the times. Smith didn't really invent an economy: he argued to support things that were already well underway.

To be prepared for the best outcomes for the centuries to come, we should look closely at things already happening in fringe communities around the world. By seeing ourselves more fully, we can perhaps find that better future for our species and the planet we rely on.

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