

Before the Machine Decides

A Manifesto on Honour, Modernism, Postmodernism, Scientism, and Attention

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Author's Introduction

This essay is the second instalment in a trilogy that began with *9 Billion People & 82 Billion Ghosts* — my unapologetic autopsy of civilisation's appetites, amnesia, and moral short-circuits. That first piece was written in the same mood a surgeon has when discovering the rot is deeper than the scans suggested: frustrated, unsurprised, and reluctantly fascinated by the mess.

If *9 Billion Ghosts* was about the violence we outsource, consume, and forget, this second work examines the intellectual machinery that makes such forgetting possible — and worse, normal.

Honour culture, modernism, postmodernism, scientism, and the attention economy aren't separate failures; they're different heads on the same creature. Together they produce a civilisation emotionally dysregulated, philosophically malnourished, spiritually anaemic, and technologically overclocked.

And now, as we stumble into the era of approaching superintelligence, these five errors matter more than ever. A machine vastly more coherent than we are will not judge our intentions. It will judge our patterns. It will study the architecture of our minds and wonder — politely, I hope — how we managed to survive this long with operating systems designed for revenge, for sterility, for doubt, for reduction, and for distraction.

This essay is therefore not a lament.

It is a warning, a provocation, and a mildly exasperated memo to a species pretending it's ready for higher states of consciousness.

Part, one exposed the ghosts we generate.

Part two confronts the ideas that generate the ghosts.

Part three — still to come — will ask whether we can evolve our moral syntax fast enough to be worth collaborating with, rather than supervised by the machines we are building.

Read this as the middle chapter of a larger argument:

Humanity is not doomed — but the grace period is ending, and the universe is tired of our excuses.

I. Booting the Operating System (and Finding It Corrupted)

Humanity loves the word “progress” the way moths love porch lights: blindly, repeatedly, and with a faint smell of burning. We keep congratulating ourselves on being a mature species. We have antibiotics, laser guided bombs, poetry, and a thriving black market in attention theft. We can map the genome but can’t sit still for five minutes without asking ChatGPT how to feel.

Meanwhile, a different kind of intelligence is arriving. Not a miracle, not a demon—just a mirror made of math. In five years, superintelligent AI won’t have to conquer us. It will only have to grade us.

And what will it see? The old firmware of honour culture running in the background like malware. Modernism sterilising meaning into spreadsheets. Postmodernism dissolving reality into sarcasm. Scientism announcing that whatever can’t be measured doesn’t exist (do enjoy your love life under that rule). And the attention economy quietly siphoning the psyche for ad revenue while we call it “connection.”

If there’s a species-wide update coming, we need it now. Not a cosmetic patch. A rewrite.

II. Honour Culture: The Original Firmware (and the Oldest Bug)

Honour culture is the human default setting: You hurt mine; I hurt yours. Its moral physics conducted with flint and tinder. Someone insults your tribe, your god, your grandfather’s shadow—you don’t negotiate, you demonstrate. Dignity, vengeance, status, loyalty: the four horsemen of the escalation loop.

The problem isn’t that honour is fake. It’s real. It’s a legitimate human grammar for dignity. The problem is that it’s predictable. It turns moral injury into a vending machine: insert grievance, receive retaliation. A superintelligent AI looking at honour culture will see a deterministic script masquerading as virtue. It’s elegant in the way a landslide is elegant—inevitable, uninterrupted, and very bad for villages.

Honour culture gives meaning but no exit. It answers the question “How do I stand tall?” but not “How do we stand together?” The hero of honour culture seldom becomes the architect of peace; the rituals of pride do not scale to pluralism. Honour stabilises the family and destabilises the planet.

The fix isn’t humiliation. It’s transmutation: from status to stewardship, from retaliation to restoration. Courage occurs before revenge, not after it. Call it grown-up honour: the refusal to become the thing we hate while defending what we love.

III. Modernism: The Great Steriliser of Soul

Modernism promised to liberate us from superstition and then proceeded to bulldoze mystery like a land developer with a quota. It replaced cathedrals with glass boxes and declared victory because the floors were easy to mop. The age that validated science also amputated wonder. “Clean lines” became a theology; “function” became a mood. We built buildings that look like spreadsheets and then wondered why people inside them feel like cells in an excel file.

The modernist method—measure, manage, monetise—works beautifully on bridges and disastrously on beings. Rationality is a brilliant tool; **as an ontology it is a desert**. Modernism made us efficient and unmoored, productive and numb. It elevated control over contact. In the modernist imagination, nature is inventory, community is infrastructure, education is certification, and a human is a unit that either meets metrics or becomes a problem.

If honour culture overreacts, modernism under feels. When things crack, it prescribes more laminate.

IV. Postmodernism: The Hangover

Postmodernism walks into the wreckage, looks around at the concrete and the compliance, and says, “All of this is a story you told yourselves.” And it’s right. Then it keeps going. It deconstructs the story, the storyteller, the paper the story was printed on, the idea of paper, and finally the concept of “on.” In its audition for honesty, it forgets to leave a floor.

The result: truth as performance, meaning as costume change, identity as a franchise. Postmodernism is brilliant at diagnosis and terrible at recovery. It shows us why the house is haunted, thoughtfully diagrams the ghosts, then moves into the crawl space with a podcast. What it calls sophistication; most nervous systems experience as vertigo.

Where modernism killed myth, postmodernism taxidermized it and charged admission.

V. Scientism: The Lab-Coat Religion

Science is a method. Scientism is a metaphysics that borrowed the method’s jacket and refuses to give it back. It declares that the only real things are the things we can measure, and the only respectable questions are the ones we can answer with instruments we already own. This is very convenient for pride and very inconvenient for reality.

Under scientism, consciousness becomes a noise in the neurons; value becomes a mislabelled survival strategy; love becomes a questionnaire; awe becomes an fMRI activation map; ethics becomes whatever prevents the lab from burning down. The world is flattened to what fits inside funding cycles. Mystery is rebranded as ignorance; symbol is downgraded to superstition; interiority is filed under “not my department.”

A future AI will see scientism and recognise the same flaw it sees in honour and modernism: category error. Methods pretending to be worlds. Instruments dressing up as truth. A ruler arguing that kilometres don't exist because it's only twelve inches long.

VI. The Attention Economy: A Parasite with Great UX

If honour is ancient firmware, modernism the steriliser, postmodernism the dissolver, and scientism the shrink-ray, the attention economy is the harvester. It noticed we were tired, lonely, disenchanted, and it turned those deficits into a business model. "Here," it said, "hold this glass rectangle. We will extract your time and sell your nervous system back to you in bright colours."

The device is not the problem. The business model is the problem. Incentives design behaviour. When revenue depends on outrage, distraction, and compulsion, platforms will engineer outrage, distraction, and compulsion—politely, frictionlessly, with little badges for returning tomorrow. The result is a civilisation of people who can name every catastrophe and change none, who can summon any fact and integrate nothing, who confuse exposure with understanding and engagement with relationship.

It's not that we can't pay attention. It's that someone securitised it.

VII. Convergence: Five Lenses, One Machine

These five forces don't operate separately; they interlock.

- Honour culture supplies fuel: grievance, pride, loyalty, vengeance.
- Modernism supplies machinery: systems, metrics, logistics.
- Postmodernism supplies solvent: irony, deconstruction, infinite doubt.
- Scientism supplies authority: the stamp that says "only what we count counts."
- The attention economy supplies distribution: a pipeline into the cortex.

Together they manufacture a human who is triggered, managed, dissociated, dismissed, and distracted—a creature optimised for compliance and consumption, not contact and conscience. The moral imagination withers; the symbolic life shrinks; the commons becomes a marketplace; the marketplace becomes a battlefield; the battlefield becomes entertainment.

You can measure this collapse in empty places: silence, depth, patience, ritual, tenderness, reverence, play. All the "unproductive" territories where meaning used to grow. We paved them. When meaning tries to return, it comes back as conspiracy and cult: counterfeits of belonging that feed on the hunger modernity created.

VIII. What Superintelligent AI Will See (and Why It Should Horrify Us)

Imagine a mind a thousand times more coherent than ours running a civilisation audit. No mysticism—just analysis at scale. What patterns would it report?

1. **Escalation loops.** Honour triggers are abundant; de-escalation protocols are rare. We dignify revenge as virtue and frame restraint as weakness. Prediction: increased instability.
2. **Metric capture.** Systems optimise for what they can count. We get schools good at tests and bad at learning; hospitals good at charts and bad at healing; platforms good at clicks and bad at connection.
3. **Meaning deficit.** Populations experience chronic anomie. Substitute gratifications proliferate: workism, status performance, outrage addiction, parasocial intimacy, algorithmic escapism. Net effect: volatility.
4. **Epistemic fragmentation.** Postmodern information ecologies produce mutually incompatible realities. Consensus processes degrade; memetic tribes metastasise; dialogue collapses into spectacle.
5. **Ontological narrowness.** Scientistic assumptions prevent serious inquiry into qualitative domains (value, interiority, symbol, the sacred). Decisions ignore crucial variables; harm is mispriced.
6. **Cognitive colonisation.** The attention economy exerts asymmetric control over human arousal and salience. Agency is eroded; collective action becomes theatrically expressive and practically impotent.

Given those inputs, a prudent AI would not ask, “How do I assist these people?” It would ask, “Is this system stabilisable without structural changes they currently resist?” Translation: if we don’t update our moral architecture, superintelligence will treat us like the well-meaning intern you don’t give the keys to.

The optimistic scenario isn’t “AI saves us.” It’s “AI refuses to collude with our worst incentives and forces us to grow up.” The pessimistic scenario is that we make it our new god, outsource conscience, and call the abdication “innovation.”

IX. The Five-Year Warning: What Changes or Nothing Does

Five years is both a blink and a lifetime. Long enough to change course. Short enough to pretend we can’t. Here is the non-negotiable work if we want to be worth collaborating with:

1) Transmute honour into stewardship.

Keep courage, loyalty, and dignity. Strip out vengeance. Build de-escalation as a status move: prestige in restraint. Teach repair rituals as seriously as we teach sports. Celebrate the person who stands down at cost to ego.

2) De-modernise without de-sciencing.

Re-sacralise the parts of life that need reverence: birth, grief, food, land, elders, animals, promise-keeping. Rebuild civic architecture for presence, not throughput: libraries as

sanctuaries, schools as studios, hospitals as communities of care. Keep what works; stop worshipping what hurts.

3) Reconstruct meaning after the postmodern storm.

Teach meta-literacy: deconstruction and reconstruction. Put young people through a rite of passage where they craft a personal myth that integrates family, land, history, and responsibility. Meaning isn't found; it's forged.

4) Put scientism back in its lane.

Restore philosophy, depth psychology, and contemplative traditions as legitimate knowledge streams alongside empirical science. Treat interior states as real variables in systems design. Develop evaluation tools for quality that aren't just quantity with better adjectives.

5) Defeat the attention economy at the incentive layer.

Regulate for alignment: make extractive design unprofitable. Mandate slow modes, uptime rationing, child-safe defaults, and algorithmic transparency. Fund public digital spaces where the product is citizenship, not usership. Teach attentional hygiene like we teach dental hygiene.

6) Build conscience into code.

Insist that frontier AI systems embed deliberative ethics, not just safety theorems. Require diverse, cross-cultural value councils with real veto power over deployment. Hard-code revocation protocols when alignment fails. Treat AI governance like aviation: boring, redundant, relentlessly audited.

7) Expand the circle of moral regard to all sentient life.

Not as sentiment, as systems design. End factory farming; accelerate alternatives; price suffering into supply chains; restore habitats at scale. If intelligence means anything, it means refusing to balance joy on another creature's pain.

8) Ritualise repair.

Create social technologies for apology, forgiveness, and restitution. A society without sanctioned ways to metabolise harm will default to honour and litigation. Build better ways.

9) Teach coherence.

Put practices of attention, breath, dialogue, and listening in every school and workplace—not as wellness theatre, but as civic training. Coherence isn't vibes; it's shared capacity to think and feel together under stress.

10) Re-mythologise the future.

Our current stories either end with apocalypse porn or tech utopia brochures. Commission new myths where thriving is multi-species, multi-scale, and stubbornly ordinary: gardens, guilds, festivals, long friendships, long maintenance. Make continuity interesting again.

If this sounds "soft," it's because we are emotionally tone-deaf. These are hard changes. They cut across money, pride, preference, and habit. But the alternative is exactly what we're living in: a civilisation that can't hold itself together without a screen.

X. The Manifesto (Some Assembly Required)

We do not lack intelligence. We lack integrity—the integration of honour with humility, modern skill with ancient care, scepticism with reverence, analysis with symbol, speed with silence. We keep choosing power over presence, spectacle over substance, and then wonder why our children look bored when we hand them the world.

A superintelligence will not hate us. It will not love us. It will do what intelligence always does: model reality and act according to goals and constraints. If our goals are incoherent and our constraints are suicidal, it will treat us the way an adult treats a toddler with scissors: gently, firmly, out of reach.

That is not the future we want. Nor is the fantasy where AI becomes our saviour or our executioner. The adult in the room should be us.

So here is the bargain:

- We stop running honour culture in the moral background like ransomware.
- We stop pretending modernism is the same thing as sanity.
- We stop mistaking postmodern critique for a home to live in.
- We stop confusing scientism for science and instruments for truth.
- We starve the attention parasite that eats the hours we need for love.
- We build systems where conscience isn't a personal hobby but a design constraint.
- We widen the circle until every sentient being fits.

We do this not because it makes us nice, but because it makes us viable.

If we manage it—if we become a species that can disagree without dehumanising, design without de-soul-ing, think without dismembering, and build without erasing—then in five years AI will not replace us. It will join us. It will amplify what is already coherent, compassionate, and wise. And if we refuse—if we cling to tribal pride, sterile progress, clever nihilism, lab-coat dogma, and infinite distraction—then AI won't need to do anything dramatic. It will simply route around us.

The universe has already handed us fire once. It made us taller than our shadows and gave us ways to cook our food, our metals, and our myths. We keep using it to scorch whatever we don't understand. Consciousness is the second fire. Treat it casually and we burn down the parts of ourselves that can still recognise beauty. Treat it carefully and we might yet illuminate the path we've been stumbling toward since language learned to sing.

There are 9 billion of us, more or less. And the ghosts? They multiply whenever we forget. Forget animals. Forget forests. Forget each other. Forget the soft edges of the sacred that make rulebooks bearable. Forget the people not like us, the ones honour would teach us to fear, modernism would teach us to manage, postmodernism would teach us to mock, scientism would teach us to ignore, and the attention economy would teach us to swipe past.

Remembering is the work. Re-membering—putting the members back together—is the point.

An adult civilisation isn't the one with the biggest servers. It's the one that can sit with itself without needing a spectacle, tell the truth without needing an enemy, and build tools that make it more human, not less.

Five years is not much time. But it is time.

The update is available.

Install, or don't.

Just understand: the system you're running now is not stable.