

**The Phony Eschaton**

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*The Point of That*

One cold night I sat with my accountant, all of my forms spread on his already-cluttered desk. We'd known each other for close to 15 years, and I consider him a friend. We were chatting, and I mentioned a novel I was working on. He asked what it was about. I'd told a few other people, and so had a short description ready to copy and paste into the conversation - just the premise, setting, and what the main characters experience.

After I finished, he asked, "What's the point of that?" and shuffled through the papers.

I was stunned, and stammered out a few larger themes of the book. But my expostulation did little to convince him that my years of labor had a point.

My fondness for my accountant friend wasn't diminished, nor was my respect. It was late, and he'd been neck-deep in income, earnings, and potential state and federal penalties all day. And, I'm accustomed enough to indifference of my work not to hold it against anyone. But there was something about the question that kept ringing in my ears.

The point of a novel - it can be entertainment, erudition, or protest. It can be a balm on a wound or a bad conscience. It can be titillation, a daydream, a goad, a manifesto and more. For the writer, it can be an exploration, a cry of joy or despair, or a way to make money, or a catharsis, among other things. I had these answers to his question.

But there was something else about my accountant's question. What he said seemed like something that had been studiously, and at some cost, left unsaid.

What is the point, after all? There's no shortage of material to read, and for free (once you buy the device and pay for the electricity and the connection, or obtain a library card). No one needs another book, so how might I command a buck? What is the point of creating a story, or just more words, in a world drowning in information - to the point that one of the largest companies in the world was born from a claim to organize it?

### *The Copy-and-Paste Singularity*

“What time is it?” is a common question. But it’s also, really, quite enormous. If it doesn’t strike you as an essential personal cosmological question, it’s likely because you haven’t lately asked: Are we at the beginning of something, in the midst, or at the end?

It’s a question that’s unanswerable. I have no way of saying if the end of times are at hand, or if we’re in the infancy of a galaxy-spanning, billion-year cosmic adventure. The answer, however I decide it for the day, affects how I respond to a parking ticket, or to the plight of my fellow man.

No one knows the future, but we know how we feel about it. And it’s that feeling I’d like to talk about.

This feeling is tied to the apparent growth of information, and with a kind of progress that doesn’t involve us all that much. It’s the progress of exponential, self-multiplying knowledge and accelerated, self-perpetuating technological improvement. This is connected to an idea of a historical and technological singularity. The term - singularity - is borrowed from physics, where it represents something unknowable and infinite, like the density of space-time in a black hole. It’s a phenomenon that outpaces our ability to comprehend or even witness. Applied, it’s the multiplication of information to the point where nothing actually happens.

It blunts the awful rawness and inchoate pressure of being alive. But that’s always been a part of our humanity we’ve been comfortable forfeiting.

The sensation is that every decision or protest that could slow the slide is escaping our grasp at superhuman speed. The million monkeys at a million typewriters seem to have come to a conclusion and these conclusions seem final.

But we do not know what time it is.

The money and the people may believe in something like an acceleration of collective human creation and technology beyond our ability to control or even comprehend. The winners always prefer doctrines that make the present and future appear inevitable. Their theology has a powerful effect on how they behave, and the shape and general prejudices under which we labor. One sees it in the proposals for universal basic income extended to the no-longer-necessary people, or the insidious notion that data is a force on its own.

### *A Card Game*

How does a person live, speak, and create in a world where all recorded images, sounds and words are immediately available at all times? One popular approach is to curate - to sort through and select a set of decontextualized sensations - and then feed the object back into the machine to be reshuffled.

The problem with shuffling the cards is that the outcomes of every card game, however varied, are prefigured. Card games have always been an escape from reality. Shuffling cards is exactly the opposite of speaking, of asserting or engaging with people, institutions or ideas. To call a shuffle of the cards, or a sorting of data, a form of speech or expression is to embrace the idea that history and reality is just a million monkeys at a million tablets for a million years. This is, despite the numbers involved, an extremely narrow view.

But it's that vision that looms and stalks us. It makes us feel like we're living after the end of time. Time, after all, is marked by events - be it the unwinding of a watch spring, one tick, or a world war. And if we are not ourselves events, but a predictable, inchoate problem to be euthanized by freestanding data and delivery channels, then we are necessarily living after the end of time, or at least off to the side of time.

### *Still Doing That*

The sensation of being outside of time like this is something people labor under, rather than confront. In my life as a poet and author, I hear it often, and rarely so plainly and honestly as I did that night, from my accountant.

"It's great you're still doing that," is the phrase.

I hear it from people I've only recently met, and from people I've known for decades. I hear it from people with no creative impulses, and from people who've devoted their lives in one way or another to the arts. I don't doubt the sincerity of the good wishes behind what they say. But it's what you say to someone working at a rather severe tangent, far from the actual lives of actual people.

Creativity, though championed by the corporate colossi of our day, is indeed tangent and peripheral to actual life, as it seems to be in the United States these days. But that's a symptom. This new, still-implicit ideology by which humanity makes itself insignificant is clear in a landscape full of gorgeous bathrooms and glass buildings that express no virtue except anonymity. And the places we now go for comfort are controlled by entities that embody phony-eschaton ideology of copy-and-pasting away the time.

The result is that we feel yet more helpless, without knowing quite why. And helplessness makes us angry. Anger, too, is a forfeiture of power, and of our right minds. But by giving the sensation a name, we may become a little less helpless.