Nick Berry

know fear, know courage™

Essays

Progress

What is progress?

Apart from that thing sold to us as the one pursuit meaningful; the guiding star of our existence. Progress towards what, and in which terms?

We in what is called The West and includes former and current colonies of Western imperialism, live in the most technologically advanced era in history. Armed with that advancement, we set off to conquer the world; force-feeding that technology to the whole of humanity, whether the whole of humanity wants it or not.

It is the same logic applied by the Christian and Trade missionaries of the 16th-19th centuries. “We know better and you need to know better too, or we will destroy you. Come to think of it, we will take from you what we want and destroy you anyway.”

The thing called AI – the apotheosis of number crunching – is the lovechild of a process of hubris that began with The Enlightenment. That movement killed the thing called God and inseminated the God called Reason. If nothing else, hubris can be said to have progressed; progressing from the theme of all Greek tragedy to the earthy-neutral wallpaper of modern life.

Over the past 300 years, we in The West have reasoned our way to the thing called AI. Artificial, yes. Intelligent, no (inter legere: to read among or between). Artificial intelligence? Genuine stupidity. Stupidity of a weight the word is not strong enough to support. At its heart, lies the Enlightenment

fantasy that we are capable of becoming God. Asked in interview if God existed, the head of Google's version of the thing called AI replied, "Not yet".

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was a big name of The Enlightenment. His laws of motion and universal gravitation dominated scientific thinking until Einstein turned up with his theory of relativity. Being the polymath he was, Einstein knew he was late to the party. Heraclitus (ca. 540-480 BC) had got there 2,500 years earlier.

Where Newton claimed that the universe began from nothing – from a condition of stasis, or no movement – Heraclitus worked out that stasis is one thing you would never find in the universe. If you wanted it, you needed to invent it. He came to this conclusion by watching his local river and staring into his fire. Quantum physics proves him right. Niels Bohr's observation that the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth was Heraclitus too. Philosophy (love of wisdom) calls that 'the coincidence of opposites'.

You can read all of what remains of Heraclitus' writing (The Fragments) in an hour or so, and spend the rest of your life thinking it over. Apart from stasis, there are two other things you will find nowhere in the universe: a straight line and a machine, in any form whatsoever. Both are human inventions, invented to facilitate human ends.

The point of the machine is to make life easier; that cunning seducer, Ease. Easier to do what? Life is meant to be difficult. Nothing worth doing is easy, and without difficulty there can be no ease. The thing called AI makes it easier to do the worthless tasks with which we have filled our lives. Easier to crunch data. Easier to run systems that run systems that run systems. Easier to generate floods of words no one reads; oceans of images no one looks at. Easier to create deepfake porn videos.

A 2025 EU report into cyber-bullying among schoolchildren (not students or young adults; children, which is what they are) estimated that 90% of AI's global capacity is absorbed

by the generation of deepfake porn, an unknown volume of it paedophilic. That tallies with the trade of 90% of global internet traffic. According to the report, decent deepfakes burn something like 50GB per minute, producing enough waste heat in the process to heat parts of Helsinki. Meanwhile, a popular destination for the hardware they burn – the tonnes of IT waste AI generates – is the beaches of Africa.

Another coincidence of opposites is that there is no evil so great that it does not contain a grain of good, and no good so great that it does not contain a grain of evil. Searching for a grain of good in the thing called AI, I stumble on its ability to analyse cancer scans. Its processing power enables it to find things the human eye would miss, enabling earlier and more accurate diagnosis. This in turn enables more life.

Heraclitus may have made it to 60. In that time, he did thinking that has never been bettered. I am older than he got to be. Socrates was in his early 70s when he was executed for being Socrates. Mozart left the world at 35, Hendrix at 27. Simone Weil was 34 when she handed in her pass, Shakespeare 52, Marie Curie 66. Quality of life, or quantity?

The Holy Grail of the transhumanist AI visionaries is Eternal Life. But we have that already. It is called love. So what else can the thing called AI do? Fix a leaking tap? That might be progress, of a sort.

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Phone: +45 81 98 73 17

Email: words@nickberry.net