

Dystopian Societies and Technological Threats to Humankind as Recontextualizations of the Myth of Cosmic Evil

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ABSTRACT

Since its initial appearance in the Book of Genesis, the monster has taken many forms within different cultural contexts. During its time, the monster was seen as a symbol of cosmic, non-anthropomorphic evil. In recent years, rapid technological developments have allowed a further metamorphosis of the monster's story. Creating artificial intelligence is one of the most prominent technological challenges, and the danger that this implies for the survival of the human race suggests that the idea of cosmic evil is more relevant than ever. I show how this idea still informs, on one side, certain visions of dystopian societies dominated by technological elites and, on the other, existential risks to humankind raised by increasingly intelligent technologies.

Keywords: *cosmic; evil; technology; Bible; dystopian narratives; existential risks.*

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that evil rarely shows up in some pure, abstract, or unrecognizably shape but rather appears in human form. In an 1802 letter to his friend Friedrich Schiller, the German poet Goethe famously described the plot of his tragedy *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1786) as “verteufelt human” (“devilishly human”).¹ This paradoxical phrase is also applicable beyond the evil deeds described in Goethe's classic work. Manifestations of the ‘devilishly human’ occur frequently within cultures. When asked to describe wartime atrocities, acts of terrorism, and serial killers, some people reach for the word ‘evil.’ Evil is the word often used in condemning atrocities such as the Holocaust. The concept of evil is extreme; nevertheless, it plays an important role when it comes to evaluating and explaining the worst kind of wrong doing.

Contemporary conversations on evil center on the nature of evil, that is, what it means to say that an action or a person is evil, and if there is a hallmark that distinguishes evils from other wrongs.² Current debates focus on whether it is preferable to build an account of evil action on a prior account of evil personhood, or vice versa.³ Recent philosophical accounts of evil action deal with the question on whether evil actions can be banal, whether every evil person is an

evildoer, and whether an evil person is disposed to perform evil actions when operating under conditions that favor his/her autonomy.⁴ Centered as it is on the person's feelings, aims, and actions, it is not surprising that -- when translated in the technological world -- evil is mostly constantly anthropomorphized. In contemporary culture, a devilish human is the Terminator, the Matrix, and the evil machine.

Yet, some of today's dystopian visions of technology, i.e., Blade Runner, the cyberpunk literature, and the existential risk raised by Artificial Intelligence (AI), resist the characterization of anthropomorphic evil machines. They are visions of epidemic, permeating, anonymous forms of evil, distributed plans of total oppression, progressive annihilation, and disruption. Steven Hawking argues that although “success in creating artificial intelligence would be the biggest event in human history, [...] it might also be the last.” Elon Musk characterizes the progress of AI as “our biggest existential threat.”⁵ These ‘plans of evil,’ these mortal threats to humankind, express the idea of a non-anthropomorphic evil technology. How can this idea be better understood? In this present essay, I shall not say anything to cast doubt on the importance of these dystopian visions and statements on evil technologies; rather, once these (and other)

visions and statements are seen against a certain background, the true significance of these statements becomes all the more apparent. Thus, I shall propose a specific context in which dystopian visions and statements about evil technologies can be better understood.

More than 3,000 years ago, long before *The Terminator* and *The Matrix*, Semitic imagination was exploring ideas about cosmic evil. In this article I recover this lost myth of evil as cosmic evil. With ‘cosmic evil’ I mean a form of evil expressed in terms of power of disruption beyond redemption on a cosmic scale. Cosmic evil is the non-anthropomorphic, incomprehensible, evil power that causes annihilation. In this article I want to study how the myth historically developed, starting from the biblical verses of Genesis. The question of cosmic evil obsessed the ancient Semitics; time and again, their stories explored the promises and perils of disruption. The initial verses of Genesis immediately raised the basic question of the means and ends, which bring chaos and disorder, and perceived them as intrinsically diabolical. Today, developments in technology and advances in AI bring a new urgency to questions about the implications of combining the cosmic evil and the technological. It is a discussion that one might say the ancient Semitics began.

This paper offers very preliminary ideas toward a genealogical history of the idea of ‘cosmic evil.’⁶ It identifies the concepts that have defined cosmic evil through history and that have potential to illuminate certain ideas about dystopian technological societies and technological threats to humankind. In this article I argue that evil technology can reveal itself in two forms: as an illustration of anthropomorphism (i.e., evil machine) and as a cosmic threat (i.e., catastrophic technology). I dedicate special attention to the latter and challenge the notion that evil can appear either in pure and recognizable shape, that is, in human form. I rather argue that evil can appear in form of systemic or cosmic forces of disruption. More precisely, I mount a case that evil can reveal itself in contemporary culture as evil dystopian societies, such as a callous technological society that is no longer regulated by a state and in which anarchy rules supreme (‘systemic evil’); as an unchallenged machine’s

takeover of earth’s governance; or finally, as an imprudent, uncontrolled development of intelligent machines.

The paper is divided in two parts. First, I present the Semitic roots of two archetypal notions of evil: evil as an embodied power and as a natural force, where I focus on the latter. Second, I describe how the original notion of a sea monster in the Bible travels from one culture to another and becomes the modern Leviathan. Then I show how the modern Leviathan operates as the archetype of a family of evil dystopian societies and tragic future scenarios in contemporary culture. Thus, for example, the capitalism without restraint portrayed by cyberpunk fiction becomes sort of a variation of the technological Leviathan. Finally, I address the existential risk raised by uncontrolled progress of intelligence technologies and read this concept through the lens of the notion of cosmic evil.

Three final notes: first, I use the word ‘myth’ and ‘idea’ with regard to cosmic evil as synonyms. Second, according to an old tradition, I use capital letters with regard to God, His creation, and Him. Finally, biblical quotes are from the new revised standard version of the Oxford annotated Bible with Apocrypha.

PART ONE

Devil

Of course, the serpent is the symbol of evil. The serpent who seduced Adam and Eve in the Eden story of Genesis 3 was not a snake, but a reptilian, a serpentine, divine being. Noted Hebrew and ancient Semitic language scholar Michael S. Heiser has put forth the notion that the Hebrew word for ‘serpent,’ *nachash*, means shining bronze. So Heiser concludes that the serpent may have been a shining serpentine spiritual being. If that’s the case here, *nachash* could mean ‘shining one.’⁷ Later Scriptural books and Patristic tradition (the theology of the Early Church) identified the *nachash* with Lucifer. Lucifer (Latin, *lucifer* -- uncapitalized) is the Latin translation of *nachas*: it means light-bearer, from *lux* (light) and *ferre* (carry). The story of how the original biblical meaning of ‘Satan’ in the books of Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 becomes the ‘Devil’ in the more recent literature would require an article on its own.⁸ The fact is, there is an agglomeration of

meanings, i.e., *nachash*, serpent, Devil, Satan, and Lucifer, which challenge the conventional popular reading of these texts by rejecting the view that the Satan in Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 is equivalent to the Serpent of Genesis 3. As said, the entire matter requires a dedicated article, whereas for the sake of this article, it is sufficient to say that Satan (the Devil, Lucifer) shows up in the New Testament in both pure form (for example, in the desert with Jesus; see Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13) and human embodiment (see Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7; Luke 4:34 and 41). The dual configuration survives the entire period of the high and low middle ages and only in early modernity begins to fade. The anthropocentrism of modernity initially vaporizes the pure evil as a spiritual entity, though maintains the possibility of an evil spirit carried by the human body (possession, witches, etc.). This is the personification phase, when the modern mind is no longer able to conceptualize evil as a pure, spiritual yet maligning force, but can still conceive evil as embodied in a person.

Then, with advent of Enlightenment, the option of this embodiment is eliminated: now it is Man him/herself who proves evil.⁹ The category of the “devilishly human,” Man who is acting like Devil, is the result of the elimination of the spiritual realm from the ontological code of modernity. The regression of the supernatural to the level of superstition leaves evil with no place to go but to Man. Thus, in the Western social imagination the *nachash* reappears in the form of men and women who are evil. What is evil? Is it a human condition? Is evil part of what it is to be human, a category available only to describe the extreme limits of humanity? In the aftermath of the Holocaust, political theorist Hannah Arendt famously spoke of ‘the banality of evil’ to indicate a form of evil that lies behind the curtain of ordinary human life.¹⁰ Evil is hidden in every human being, ready to reveal itself as soon as conditions allow. Evil is not the sadist, the disordered, but it is our neighbor, the man or the woman capable of empathy and remorse. Arendt pointed out that individuals can cause extraordinary harm in circumstances that are not necessary extreme; they are capable of evil eventually for conformity. Evil can emerge in any type of circumstance.

And yet, the entire concept of evil seems to lose gravity. Scholars have lost touch with this

relevant philosophical and theological category. Or maybe they have not lost touch with the sense of evil, but rather, as Susan Sontag said, they “no longer have the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil.”¹¹ So scholars lack the adequate language to talk properly and acutely about evil. Or maybe they have forgotten that the option of evil as part of the anthropological package that makes a human a human, an option that is the modern reincarnation of the biblical *nachash*, is only one of the two ways in which evil has entered the Western imagination. The other is the primordial option of a sea monster, who represents chaos, disorder, and, in fact, evil.¹²

Leviathan

Scholars may be familiar with the Greek concept of chaos. As a matter of fact, Athens and Jerusalem, Greek thought and biblical narrative have offered to Western civilization two distinct meanings of chaos. In the Greek creation myths, chaos (Greek *χάος*, *khaos*) refers to the formless or void state preceding the creation of the universe or cosmos. This chaos was, according to Greek mythology, the origin of everything and the first thing that ever existed. Chaos preceded the divine and the material; it preceded everything. It was the primordial void, the source out of which everything was created, including the universe and the gods. A slightly different meaning is offered by Semitic thought.¹³ In Genesis 1, the first chapter of the book of Genesis, soon after God (Yahweh) “created the heavens and the earth,” the Scripture continues with a poetic verse: “and the earth was without form or shape [formless and empty], with darkness over the abyss [the surface of the deep] and a mighty wind [the Spirit of God] sweeping over the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The ‘deep’ is the primeval ocean, the wind (or spirit) is the spirit of God in action. At this point, the anonymous author of Genesis displays a sense of cosmological power: “God said: Let there be light, and there was light.” The classic interpretation of these initial verses of Genesis, and therefore of the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible, states that this is a cosmology. A cosmology is a primordial, pre-scientific explanation for the creation of the universe. *Creatio ex nihilo*: from nothing, the Creator creates something. This is the classic interpretation.

New exegesis (interpretations) of Genesis, however, stress the idea that at the beginning, there was actually something: there was chaos.¹⁴ Ancient near Eastern civilizations believe the chaos was the primordial status of the universe. The blocks of creation were already there, but they remained unformed until a deity came along to impose order on creation. Chaos imagery includes formlessness, emptiness, deepness, and water. In ancient Israel, like in every other near Eastern civilization at that time, the ocean [water] was the unknown, the uncontrollable, the 'otherworld.' Thus, "the earth" that "was without form or shape;" the "darkness over the abyss," and "waters" were all synonyms for disorder, signposts to express chaos. These symbols of chaos return in two other relevant Old Testament stories. The first, the story of Noah, is about a flood (Genesis 6). God allows the chaotic, disrupting forces of water (chaos) to bring death to the corrupted and lawless life on earth ("But the earth was corrupt in the view of God and full of lawlessness," Genesis 6:11), only sparing Noah and his ark. The second is the story of the Exodus. The climactic moment is when Moses parts the water. God gives Moses the power over the sea, that is, over the forces of chaos. While God in Genesis 1 separates "one body of water from the other" to create the universe (Genesis 1:6), Moses splits the waters of the Red Sea to create the nation of Israel (Exodus 14:21). The New Testament also proposes similar stories: Jesus shows his divine power by walking the high waves of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14: 22-34, Mark 6:45-53, John 6:15-21). The action of walking on the waters shows His victory over the destructive forces of chaos. Thus, Christ's victory over the waters parallels Yahweh's defeat of the primeval Sea, also representing chaos.¹⁵

The difference between Greek and Semitic mythology is clear. In the former, the deity is originally a non-being who becomes by emerging out of chaos. The deity is a creature and depends on chaos. In the latter, the deity drives off chaos and calls the well-ordered cosmos into being. God is the creator and fights the chaos. In Greek thought, chaos is a condition of the universe; in Semitic thought, chaos is a disruptive force that needs to be contained. In the Bible, God never expels chaos beyond the boundaries of His creation. Chaos is marginalized and controlled by God, but

remains latent, still immanent in the cosmos. The story of Noah is emblematic at this regard: God decides to annihilate the corrupted world He created, restoring it to its original state of chaos. In Greek philosophy, chaos and cosmos differed, not in content, but in organization. Creation is organized chaos. In the Bible, chaos and cosmos differ in content and in their effect. Creation is the alternative polarity of chaos: the former is a creational order, the latter a disruptive disorder. To put it differently, God has power over creation and chaos; He imposes cosmological order, the opposite of disorder and chaos.

Genesis 1 isn't the only creation text in the Bible. In Psalm 74 a revelation is disclosed that God destroyed Leviathan when He created the heavens and earth.¹⁶ Appearing in only one pre-biblical text and mentioned six times in the Bible, Leviathan is the water beast symbolic of chaos. Leviathan operates as a paradigmatic monster and enemy of considerable mythological attire; he outweighs other representatives of chaos and evil. The chaos monster is sometimes connected with (unusual) natural phenomena like storms, flood, or drought. Mesopotamian, Hittite, Canaanite, Egyptian, Iranian, and Greek myths describe battles between a figure representing chaos and causing rebellion and a supreme god who restores the order of the gods by overcoming the monster shape as chaos monsters living in the sea. Canaanite literature describes the storm-god's victory over all-encompassing Sea and its allies (dragons and Leviathan) and the subsequent peaceful arrangement of the universe. In all these stories, God brings order. In Psalm 74 the claim is made clear: "*You* crushed the heads of Leviathan (emphasis added)," that is, Yahweh brought order out of chaos, not Marduk. The God of Israel, not the Babylonian god Marduk, restored order and marginalized chaos. Psalm 74 operates as a prism to realize that, in the Semitic tradition, chaos and evil are twins. In fact, Leviathan is the symbol of evil.¹⁷ He represents the maritime chaos which once had endangered the earth but was then overwhelmed by the creator-god. Yahweh's victory was a necessary prelude to his subsequent organization of the cosmos: the opening of springs and the division of time in day and night, summer and winter (Genesis 15-17). Leviathan – just as Behemoth, another monster who is mentioned in the book of Job

and understood in Judaism as a 'land equivalent' to Leviathan (i.e., Leviathan is the water beast symbolic of chaos, and Behemoth is the land beast symbol for the same idea) – represents a symbolic residue, within reality, of evil and chaos which even the creator cannot expel beyond the boundaries of His creation.¹⁸

Why are monsters of chaos seen as evil creatures? It is because they bring destruction at cosmological level. There is a strong association between the destructive power of the sea and other realms of destruction. The sea monsters, the Leviathan and its equivalents, provoke catastrophes, not just calamity, disease, or death. They deliver annihilation. The dragons and the sea serpents represent the powers of chaos; they parallel the divine order, and they match creation with disruption. The battle at the cosmological lever is between order and disorder, the guarantee of an everlasting creation and the uniqueness of the catastrophe.

Dragons were omnipresent in the Christian Middle Ages. A look at the most magnificent Gothic architecture with its goblins and giants, wizards and dragons, would prove the point. During the Middle Ages, Christians began to identify the chaos monster who brings natural disaster as the Devil (or Devilish creature). Revelation 12:9 explicitly says, "This great dragon – the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world – was thrown down to the earth with all his angels." Moreover, it was widely believed that the Devil was responsible for taking the form of a serpent and for tricking Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Therefore, heroes slaying the dragons in the Christian parables (e.g., St. George) symbolized the redemption of humanity from Original Sin (through their faith in Jesus Christ). In accordance to Neo-Platonist canon, Augustine moved the monster inward: to the late classic and medieval Christians up to early modernity, the slaying dragon was no longer just an external struggle to restore order. It was also an internal struggle of mankind, to resist the evil temptations from the Devil and defeat the chaos monsters within themselves. More importantly, Augustine was responsible for the solidification of a specific Platonic idea within Christianity. In the words of theology historian Jeffrey Burton Russell's,

The Platonists never argued that evil's lack of ultimate reality meant that there was no moral evil in the world.

Plato was well aware of wars, murders, and lies. Evil exists, but it exists as a lack of good, just as holes in a Swiss cheese exist only as lack of cheese. The evil of a lie is the absence of truth. Plato did not think that the nonbeing of evil removed evil from the world, only that it removed responsibility for evil from the creator. Evil arose not from the God, but from matter.¹⁹

Evil is the absence of good. Evil arose not from the God, but from the sinners. Natural disasters such as avalanches and landslides, floods and wildfires, reflect the unleashing of dragons and monsters spurred by the sinning behavior of Christians. This is the Platonic idea that Augustine brings into Christianity.

Classic and medieval Christians were well aware of a conscious, malevolent, disruptive force out there, as well as the evil within that they must contain through love. This awareness, however, did not survive modernity. The 1755 earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon affected the best minds in Europe, encouraging them to address the question of evil. Philosopher Susan Neiman frames the engagement of the intelligentsia of the European Age of Enlightenment with the question of evil engendered by Lisbon in terms of theodicy: how can God allow a natural order that causes innocent suffering?²⁰ But, of course, this is already a question framed in modern culture. A pre-modern mind would simply be incapable of conceiving a question that puts God on the stand. The consciousness that emerged after Lisbon was more an attempt by intellectuals to explain earthquakes by positing natural, rather than supernatural, causes. Lisbon denotes the sort of thing insurance companies call natural disasters to remove them from the sphere of divine action; Lisbon also absolves human beings of responsibility for causing disaster because of their sinful condition. The end game of the work of intellectuals such as Kant, Voltaire, Goethe, and Rousseau was to trace a sharp distinction between 'natural evil' (the monster) and 'moral evil' (the Devil), the first transferred from the realm of theology to science, the latter reframed as human cruelty.

Despite the reduction of natural disasters as natural causes, Leviathan, the chaos monster, survived. Leviathan could seem to be a biblical

figure of minor importance. For example, there is no mention that Leviathan is made in the Gospels (but he is present in Revelation, particularly 12:7-12). However, as a paradigmatic monster and enemy of considerable mythological attire, he outweighs other representatives of chaos and evil. From the early second millennium BCE until today, Leviathan has been working as a metaphor for an historical-political entity, unnamed but identified with mere chaos. Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (a treatise on the modern state, first published in 1651) is only one peak in a tremendous list of the so called 'Chaoskampf (German: ka:os,kampf, 'struggle against chaos') constellation' or 'combat myth' in which Leviathan plays the role of a threatening but vanquished enemy. In Hobbes' treatise, a society at the state of nature is equated to the biblical chaos monster. In his treatise, Hobbes was responding to a state of chaos, partisan conflict and civil war in Britain of the 1640s and 50s, when the entire basis of the state was overturned by the public execution of the King. For Hobbes the first priority of government was to preserve safety and security, and to prevent society descending into chaos, a war of *all against all*, total disruption. His answer was the absolute sovereignty of Leviathan, named after a Biblical sea monster of cosmic power. Hobbes' treatise on modern political society as Leviathan exemplifies how an ancient near Eastern mythological concept could travel from one culture to another or adapt itself, within one given culture, to changing historical trends.²¹

A last comment before moving to the next section: in the biblical story of the Genesis, chaos is overcome by the cosmos, but not in the sense that the chaotic forces disappear; rather, they are given their proper space. This outcome stands in radical opposition to the modern theory of theodicy (from Greek *theos*, "god"; *dikē*, "justice"), which can be formulated in general terms as a question: how could a good God permit the existence of evil in this world? Implicit in this question is the idea that a world without evil is possible, if not necessary, to the point that the very existence of evil raises the question of "justifying God" (theodicy). The theory of theodicy is connected to the story of Eden and the Fall; it is not related to the story of creation. The story of creation frames the problem of evil not in terms of evil's existence, as in modern philosophy, but in evil's unleashed becoming. The problem is not that evil exists,

but that it does not rest in its proper place. The real predicament is not that evil exists, because the option of a world without evil has never been in place. Evil is part of the cosmos. It is part of reality. The real predicament is the uncontrolled evil, the evil without limits and constraints, the evil that destroys order. A world without a controlled evil is a world without order. And a world without order is an evil world.

PART TWO

Evil Machine

The case of evil machine, the machine that is evil is the result of a dual transformation: first, the attribution of satanic characteristics or behavior to Man, in modernity; second, the transfer of such attributes to the machine, in postmodernity. In popular literature, a computer has already killed an astronaut by 1968 (*2001: A Space Odyssey*). A few years later (the novel was published in 1973 and then completely rewritten in 1997; the movie with the same title was produced in 1977), an artificial intelligence program builds a robot that impregnates a woman (*Demon Seed*). In order to stop machines from harming humans, Isaac Asimov invented the Three Laws of Robotics, which are sometimes cited as a model for ethical robots – machines that are capable of acting ethically on the basis of encoded moral principles.²² Not one but two disciplines deal with the reality of potentially dangerous machines: the newly emerging areas of machine ethics, roboethics, and their various synonyms (machine morality, friendly AI, artificial morality, and roboethics). Traditionally, machine ethics is concerned with describing how machines could behave ethically towards humans; roboethics is concerned with how humans relate to these machines in both the design and use phase of their operation. In fact, the ethical behavior of machines is determined by the way their systems have been designed. To put it differently, the ethical behavior of autonomous machines depends on their design, but the design, and the determination of the ethical behavior of machines, ultimately depends on the extent that the designers can predict every single situation a machine will ever encounter. Although in the last decade the terms 'machine ethics' and 'roboethics' have drifted a bit and have been used somewhat synonymously to refer to the ethical concerns raised by robotics technologies, in this paper the original separation is maintained.

Before addressing the case of cosmic evil, I need to clarify that here I discuss two forms of cosmic evil: a social, political version of cosmic evil, which I name ‘systemic evil,’ and a catastrophic, apocalyptic evil— a proper cosmic evil. I would define ‘systemic evil’ as a phrase of reference to express the practice of social and political institutions focusing on family disintegration, community collapse, and personhood annihilation. Systemic evil stands for the evil character of the dystopian society, the surveillance society, the society of Blade Runner, and the cyberpunk science fiction literature. In these forms of societal organizations, law is replaced by oppression and order is substituted by criminalization of large segments of the population. Manufacturing of truth and constructing of target populations take the place of liberal values and democratic forms of citizenship.²³ For reasons that will become clear later, in this article I call these societal forms ‘technological Leviathan.’ Thus, I define ‘technological Leviathan’ as a dystopian technological society dominated by systemic evil. In this final section of this paper, I show how dystopian narratives of threatening technological advancement have largely been fueled by religious imagination.

The case of systemic evil is the result of a dual transformation: the attribution of malign characteristics or behaviors to society, in modernity, and the transfer of such attributes to other social institutions, including global organizations, states, and private corporations, in postmodernity. Leviathan refers to societies at the state of nature. Such primordial societies, that is, societies before organized societies, are primarily subject to “the war of all against all,” in Hobbes’ famous words. Technological forms of Leviathan are instead futuristic societies, that is, societies that come when the rule of law has been suppressed and disorder reigns. In these societies, order is oppressive, and freedom is replaced by benevolent acts that hide the true horrors at hand. Evil dystopia takes different forms in popular narrative, but it maintains a common character of cruelty and survivals live in dehumanizing conditions, treated like property, and stripped of all God-given rights.

A specific configuration of evil dystopia is anarchist societies, societies with no regulatory state. Anarchist societies are often seen as societies in which corporations rule supreme. They represent a world which has spiraled into

anarchy, a world free of the constraints of government, but not free of violent aggression put forth by sinister entities driven by purely economic interest. Social pillars which characterize civilization such as markets, churches, and places of organized social life are absent: these social constructs that promote order are replaced by the conquest ethic of material gain obtained by means of technological brute force. No restoration in some form of governance, legality, or order is possible: evil power is ubiquitous and the over-arching spirit of the society is anarchic, if not downright nihilistic. Under the pressure of constant violence perpetrated by all-powerful private powers controlling the society through technological forces, the society disintegrates and returns to its primitive nature. Evil corporations often serve as the antagonists in cyberpunk novels, in which this dystopian and evil regime is challenged by the central character of the hacker, who is a lone individual fighting for survival.²⁴ The over-arching spirit of evil dystopia is anarchic, if not downright nihilistic: the world has become increasingly ravaged, technological power is unstoppable, and ethical remedies are irrelevant. Thus, the core of dystopian societies like that feels like it’s been perverted past the point of return. Not surprisingly, anarchy stimulates the rise of the fortified suburbs (or gated suburbs).²⁵

Another configuration of evil dystopia is the oppressive state. The dialectic of anarchic chaos versus hierarchical order and social organization takes in dystopia an evil twist: the state becomes over controlling and uses technology at this end. Oppressive state as a dystopian configuration is the reverse of anarchist societies: while in anarchist societies the society is to be inherently evil, oppressive states regard the state as inherently evil. In the case of oppressive states, society retains some semblance of its former self, and all humanity has not yet been lost. Crime and lawlessness are contained but at a high cost: the establishment of a dark and oppressive state seems to represent the last human domino that needs to be protected before evil chaos takes over completely. Variants of dystopia can see technology taking the place of government or even of governing people.²⁶ Other variants show a benevolent government trying to disguise its intrusive tendency with the avocation of noble scopes or security imperatives.

Superintelligence

Now I move to a more proper form of cosmic evil, an evil that operates at cosmic magnitude and provokes catastrophes, including situations where humankind as a whole is in peril. In 2014, Oxford University Professor Nick Bostrom wrote a book concerned with the existential dangers that could threaten humanity as the result of the development of artificial forms of intelligence.²⁷ In his highly abstract, largely philosophical essay, Bostrom proposes alternative scenarios and, without being pessimistic about humanity's chance of avoiding destruction at the hands of its future AI creations, focusses on the concerns and self-awareness that are necessary to humanity facing the development of a superintelligence as it becomes more likely. In a previous paper, Bostrom defines the notion of "existential danger" (or "existential risk") as "one that threatens the premature extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life or the permanent and drastic destruction of its potential for desirable future development."²⁸ He classifies risks in terms of 'personal,' 'local,' and 'global:' an existential risk operates at a global scale. After writing a first paper on existential risk in 2002, he returned on the same subject about 10 years later. This time the link between existential risk and chaos is framed with more precision and so is the link between present technological risk and old natural risk. With regards to the first link, Bostrom argues that unrestrained technological progress, a progress that humans may be unable to control even if they wanted to, no matter how hard they try, is ultimately dangerous. In his article, Bostrom introduces the idea of "normative uncertainty" and claims that the concept of existential risk is subject to some normative issue. With regards to the second link, he depicts the transfer from natural types of risks to anthropogenic risks:

Humanity has survived what we might call *natural existential risks* for hundreds of thousands of years; thus, it is prima facie unlikely that any of them will do us in within the next hundred ... In contrast, our species is introducing entirely new kinds of existential risk ... [in fact] the great bulk of existential risk in the foreseeable future consists of *anthropogenic existential risks* — that is, those arising from human activity (original emphasis).

When everything is considered, it may be said that Bostrom offers a helicopter view of the problem, and remains vague as far as practical remedies. He implicitly advocates to some indirect form of governance. He maintains his stand on the groundless ground between different, even conflicting, options. He recommends humanity "to pursue a sustainable trajectory, one that will minimize the risk of existential catastrophe." But he is aware that, "unlike the problem of determining the optimum rate of fuel consumption in a rocket, the problem of how to minimize existential risk has no known solution."²⁹

These themes return in his celebrated 2014 book on paths and risks of Artificial Intelligence. More specifically, Bostrom addresses the topic of 'superintelligence,' a not human-level Artificial Intelligence that can pass the Turing Test. The book is about what comes after that. Once humans build a machine as smart as a human, that machine writes software to improve itself, which enables it to further improve itself - - but faster, then faster and faster. The equal-to-human stage proves brief as the technology charges ahead into superhuman territory. This territory is not only an unknown territory; it is also a dangerous territory. Though rigorous and manically self-restrained in his proceeding, the author cannot avoid delivering a sort of sober reminder that what humanity is engaging in is an exercise at outsmarting something that's smarter and more powerful than humans are. His eloquent warning has been mentioned extensively: "we humans are like small children playing with a bomb. Such is the mismatch between the power of our plaything and the immaturity of our conduct. Superintelligence is a challenge for which we are not ready now and will not be ready for a long time."³⁰

Scholars who have been dissecting the same risk are Stuart Russell, a UC Berkeley Computer Science Professor, who insists that robots must share human value system. The problem, he argues, is the possible value misalignment between machines and humans.³¹ Eliezer Shlomo Yudkowsky, a research fellow at the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, in Berkeley, argues that it would be easy for an Artificial Intelligence to acquire power given few initial resources.³² Stuart Armstrong, a research fellow at the Future of Humanity Institute centers on the safety and possibilities of Artificial Intelligence, and works to at least

partially integrate humanity's values into the design of Artificial Intelligence in order to mitigate the risk of misalignment.³³ Tom Dietterich and Eric Horvitz of Oregon State University have joined the list of luminaries speaking about the threat and potential negative effects of Artificial Intelligence on the future of humanity. They advise researchers to focus on the challenges coming from near-term Artificial Intelligence and address their concerns about potential dystopian consequences coming in future.³⁴ The literature on the subject is rapidly growing.³⁵

Though the language is philosophical (not moral or religious) and the tone is almost constantly speculative (not emphatic or imaginative) in Bostrom's work (and in the works of the other scholars who follow his same path), the patten of Hobbes' *Leviathan* is still recognizable: some form of governance is unfortunate but necessary to restrain the chaotic tendency of a technological society operating at an anthropogenic state of nature. Beyond that, scholars can detect in Bostrom's work the contours of the old Semitic myth of the chaos sea monster, the evil sea monster. The existential risk that could cause human extinction or destroy the potential of Earth-originating intelligent life can be seen as a current reinterpretation of the old notion of cosmic evil. In Bostrom, technology is otherworldly as much as the ocean was otherworldly to the ancient Israelites. The vast amount of water that nobody can travel without risk has become the unstoppable technological progress that nobody can seriously navigate without concern. The mortal risk of the sea monster is evil because he brings disorder, and disorder is dangerous, disorder means death. That mortal risk has traveled from ancient and medieval culture to modernity, and from modernity to postmodernity, and nowadays takes the form of an existential risk. The normative uncertainty has replaced God's will. It may be not a coincidence that, in his book, Bostrom doesn't answer the 'what is to be done' question concerning the likely emergence of non-human (machine-based) super-intelligence and related risk. He must stop his narrative at a much safer point, since the recognition that human failure to comprehend the magnitude of the risks humanity is about to confront would be a grave error. In the old Semitic mythology,

God creates the sea monster, and though He cannot get rid of him, He can easily have control over him. This is not the case of humans and technology, apparently. The old myth travels from culture to culture, but the damage to the myth caused by modernity, namely the disappearance of a figure with authority over chaos, undermines the potentiality of the myth to offer guidance.

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