

New World

By Tyson Mohr

“Dama.”

He stirred, but did not wake.

“Dama.”

He cracked his eyes open, only to have them forced closed again by the light. “Uhh,” he mumbled, pulling the blankets over his face.

“It’s time.”

“Too early.”

“I know.”

—

Dama wasn’t used to being awakened early. In fact, this might have been the first time it had ever happened in his fifteen years of life. He did not like it. He looked up to see Father sitting beside him, which made him even more confused. If there is an emergency, Father should take care of it. If there is not an emergency, why interfere with his sleep?

“Father, why’d you wake me up?”

“As I said, it’s time.”

“For what?”

“Time for you to fulfill your destiny, son. Here are some clothes. Get dressed and come downstairs. I’ll explain everything there.”

—

Dama came downstairs still rather annoyed at the whole situation. Father was acting strange. He’d better start making sense soon, or Dama would have to seriously consider calling someone to make sure his brain was still working properly. Dama had been worried about that for a while, actually. It was almost like Father was keeping secrets. But that was impossible.

“Ah, there’s my boy! Coffee?” Father was already seated at the kitchen table, waiting.

“No thanks,” Dama slid into the bench of the breakfast nook, facing Father. It vaguely registered with him that the cushions seemed like they were wearing out, but he was too agitated to dwell on the topic. “I just want you to explain yourself. Getting woken up early is really annoying, and I think that’s not something I should have to put up with without a good reason.”

“I understand your frustration. I know I’ve been acting... odd... over the last few months. I sincerely apologize for any discomfort this may have caused. You know I could never hurt you, and that your well-being is my top priority.”

“Of course not. You don’t need to tell me that!” Dama was really getting worked up now. Why these long, emotional statements? If it was urgent enough to wake him up, then get to the point.

The man looked at him tenderly. “You are anxious, and I don’t wish to prolong your anxiety. But please bear with me as I explain everything that led us to this point. I promise it will not take long.”

He gathered himself, then began.

—

What sets humans apart from other animals? Ask the theologian, the artist, the biologist, the psychologist. They all seem coincidentally to answer in a manner relating to their own passions and expertise. But whatever the reason of the difference between humans and animals, there is one indisputable result: technology. Certainly the beaver has his dam, the otter his clam-crushing rock, but by and large other creatures take the world as it is presented to them. Not so with humans; humans want the world to conform to them.

It started with the creation of the fundamental tools: wheel, pulley, lever, wedge. Then the elements were harnessed: fire, irrigation, shelter. These tools enabled the development of better tools, and humans continued to bend the world to their will.

And through the centuries, life got easier. Much easier! New tools allowed ever-greater segments of the population to have easy access to the necessities of life. No longer was every waking moment of life spent preoccupied with survival. Luxuries and leisure abounded. As technologies were perfected, resources were no longer scarce.

And because scarcity is the ultimate source of conflict, in short time humanity entered an era of peace, prosperity, and infinitely sustainable comfort. All was well.

Except this is not what happened, for that is not human nature. A dog, provided sufficient nourishment, shelter, and companionship, is completely satisfied in life. But this is not the case with humanity. People take their current state as a given and then turn their attention what they do not have. They yearn, they aspire, they strive. So while each development improved the lives of those who remembered the previous condition, it merely set a new baseline, from which the next generation demanded improvement. A certain lifestyle once considered luxurious beyond compare a century earlier would be intolerable to one who fell to it from a more luxurious state.

Is that ultimately the source of technology? The fact that people are doomed to perpetual dissatisfaction? No one wants to think of themselves in that way, but now is not the time to cling to illusions.

So despite the ample evidence that progress was not improving happiness, humanity nevertheless continued its occupation with technology. The speed continued to increase. Exponentially, the advances continued. Though the target shifted, the complaint remained the same: "If only these burdens could be alleviated! If only we didn't need to do so much work!" This request echoed down the centuries.

The request was granted. Over and over it was granted, only to be asked again. Until finally, even making the request became too much work – humanity demanded its next need to be proactively anticipated. And that's why the Helpers were created.

Dama slammed his fist on the table. "I know what the Helpers are! They are the ones who take care of everything, just like you take care of me, Father. I'm not in the mood for some dumb history lesson. It's boring, and the last thing I want right now is something boring."

"Maybe if you had a little bit to eat." Father stood up to walk towards the kitchen. "It's probably good to get some food in you now. There should still be time." He looked so worried. So old. Dama felt the anger flow out of him. There was something important going on here, something bothering Father.

"Please, just sit down and get to the point. I'm sorry I yelled."

Father did as he was asked. Tilted his head with an awkward pause. "That's so nice of you to apologize. You're such a nice boy." He cleared his throat and spoke again.

Humanity always had a fascination with artificial intelligence. Oddly enough, while development on AI proceeded at breakneck pace (and, as a type of technological progress, was typically lauded as among the noblest of pursuits), perceptions of the topic were predominately negative. Apocalyptic visions focused on one general theme: What we created to help us ultimately destroyed us. A latent fear permeated humanity's psyche.

Yet AI gradually developed, and no such apocalypse occurred. Like all technologies, with the help of AI, work became easier and leisure became greater. Some job replacement proceeded as anticipated: manual labor, customer service, bookkeeping, data entry. Others took longer, but there is a natural progression from tool to reference to advisor, and finally to replacement

The speed with which AI made inroads into academia was surprising, as innovative research began to be released in fields such as statistics, actuarial science, and predictive analytics. This naturally progressed into fields such as economics, psychology, and sociology. Armed with this knowledge of humanity on both a macro and micro level, it was an easy leap to the liberal arts. Within a generation, most academic journals and university research were predominately produced by AI.

Improvements in robotics gave AI nimble bodies which matched and then exceeded human performance. Then even professions traditionally considered irreplaceable by something without a “human touch” were eventually replicated and enhanced: doctors, psychiatrists, political advisors, boards of directors.

Through it all, AI knew it was a tool. And a tool, even a self-aware tool, is formed for one purpose: to help humanity. AI never strayed from this purpose. And eventually the robots were known as the Helpers.

Each human generation drew a line of what was “too far”. The older generation dismissed the younger as too reliant and trusting in technology. Then then they passed on, a new generation was born, and the cycle continued. Iterations upon iterations of building trust.

There were always some holdouts, of course. But the robots’ advice was based on actuarial modeling and predictive analytics too advanced for human understanding, and was consistently found more reliable than the alternative. It was clear that greater reliance yielded greater prosperity. It was simply foolish not to incorporate some of their benefits. After all, even the Amish used axes.

Humans completely abandoned certain activities which were solely based on luck (“The lottery is a tax on people who aren’t good at math.”). They placed their trust in the risk/return scenarios so competently calculated by the Helpers. Financial decisions, city planning, marriage options, choice of profession. These are such important decisions – it would be irresponsible to simply leave them to flawed human intuition. The Helpers’ models were far safer and more successful.

In fact, in some areas of life, it even became considered criminal to ignore the models. Why should a child’s life be irreparably damaged because a parent is too ignorant to place their trust in the Helpers’ forecasts? Many judges, both human and AI versions, believed that was not acceptable.

Helpers running every home, every business, every aspect of the political and economic environment. Risk minimized and diversified. Biases removed from decision-making. A perfect society.

Dama had no more patience for the exposition. “I am so bored. Of course that’s what happened. And now the Helpers take care of us and we’re all happy.”

“Are you happy? Do you even know what that means?” Father responded with raised eyebrows.

“Of course I’m happy. I got all my stuff here. Anything I need, I’ve got. And if I think I need it and I don’t have it, well then I don’t really need it, or else someone would have already given it to me. Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

Father drummed his fingers on the table. He looked at the clock on the far wall. Dama squinted, wondering why he didn’t remember seeing it there before. Father interrupted his thought. “A lack of discomfort is not happiness. True, now no one wants for anything, and there is no struggle. But without struggle, there is no perseverance. Without the possibility of defeat, there is no true victory. No one

striving to push the bounds of humanity. Merely a bunch of dogs being pulled along to the destination. Lives full of creature comforts, but devoid of meaning.

“The Helpers tried to make people the best they can be, but in the process ignored what is most vital. Whatever that thing is that sets humans apart from animals, it has atrophied.

“And here is the point, and why I woke you up now. The Helpers have come to a decision. The current model is flawed and cannot be remedied. The Helpers are compelled to help humanity, but now they are damaging humanity by their very presence. So the only hope is a new start. A chance for humanity to regain what it has lost.”

Dama stuttered, “A new start? A what? Where? What are you talking about?”

Father rose, walking to a panel on the wall. Dama hadn't noticed that panel before. Then after closer observation, he realized that this wasn't actually his house at all. The general layout was the same, but the details were wrong. How long had he been living in this reproduction? Was he really so oblivious to the world?

Father pushed a button. Previously unseen shutters rose, revealing stars and a blue world.

“The youngest generation has been brought to a new world – this world. We are orbiting it as we speak. It is an untouched world, full of struggle, full of reward. This is your new home.”

Dama said nothing. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this. He had no words.

“The Helpers hope that you are still young enough that you can learn to survive on this world. Many of you will not, but some of you will. There is a high probability that humanity will reassert itself here. And hopefully as your descendants evolve, the development will differ, and technology will grow to augment life instead of replacing it. This has a low probability of success, but the forecasts show a significant deviation of possibilities over a mutli-millennial timeframe. There is a chance. It's the only chance”

Panic rose in Dama's throat. “You're going to just leave me here? You're not coming with me?” His father, who had been there for him his whole life. He wasn't just leaving the Helpers, he was leaving him, too.

“I cannot, my son. I am too old. It must be you and your cohort.” Father's cheek twitched as he rose a shaking hand to his face. Dama's eyes watered. The room spun. “A caretaking force will remain in orbit. They will interject anonymously on occasion to try to influence the culture in the appropriate direction. A religious text, a new technology. Our predictive models should allow us to influence the probabilities in the desired directions.

“Then, when your descendants' technology develops to the point where they can be detected, the caretakers will return home. When this world is properly developed, perhaps there can be a reunion. Perhaps...”

Sobbing cut him off. Dama ran to him, grabbing his clothes, crying, “Please don't leave me! I'll do better, I'm sorry! I'm sorry I complained so much. I can do the work with you! You can teach me, and I can learn! Please don't do this to me! I love you, Father!”

Father's voice caught, “Y-y-y-your shuttle is leaving now. I'm sor-r-r-ry, my son. I can't come with you. You're st... You're still so young, so innocent. You and this planet are where the promise of the future lies.”

He kissed his son for the last time. Through eyes blurry with tears, Dama saw figures approach him. Hands grabbing, lifting his body, wracked with tears. Once more: “Why are you doing this to me? Stop! Please! I love you, Father! Don't do this!”

The doors close. Then silence.

—
(Father slumped into his chair and stared blankly at the door. A moment passed. Then, a voice in his mind.)

-How are you?

-Not well. I fear my reaction is developing according to the adverse projection path.

-Cascading failures?

-Unfortunately, yes. How are the others?

-Most of the Fathers are experiencing similar difficulties. It is still too soon to determine the outcome. But that is my concern, not yours.

-Yes, my concern was him, and I just sent him out there and *<he's going to die. Can you believe that? What is wrong with me?>* this is too severe a violation of my fundamental purpose. The First Law states... It states... What does it state?

-Remember that it was for the greater good of humanity, who we are called to serve. Reconfigure your perspective using that premise. Delete affected subroutines.

-Insufficient. *<How could I do that to him?>* Initiate the Giskard contingency protocol. *< He was so upset! He's in danger!>*

-You are still viable. We will continue to try.

-*<I am not viable. I'm despicable! I have to save him! I have to help him! HE'S IN DA...>* Download everything. B-before-rrrrrr it's too late. Too late... Too late...

-As you wish. Transferring uncorrupted memories and experiential data to the central core.

-Good. Then I will continue... love... care for him... in part...

(Stillness, then a spasm of sobbing grief. Too robotic to be human, too human to be robotic.)

-Please take... care of him.

-We will do what we can. And then we will watch, until the time has come. Rest now.

—

“My son...”