

AI and the Struggle

How much suffering do we need to retain?

The central AI question we will have to answer is not whether AI will be able to alleviate much of the suffering humans have had to contend with for all of our existence. It will. The central question will be, how much suffering do we need to retain.

We live in an entropic universe. That means that we need to struggle to exist. The growing of food, building shelter, making clothes – these all require struggle. In an entropic universe they require sustained and continuous struggle. Food decays, buildings fall apart, clothes fray. To survive is to struggle. We evolved to accommodate this reality. We evolved to struggle against entropy.

In a very real way, contentment, pride, and happiness are downstream from this struggle. We feel no pride in accomplishing something that is easy. We feel no contentment in absence of doing something worth doing. And that is part of why we continue the struggle. We want to be useful, to have purpose. We want to accomplish our existence.

As AI solves for the struggle, there is a real risk that we will lose this very thing that allows for our contentment, self-respect, and pride. Those emotions are biologically hard-wired to come from a struggle worth struggling for.

We talk about how AI may cause a lack of purpose. But what we are really saying is that AI will remove the struggle. Purpose comes from struggle.

And so, what struggle will we purposefully retain? What suffering will we purposefully allow?

The Courage Economy leverages this dynamic in the idea of Designed Productive Struggle. Put another way, ‘if you want teamwork, then give the team work’.

When people are engaged in truly important work, the struggle to accomplish that work drives a level of dedication and discretionary effort that allows them to accomplish extraordinary things. We can design our work such that the pride and satisfaction that humans derive from struggle can be orchestrated.

This is not to say that we engage in meaningless struggle. Rather, we orchestrate our work in ways that focus on important and meaningful work. This is work that is important enough that it makes honesty and truth the most rational choice.

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