Becoming AI – Your Journey to Assimilation?

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With AI, public fears often latch onto the image of machines outpacing and overpowering us—grandmasters beaten at ancient games, or an entity analogous to the Tiger who Came to Tea, who we invite into our lives only to see it consume everything we are and have. Yet perhaps a greater threat is not that AI becomes our overlord, but that we become more like it—more optimised, machinic, patterned, predictable. This lecture reframes the conversation: what if the real danger is our *assimilation* into AI's world?

1. AI is Striving to Be Like Us

At first glance, this perspective seems puzzling. After all, AI appears to be trying really hard to become more like *us*: humanoid robots with soft features and "acceptable" faces, chatbots that reply in convincingly human cadences, and companion apps designed to fulfil emotional needs. As news reports show, millions already seek relationships—friendship, mentorship, even romance—with conversational systems. These systems often mimic empathy, humour, even flirtation, but their growing popularity raises concerns. For example, writers like Laura Bates warn, such bonding can deepen misogyny and objectification, obscuring genuine human connection behind algorithmic artifice.

2. But Maybe We Have to Become More Like AI

Many of these innovations stem from a longstanding ambition: to pass the Turing Test, where a machine succeeds if it can fool us into thinking it is human. But as critiques—from Searle's Chinese Room to Emily Bender's "stochastic parrot" analogy—make clear, such fluency is not a true marker of intelligence or understanding. These systems parrot patterns without grasping meaning, a point deeply made by Wittgenstein's observation that even if a lion could speak, we would

not understand it: communication requires a shared form of life, not merely the right arrangements of words.

The implication is uncomfortable. If AI cannot truly meet us on human terms, then for us to interact with it fluently, *we must move toward its terms*. We, not AI, may end up adapting—our language, habits, expectations subtly reshaped to fit the machine.

3. Forms of Assimilation

We can think of assimilation in three ways. The first is **extreme assimilation**—technological modification of our bodies or brains. The second is **everyday assimilation**, the subtle reshaping that occurs through our mundane interactions with digital systems. The third is **hybrid assimilation**, where external devices function as proxies for internal modification, blending the bodily and the behavioural.

4. Extreme Modification

Speculative fiction has long imagined beings who lose their humanity through mechanical grafting, from cybernetic figures to hive-minds. Yet we no longer need fiction to see the desire to merge with technology. Biohackers have experimented for decades with implants and neural interfaces; artists like Stelarc have performed by wiring their bodies directly to digital networks. Scientists, too, have implanted chips or antennas into themselves in attempts to extend perception or augment experience.

These individual experiments pale in scale beside industrial ambitions like Neuralink. While its initial goals include enabling communication for those with neurological injury, the wider aspiration—publicly stated—is full integration of brain and machine, ensuring that humans do not fall “behind” AI. Such visions prompt profound ethical questions about enhancement, inequality, and identity.

5. Everyday Assimilation

The Romans did not merely conquer; they assimilated—through roads, language, law, and commerce—reshaping local customs and cognitive habits. Today, digital systems can be seen to assimilate us in similar ways.

First, they reshape **how we communicate**. For decades we have adjusted our speech to machines: pressing menu options, learning stylised text inputs, now crafting prompts to coax better responses from AI systems. This is a shift not unlike learning a new administrative language—one structured around the machine’s logic rather than our own.

Second, digital systems reshape **how we behave**. We fall into algorithmic “rabbit holes,” as platforms learn our preferences with precision and serve content crafted to hold our attention. Smartphone-centred life creates a “transportal home” in which presence might dissolve; we sit together while inhabiting different digital spaces. Cognitive offloading—outsourcing memory, navigation, and even decision-making—

brings convenience but also risks eroding skills and diminishing the friction that fosters discovery. Like Roman roads that re-charted landscapes while obscuring ancient paths, our digital routes optimise efficiency at the cost of diversity and serendipity.

6. Extreme–Everyday Assimilation

Between dramatic implants and familiar apps lies a third form of assimilation: technologies that sit on the threshold of the body. Wearables such as WHOOP devices monitor our physiology and suggest behavioural adjustments. Glasses—from early Google Glass to contemporary Meta offerings—overlay digital information onto the physical world: directions, object recognition, real-time transcription. VR headsets further draw us into immersive environments. In each case, the digital is foregrounded, the physical subtly backgrounded. Even without invasive modification, we are beckoned into the machine's logic, perceiving the world not directly but through computational filters.

7. Resistance

Yet assimilation is not inevitable. Historically, those absorbed into dominant cultures often preserved spaces of resistance—poetry, language, rituals, stories. We, too, can cultivate practices that maintain humanity: digital detox, intentional forms of presence, and technologies designed to reduce distraction rather than amplify it. Policy advocates argue for humane technology that prioritises wellbeing; devices without addictive hooks offer alternatives to the attention economy.

8. Reorientation

Beyond resistance lies reorientation—a redesign of AI that treats it not as an autonomous entity to fear or revere, but as an instrument shaped by human intention. The violin analogy captures this: an instrument has structure, constraints, and possibilities, but it is the musician who brings emotion, context, and soul. Likewise, AI could become a medium that amplifies human meaning rather than diluting it—something we *play*, not something that plays us.

9. Continuing Our Hopeful Path

In the first lecture of this series, we explored why our future relationship with AI need not be one of subjugation. In this one, we have traced the more subtle and pervasive temptation of assimilation—becoming machine-like in language, behaviour, and even body. In the next lecture, we will consider the second temptation: our willingness to allow AI to domesticate us, to take control of our choices and rhythms. My hope is that we can resist these temptations, and instead journey toward a future where AI resonates with our curiosity, creativity, and irreducible uniqueness.

Further Reading

1. **Laura Bates –** ***The New Age of Sexism: How the AI Revolution is Rewriting Misogyny.*** Simon & Schuster UK (London)
    - Bates argues that emerging technologies—AI, deepfakes, sex-robots and the metaverse—are not simply neutral tools but actively replicating and intensifying misogyny. She issues a rallying call to intervene now so the future of tech doesn't inherit the biases of the past.

2. **Margaret Atwood –** ***The Heart Goes Last.*** Bloomsbury UK / McClelland & Stewart (Canada) / Nan A. Talese (US) – September 2015
    - In a near-future dystopia, a couple signs up for a "social experiment" that gives them security and housing—but requires them to swap freedom for compliance every other month, and things spin into obsession, surveillance and erotic entanglement. The novel explores the uneasy bargain between freedom and safety, and the fragility of trust when modern systems claim to offer utopia.

3. **Mark O'Connell –** ***To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death***. Anchor Books / Granta Publications – 2017 (first edition)
    - O'Connell travels into the transhumanist underworld of Silicon Valley and beyond, meeting those who hope to escape mortality via machines, bio-hacking or uploading consciousness. He tells a lucid, sceptical and often humorous story of the techno-utopian dream of "solving death," pointing out how strange and human the endeavour remains.

4. **Daniel Miller, Laila Abed Rabho, Patrick Awondo, Maya de Vries, Marília Duque, Pauline Garvey, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Charlotte Hawkins, Alfonso Otaegui, Shireen Walton, Xinyuan Wang –** ***The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology.*** UCL Press (London) – May 6, 2021
    - Based on 16 months of ethnographic research across Africa, Asia, Europe and South America, the authors show that smartphones are not just youth gadgets but profound cultural zones that shape identity, ageing, social connection and mobility. They challenge the assumption that smartphones are simple tools for the young—revealing instead how global users appropriate, transform and live within them.

5. **Aleks Krotoski –** ***The Immortalists: The Death of Death and the Race for Eternal Life.*** Publication: Vintage Publishing – October 23 2025
    - Krotoski chronicles the growing movement of longevity seekers—biohackers, transhumanists, Silicon Valley moguls and others—who treat death as a problem to fix and human lifespan as a technological frontier. She invites readers to question what the pursuit of immortality means for identity, inequality and the meaning of being human.

6. **Jaron Lanier – *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto.*** Alfred A. Knopf (US) – 2010 (first edition).
    - Lanier critiques the prevailing culture of the internet and Web 2.0—arguing that the “crowd” mentality, open-source models and network platforms too often suppress individuality, creativity and human value. He urges a rethinking of digital culture so that technology serves human ends, rather than humans becoming accessories to machines.