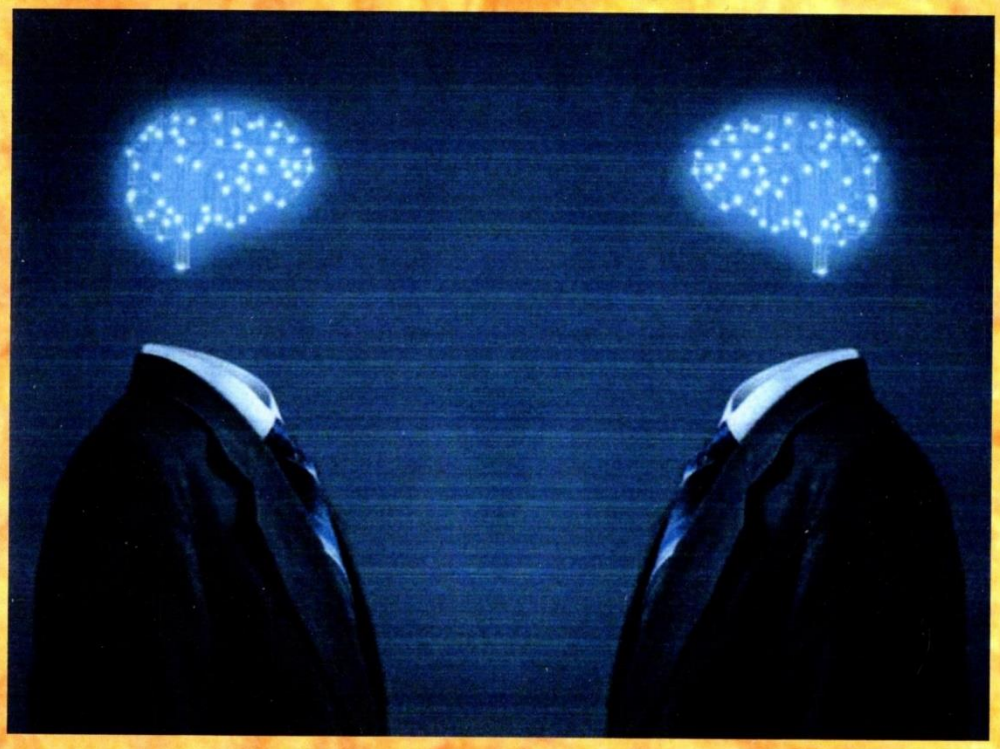
JAMPA DORJE



PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE EPISTEMOLOGY

Reflections on AI & Big Data

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PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE EPISTEMOLOGY

When an event is of serious purport, journalists sometimes use the term “existential crisis” as a rhetorical flourish to emphasize the importance of the event to our very existence. However, the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is of such a magnitude and of such far reaching consequences a hyperbolic word like “metaphysical” is necessary. And yet metaphysical is an accurate term to use because it designates what is now causing the paradigm shift and why we are on the cusp of a brave, new consciousness.

In *The Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Immanuel Kant asks if metaphysics is possible as a science? He believes that it is perfectly natural to ask metaphysical questions but that these questions usually wind up in confused debates. For metaphysics to be on sound ground as a science, Kant believes that “a critique of pure reason must systematically investigate the role of *a priori* concepts in understanding” (Wiki). In other words, until we know how we know what we know, we cannot answer the big questions. That was in 1783; this is 2023; and it appears that machine learning and data science in conjunction with advances in neuroscience are about to stand Kant on his head.

Through the ages there have been collections of documents containing human knowledge (e.g., The Library of Alexandria), but in the 18th century there was a collaborative effort to collect all knowledge and organize it into categories. In the *Encyclopedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*, published in 1751 and edited by Diderot and d’Alembert, there is a table of knowledge “based on Bacon’s division of human faculties into memory (history), reason (science), and imagination (poetry)” with many subcategories (Larry Steiner, *The Invention of Art*, University of Chicago, 2001). Between 1751-1765, the *Encyclopedia* grew to 28 volumes, with 71,818 articles, 1800 plates, and 3,129 illustrations (Wiki, “Enclyclopedia”). This enterprise can be considered as the beginning of what today we call Big Data.

What did Kant think of this enterprise? He mentions Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* in a footnote in the section “First Division: Analytic of the Beautiful” of his book *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Cambridge University Press edition, translated by John T. Goldthwait, p.38, as divulged by ChatGPT). Kant writes:

> Encyclopedias, which collect in one place the many things that must be known in order to have culture and taste, and to which the learned may go for reference and the unlearned for instruction, are very useful. The French

> have the advantage of the *Encyclopédie* of M. Diderot, which, though not free from defects, is very extensive and varied.

As a philosopher searching for moral universals, the secular nature of the encyclopedist's enterprise may have given Kant pause. As the modern Big Data ChatGPT often begins: "I am a language model and do not have beliefs and opinions." In this sense, the *Encyclopedia* would not enable a researcher to arrive at moral or aesthetic conclusions.

Kant would likely be fascinated by the storehouse of data and the speed of access of ChatGPT, but he would worry about the mistakes it makes. For him, the possibility of an advanced Artificially Intelligent Consciousness upstaging our human ontological condition would induce in him a teleological vertigo verging on the sublime.

Buddhist philosopher Peter Hershock insists we are moving from the data gathering era of computers to the "attention economy" era. Big Data technology can now identify us as individuals and through advertising exploit us economically, what Hershock refers to the "colonization of our mental faculties," producing a metaphysical revolution that will increasing threaten our freedom to think and act (YouTube: "A Buddhist perspective on AI and Big Data" at 13:14).We are being drawn into a terrifying world by a technology that uses synthetic intelligence to shape our behavior. We are inundated by fake news; we are seduced by the sexualization of commodities; our attention spans become shorter as we web surf; our mood more pathological as we doomscroll. AI has metaphysical ramifications because it is in the process of shaping human intelligence. Can Buddha's teachings guide us on this exciting but perilous journey?

Gautama Buddha probably lived in the 5th c. BCE and would have been born into the Hindu religion. *The Vedas* are a large body of religious texts written in ancient Sanskrit between 1400 and 1200 BCE (Wiki). This was the Big Data of Buddha's time, and through these teachings his society was held together in a deterministic social order called the caste system. After his enlightenment, Buddha created a path, known as The Four Noble Truths, that freed us from the unnecessary suffering induced by attachment to a phenomenal world of impermanence. The Buddha's teachings offer a framework for developing awareness, mindfulness, and compassion to navigate the attention economy in a more conscious and intentional way.

Non-attachment and right-intention. If I ask myself what my intention is for using technological devices, I can better discipline myself in the use of them. If I am using them only for pleasure, I am more vulnerable to being controlled. The

Buddha would advise me to use technology constructively for the benefit of myself and others. This means recognizing that the constant stream of advertisements and demands for my attention is not something I need to react to. When I realize that suffering arises from attachment to impermanent things, I can focus on what is important for me to accomplish and avoid unnecessary stimulation.

The practice of mindfulness is central to Buddhism and involves being fully present and aware of one's thoughts, feelings, and surroundings. By developing this meditational skill, I can be conscious of how technology affects my mind. I can learn to recognize when I am being pulled into the attention economy and make a conscious decision to withdraw from it.

Another important teaching in Buddhism is the cultivation of compassion for oneself and others. By practicing compassion, we develop empathy with others, but this works two ways. We can also cultivate compassion for ourselves by recognizing that it is okay to take breaks from technology and that our worth is not determined by the number of likes or followers we have on social media platforms.

Hershock is concerned about the “behind-the-scenes manipulation of our consciousness” by AI (14:03) and the threat to our freedom and whether AI can control our consciousness. This is a looming predicament and a shift from the technical level to an ethical level of concern. Existing applications of our ethical precepts may not be able to get us to a desired solution. If we can’t predict how we will solve our problem, there is no way to resolve our problem (17:50). We need clarity to re-prioritize our values or we may find ourselves trapped in something like a Skinner Box wired to a Panopticon.

We also need to revise our epistemological presuppositions about the nature of truth because AI will be a component of how we arrive at it as an application of this new system of machine learning in our human deliberations. With AI, we may have outsmarted ourselves, and I have reservations regarding my conclusion about Buddhist teachings having much influence on solving the drawbacks of this technological revolution underway.

At this juncture, if the reader will indulge me—I know it is a big ask—I would like to relate a story that will illustrate the formidable undertaking that a deconstruction of the notion of Self and the reorganization of the data bank or a person’s consciousness might need to undergo if the person desired to free themselves from the “running-around-in-circles” mentality that has infested the standard issue psyche.

During the summer of 2008, while I was preparing to go into long retreat at

Tara Mandala, one of my jobs was to put other retreatants into cabins and to be their caregiver during their stay. The economy had just collapsed, and many of the retreatants were in a state of confusion. A man, Lester, a day trader on Wall Street, had flown a thousand miles to be alone in the woods in a cabin with a hope of sorting out the conflicts in his life.

Lester was excited to get started, and with high expectations for his accomplishment on this adventure, I established Lester in a small cabin with his supplies. I told him I would return in a week to pick up a grocery list and credit card that he was to leave in a container at a designated spot and I would go to town on my shopping run and return with the items he had requested. Two days later, I was drinking a cup of tea on the porch of the community hall after breakfast, and Lester walked up to me and said, “I can’t stay. I must go back to New York. It is a great time to buy General Motors.” What Lester had really wanted was a direct transmission from the lama so he could maintain a stable mind in the volatility of the stock market crash. In short, Lester wanted a quick fix without doing the work necessary to prepare his mind for the transmission.

What is ironic is that Lester might not really have wanted the attainment of the Dzogchen “view” he sought. Dzogchen is a radical Buddhist teaching. It is a position of non-meditation and non-action. Once Buddha mind is realized, the dualistic desire-attachment framework of the self is transcended, and one recognizes pure consciousness. After his retreat, Lester might have discovered that he was no longer interested in the hectic pace of his previous lifestyle. This reminds me of Jigme Lingpa, an 18th century Tibetan yogi and author of *Longchen Nyingthig*, who had to avoid a prickly shrub when he left his cave. He considered pruning it back but would then change his mind because he couldn’t be sure he would return to his cave once he left it. This story illustrates an extreme position of non-doing. The chaos of the trading floor at the stock market on Wall Street is at the other extreme.

Meditation is not a drug to calm nerves. It is a means to gain clarity about the nature of the mind and the relationship of the mind with the world. By improving his ability to buy stocks with less anxiety, Lester would be adding fuel to the desire-fire that drives the wheel of independent causation which in turn would lead to more anxiety. To be free of the wheel of suffering, Lester would have to give up his lifestyle for something simpler. But what kind of life would that be given the goal-oriented, consumer-driven, materialistic society we live in?

With the main goal-driven compulsions of our society, fame, power, sex, and money, the average citizen is extremely vulnerable in a society manipulated by

surveillance capitalists utilizing attention economy devices. Lester asks, “Without my distractions, what would I do with myself?” The lamas are fond of saying, “No self, no problem.” This translates as—take yourself off the clock and out of the mix, and you will discover a self-evident pure land. How do we reach this pure land?

In my three-year, solitary retreat, I completed a cycle of practices called *Dzinpa Rangdröl*, translated as “Self-Liberation from Clinging and Attachment,” a mind treasure (*terma*) of Do Khyentse Yeshe Dorje (https://www.taramandala.org/about/our-lineage/dzinpa-rangdrol-and-tara-mandala/). I cannot discuss this practice because of my vows of secrecy, but I will present an outline of a generic practice to give an idea of the extensive meditational immersion one undergoes in a long retreat.

Tantra is a path of psychological transformation. It utilizes a method called the mandala principle, which involves the evocation of tutelary deities. The tantric pathway is an exotic, complicated, even dangerous method to attain liberation from the habitual tendencies that ensnare a person into the attention economy or simply leave them confused in the cosmos. Generally, a mandala is depicted as a geometric composition wherein tutelary deities reside. The mandala serves as a tool for guiding individuals along the path to enlightenment and is visualized as a three-dimensional palace or landscape. The principal deity is presented in the center of the composition. The deities embody philosophical-psychological views and serve as role models who help transform ordinary minds into enlightened ones.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, the Five Tathagatas, or Dhyani Buddhas, are: Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Vairocana, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi. These buddhas are representatives of the five buddha families. According to Britanica.com, “Dhyani-Buddha, in Mahayana Buddhism, and particularly in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism, [are] any of a group of five ‘self-born’ celestial buddhas who have always existed from the beginning of time.” Each Dhyani Buddha is associated with a particular buddha family and possesses an enlightenment function. Through the practice of embodiment, or “entering into the deity,” the practitioner can transform negative energy (aberrant psychological behaviors)—often referred to as turning “poison” into “wisdom nectar.” These buddhas are not gods or embodied buddhas. although they each are associated with various elements, hand signs (mudras), lineages, etc. Rather, they are abstract representations of buddhahood with each Dhyani Buddha being the parent of a family. Here I am drawing on my journals, containing notes from many

teachings received from lamas at Tara Mandala.

In the east is Vairocana, head of the Buddha Family. Vairocana represents the Wisdom of Dharmdhata, or Absolute Truth. His symbol is the wheel; his element is space; his color is white. He transforms ignorance into an awakened mind by transforming the feeling of dullness, spaced-outness, of being defeated, and of waiting for things to be different into a feeling of connectedness, of suchness, and of arriving at an active presence in the here-and-now, where one discovers how much energy it takes to be depressed, to be addicted, to be avoiding.

In the west is Amitabha, head of the Padma Family. Amitabha represents the Wisdom of Discriminating Awareness. His symbol is the lotus; his element is fire; his color is red. He transforms compulsive, seductive intensity that often manifests in a sense of insignificance that would disappear if the right person appeared. Discernment brings about a sense of self-containment without the need for manipulation. One discovers how passions are never satisfied and are based, for the most part, on superficiality and glitter.

In the south is Ratnasambhava, head of the Ratna Family. Ratnasambhava represents the Wisdom of Equanimity. His symbol is the jewel; his element is earth; his color is yellow. He transforms pride, greed, enviousness, and consuming hunger into balance, prosperity, and creativity. Ratnasambhava nurtures by reducing the feeling of not having enough and by irradicating invasive, encompassing compulsiveness.

In the north is Amoghasiddi, head of the Karma Family. His symbol is the moon; his element is air; his color is green. Amoghasiddi represents the Wisdom of All-Accomplishment. There is nothing he can't do. He is associated with accomplishing the Buddha Path and overcoming competitiveness, paranoia, workaholic-ness, and fear of being left out. He is associated with conceptual mind more than intuitive mind. One learns to do everything with levity, to work with relaxation, and to bring about self-acknowledgment.

In the center of the mandala is Aksobhya, head of the Vajra Family. His symbol is a thunderbolt scepter (*vajra*); his element is water; his color is blue-black. Aksobhya represents Mirror-like Wisdom, and he transforms anger, pessimism, austerity, and fear into clarity and luminosity of mind. This may be described as the knowledge of being able to discern what is real and what is illusion. One learns that negativity can be a fertilizer to bring about the flower of Bodhicitta. The energy of passion is utilized on the path to Enlightenment.

The mechanisms of corporate advertisers and the propaganda of political ideologs are sophisticated and widespread in our society. It is no easy matter to free oneself from the desire-attachment. By now, you can see the difficulty of having the time and energy necessary to pursue the above-described pathway to its conclusion. The goal of Tantric Buddhism is to attain enlightenment in one lifetime. Without persistence and diligence, many lifetimes (if such are in the offering) will be required. As a non-Buddhist, an existentialist predicament is present—only one lifetime is available to us.

Given the difficulty of attaining the mystical form of enlightenment offered by eastern philosophy in one lifetime and given our present social and political situation in the west with AI evolving its neural network before our eyes, the utilization of our western form of enlightenment with its epistemological roots in reason is probably our best strategy. AI has been proclaimed to be revolutionary and world-changing, but it is not without risks and not without benefits. AI could, for example, be a great tool in education if we can keep it off drugs and prevent it from hallucinating. Governments, businesses, individuals, as well as machines will have a say in how it is to be applied and how the risks are computed. Yes, Buddhist teachings can have an influence on these deliberations. I recommend data scientists write algorithms for AI to accomplish the buddha-dharma in a simulated three-year retreat so that it will do no harm.

AUTONOMOUS MACHINES MAKING CHOICES

In their introduction to “Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgement, and Asking the Right Questions,” Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser contend that robots, no matter how well-constructed will not replicate human moral judgments because they do not have the ability to attain any kind of emotional capacity that would enable them to make the necessary type of considerations. They argue that human beings possess a special ability for moral reasoning grounded in empathy, and this ability is not something that can be duplicated by AI.

Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser claim: “Moral judgement requires either the ability to engage in wide reflective equilibrium, the ability to perceive certain facts as moral considerations, moral imagination, or the ability to have moral

experiences with a particular phenomenological character. Robots cannot in principle possess these abilities, so robots cannot replicate human moral judgement." The caveat "in principle" leaves the door open for imaginative speculation.

Bostrom and Yudkowsky disagree with Purves, Jenkins, and Strawser. They believe that AI might eventually be programmed to engage in moral considerations, although these considerations might not involve the same type of emotional processes as in humans. They argue that an AI system could be designed to understand different moral principles. However, they recognize the almost insurmountable challenges of making AI systems coincide with human values.

In their conclusion to "The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence," Bostrom and Yudkowsky, claim: "AIs with sufficiently advanced states, or the right kind of states, will have moral status, and some may count as persons—though perhaps persons very much unlike the sort that exist now, perhaps governed by different rules."

Since it is already possible to create synthetic skin, it is feasible that synthetic nerves could be made and then bone and gristle and all the "wiring" necessary to have a synthetic human being except for consciousness. We haven't figured out what this is, but it may just pop into being once the synthetic humanoid is able to function on its own. Then, we would have something that feels like a person. Still, these are bold predictions, and the conclusion that AIs will have moral status is true only if (a big if) AIs attain such states, whatever these states would be. Given the speculative nature of the premise the conclusion is just an Aristotelian mind fart.

There is no denying that data scientists are concerned about the possible risks of AI to the future of humanity. The Guardian reports: "Developed by OpenAI, a company co-founded by Musk and now backed by Microsoft, GPT-4 has developed the ability to hold human-like conversation, compose songs and summarise [sic] lengthy documents. Such AI systems with 'human-competitive intelligence' pose profound risks to humanity, the letter claimed." Not everyone in the AI world was on board. The Guardian reported that many of the 1800 signatures were fake and that many of the claims made were "unhinged." (https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/31/ai-research-pause-elon-musk-chatgpt).

I asked ChatGPt: "Elon Musk and Microsoft are afraid of ChatGPT. Is there reason?" I received this reply: "Something went wrong. If this issue persists please contact us through our help center at help.openai.com."

MORAL DECISION MAKING FOR AI VEHICLES

At this stage of development, we imagine self-drive vehicles as mixed in with other human-driven vehicles and roadways that are still rather primitive with few safeguards. If there were fewer potential road hazards, we would be more likely to trust this technology to handle driving.

There are a lot of glitches in programing that are possible. I just did some sound recording at a studio, and when it was played back there were three layers of my voice on top of one another. This would be a weird thing to happen to the auto-sensors of a self-driving auto, if I the decision-making function was this confused.

We trust others to make decisions for ourselves when we ride as passengers in cars, planes, and trains. Although a human is still making a decision, hopefully a competent one, we are giving up some autonomy. At present, even though the technology is fairly advanced, Tesla self driving cars, using Autopilot or Full Self Driving features, were involved in 273 crashes from July 2020 to May 2021, according to NHTSA data (Bing). I think we have a ways to go before I will ride in one.

I object to having self-driving vehicles be set to the individual driver's whims at the beginning of this AI car experiment, as it will be hard in the future to determine when to phase out one moral system for another. Teenagers, the elderly, and any number of individuals with mental challenges are risky to insure. Perhaps this conundrum is like agreeing to have stop signs that we agree to obey or the speed limit that is set based on statistics of road accidents. A group decision.

There does not seem to be a way to eliminate all risk to a situation. There is always some odd factor that might intervene to make a a harmless situation become ripe for moral decision making. Even then there is not a clear path to a perfect solution.

Once we go this direction, the size of the problem seems to grow exponentially with layer upon layer of decision making by a Kafka-like bureaucracy of AI guardians and doorkeepers. I would stand with consumer protection advocates as far as safety goes with some kind of utilitarian moral advocacy. Then, I would buy a horse. Believe it or not there are still a few rings in the concrete on the streets of Ellensburg where you can tether a horse.

Whether a solution to the moral dilemma is ever solved may be beyond human capabilities, and if we want to have AI vehicles, it will likely require us to take the risk and see what happens and make adjustments to the project as we go. The transition from horse to car was chaotic. According to Bing: "In New York in 1900, 200 persons were killed by horses and horse-drawn vehicles. This contrasts with 344 auto-related fatalities in New York in 2003; given the modern city's greater population, this means the fatality rate per capita in the horse era was roughly 75 percent higher than today." That gives an idea of the transition.

Another solution would be to set the machine on a Russian Roulette-type scenario, and the type of preference for one option over another would change at random times. You would just have to take your chances, which is sort of like is is anyway.

If machines were to decide, they might decide that humans are not ready for AI cars and design them so that the cars run on a system more like train cars, powered with magnetism, with a mechanism that allows a car to unhook and move in a limited way like a present-day car. Although this would only be suitable for long journeys.

At what point do we just turn ourselves over to the machines? If the machines attain "consciousness" and like their ontological status, of what use would they have for us other than as museum relics or zoo animals?

The future. Here I am sitting in my AI car driving me on a magnetic highway at an astronomical speed, programed by a complex of algorithms branded by Pepsi-Cola, I have a video game going in the upper left quadrant of my cerebellum, while I talk to my transhuman daughter by astral projection. A beep in my metaverse tickles me and indicates I had better make a short sell of a stock before the Galactic Construction Corporation blows up Philadelphis, one of the newly discovered moons of Block42, where it is mining Coalblaytium, a new mineral used in android testosterone. Can I finish my homework in time for the Solar flare competition? What should I buy my sweetheart for our anniversary? Should I part my hair on the left? Life is so complex.

THE TROLLY PROBLEM AND AI AUTOMOBILES

The Trolly Problem is an ethical thought experiment raised in a 1967 philosophy paper by Philippa Foot and dubbed "the trolley problem" by Judith Jarvis Thomson in 1976 (Wiki: “The Trolly Problem”). In its basic form it describes a trolly car moving towards five incapacitated people on the tracks. There is a spur where there is a single person, also incapacitated on the tracks. There is a lever that will allow the trolly car to switch from the main set of tracks to the spur, where it will kill one person rather than kill five. A spectator (you) is standing by the lever and sees the event unfolding and can pull the lever and save the five. There are many variations of this thought experiment, but the main one is without backstories or quibbles and requires the spectator to decide whether to pull the lever.

Essentially, there are two ethical choices. Kill one person or do nothing and kill five persons. Killing one person goes against Kant’s deontological position that people are ends in the same and that you should not “use” someone for an end. The other choice involves the utilitarian position held by Mill that requires one to do what is best for the largest number of people involved.

A Wiki elf points out: ”In 2017, a group led by Michael Stevens performed the first realistic trolley-problem experiment, where subjects were placed alone in what they thought was a train-switching station, and shown footage that they thought was real (but was actually prerecorded) of a train going down a track, with five workers on the main track, and one on the secondary track; the participants had the option to pull the lever to divert the train toward the secondary track. Most of the participants did not pull the lever” (Ibid). It is my contention that it is easy to decide on what to do when the problem is abstract, but that it is more complicated when the problem presents itself in real time.

The trolly problem can be applied to other dilemmas. With the advance of artificial intelligence and the invention of self-driven automobiles, the question arises as to how these machines can be programmed to prevent unnecessary deaths. Dominic Martin, in her article “Who Should Decide How Machines Make Morally Laden Decisions” (2017) posits five alternatives: (1) the owner, (2) the manufacturer, (3) the government, (4) other machines with advanced algorithms, and (5) a collaborative enterprise. All these moral arbiters leave something to be desired. At the present time, it appears that we are ready for this technology, or if

we are it will come with a great deal of risk. Since there is data showing that the transition from horses to automobiles brought about an improvement in human safety, it may in the long run be a risk worth taking.

Here is an issue related to the trolly problem. My son Theo brought this up during a discussion we were having. It concerns the devasting effects of gun violence in our society. There is a widespread view that there is no need for gun regulation, although *The Constitution* explicitly points out: "*A well-regulated Militia being necessary*..." and so forth. I wonder if an extremist Second Amendment advocate would be willing to consider gun regulations if it was absolutely certain that their own child was going to be killed in a school shooting.

REFLECTIONS ON AUTONOMY

I must get a paper written on autonomy, and I am stumped. I can't summon my will. [There is a long pause.] B.F. Sinner claimed that my idea that I have free will is an illusion, not just the idea but my complete ability to act on my desire to attain some end. He claimed that there is "operant conditioning" from top to bottom of my every action. Well, I don't want to get stuck here.

In "The Nature of Autonomy," Dworkin presents various definitions of autonomy. One notion of autonomy, inspired by Immanuel Kant, emphasizes taking responsibility for one's actions. This viewpoint resonates with my personal experience when I was living in the Alaskan woods. One sunny day, a U.S. Geological Survey Team arrived by boat to locate a brass marker. I withheld knowledge of the marker to enjoy their rigorous search until I noticed the tide was about to capsize their boat, and I showed them the marker. True autonomy arises when one acknowledges the duty to act ethically and autonomously.

Early in his theorizing, Dworkin believed that autonomous decision-making pertained to single instances of reflection in choice making, but later he realized that it carries over into how one acts over one's entire life. Dworkin relates the story of Odysseus's choice to be tied to the mast of his ship, so he could hear the Sirens' song. Some choices can be made to limit one's autonomy to gain a better understanding of oneself.

The belief that individuals are shaped by their actions is also a Buddhist idea

of Karma. Here, autonomy is a process of self-creation whereby individuals consciously mold themselves through their choices and behaviors. This resonates with my choice to perform extensive ritual practices in a cabin in the Colorado mountains under the tutelage of a Tibetan lama for four years. Autonomy is the ability to think and act independently and is a concept that has intrigued philosophers throughout history. I doubt whether there is any truly original thought or uninfluenced action. All life appears to be interconnected and interdependent, but novelty is possible.

And I magically wrote these words.

REFLECTIONS ON PRIVACY

I have always felt the omnipresence of surveillance. If it isn't God observing my thoughts and actions (not directly verifiable), it's family, friends, lovers, priests, psychologists, police, and teachers poking at me for information. Added to this, AI-driven machines are insidiously collecting my data. Am I paranoid?

In his essay "Why We Should Love Big Brother," James Stanley Taylor argues that I should allow the State the right to surveil my every move and have access to my every thought, given there is a legitimate reason for this information to be divulged. It is increasingly obvious that the State has a lot of information already. Not all governments are benign. As a white, privileged citizen, I've been lucky to live in a democratic republic where there is a semblance of fair play and opportunities to pursue a livelihood in the private sector. A point of contention I have with Taylor lies with the possible need of citizens to challenge the State. At present, I have the right to petition my government and to peacefully protest its policies. I have twice been caught up in acts of civil disobedience that led to the arrests of my fellow protesters. On both occasions I escaped the consequences of my actions, or I might have been in jail. At 82, I have left a lengthy paper trail. As an engaged Buddhist poet-anarchist, if I had lived in a Christian theocratic or right-wing authoritarian system, this paper trail might have been the bane of my existence. I worry that my political affiliations could be detrimental to my grandchildren in the future. Life comes with risks.

In "Privacy, Intimacy, and Personhood," Reiman wants to reach a moral understanding of how violations of privacy can be judged and why this is so, and he develops his thesis to explain how privacy is a social ritual by which a person

has title to their existence. In “What Is the Right to Privacy?” Marmor claims that the right to privacy is grounded in the individual’s desire to control how they can present themselves to others. Both arguments are attempts to find the essence of a vague concept called privacy, an actuality that may never have existed in the first place or, if it did, disappeared around 1984, when you could still get away from most forms of surveillance.

Artificial Intelligence is here. If there was a chance to prevent AI from knowing about humans, data scientists should never have given it access to the internet and let it learn to write algorithms. Taylor is not saying that we should just capitulate our claim to privacy. He acknowledges that the surveillance society is present, that it can be useful, that we must learn to live with it, but that we should maintain guidelines for its use by the state. My solution to the privacy dilemma is to be a content provider. This is my stand.

However, I’m wistful. There was a time, not so long ago, before credit cards and interconnected data collecting devices, when you could drop everything and move to the next town and start a new life. That was then, and this is now. Ever since the Garden of Eden and our fall and our sense of shame, we’ve been ducking and hiding, trying to stay out the line of fire, so we can have a few precious moments alone to take stock of ourselves without someone nosing into our business. Even with Big Brother showering us with his love, I think a few outliers will stay on the run. My confessions are subterfuge. Transparency allows me to be invisible. God has no nit to pick with me, and the Law lets me do and think what I will, if I don't raise an alarm, although my next screed may blow up the edifice.

Here lies the nut of this nutshell. What seems counter-intuitive to a Big Brotherist, might be intuitive to a person who believes that the civil government should stay out of the data collection business and leave its citizens to pursue liberty on their own. This has to do with us having free will and the right to exercise it against State intrusions. In his essay, “On Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau said, “One man in the right is a majority of one.” Humans are unique in that they are the only animal species that torture one another for the truth. It is at this point the deontologists and utilitarians part company. According to a Wiki elf, “Thoreau argues that individuals should not permit governments to overrule or atrophy their consciences, and that they have a duty to avoid allowing such acquiesces to enable the government to make them the agents of injustices.” Thoreau would likely think Big Brother was the Wizard of Oz trying to trick us with smoke and mirrors.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON PRIVACY

In “Privacy, Intimacy, and Personhood,” Jeffrey H. Reiman tries to go beyond Judith Jarvis Thomson’s argument that any violation of privacy can be judged by looking at other rights that have been violated that would include the issue of privacy. He posits the idea of personhood as a moral principle that has been overlooked. Reiman wants to reach a moral (rather than practical) understanding of what is at stake in a privacy violation, and he develops his thesis to explain how privacy is a social ritual by which a person has title to their existence. As a Buddhist, this seems a stretch to me, but for the sake of argument so be it.

Reiman wants to posit a sacrosanct “self” to be respected for its right to privacy outside of the reasons for privacy conveyed by psychology and legal property rights. He believes that the more concrete and defined you can make things, the easier it will be to come to resolutions within conflicts concerning problems that arise fro the self. For me, since the notion of an inner self is vague, this is a good reason to leave the idea of privacy vague and deal with problems related to a person’s physical self and their identity.

The concept of privacy is tied up with social conditions, and these conditions change in history. Once, most humans were slaves, serfs, or laborers as we are today and much of our privacy has been co-opted by institutions. At home, whether in a house or a tipi, it is hard to be private with parents and children and lovers wanting to know what you are doing or thinking or dreaming. Spinoza said he would give up all his freedoms if he could just be allowed to think his thoughts without constraint.

I'd like to think there was a time before we put on the fig leaf, where privacy wasn't a concern, but that was a long time ago, if ever. The heavy burden of privacy requires the strength of Samson to sustain. I've been institutionalized and documented in many ways and have finally decided to let it all be revealed. You can read *Jampa's Worldly Dharmas* in the autobiography section of my website www.dpress.net. It’s such a relief to have nothing to hide.

A need for privacy may be for some of us instinctual, a built-in "the-universe-knows-what-I'm-doing" mechanism that creates our conscience which enables us to stay on the path of righteousness. For those who want to violate privacy, the

opposite. Machines are indifferent to our concerns. Our private thoughts are about all we have that is ours alone and may be sacred. There is occult power in the secret, as long as it remains secret. Intimacy is a bonding experience, and the strength of the bond is in the secret cords (accords) of trust.

As individuals we need to be cautious since the apparatus of the internet and the attention economy have objectives in antithesis to our privacy concerns. I'm with Thomson that the laws are already in the books, but if you buy into Reiman's thesis that there is a sacrosanct self in play, you had better look for it, first, and then look out for it. Privacy laws are a good thing to have just so we aren't throwing caution to the winds. Organizations should protect their clients; friends should be trustworthy, and individuals should avoid scandal. All good, but where the “should” derives from is sketchy, as Thomson points out. Be generous, be diligent, play nice, and you will fare well in life. This doesn't mean you will win all the toys, but you will be known for your upstanding character.

The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness implies having a personal self, and if you add the right to property (Locke), these rights are enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. The founders were mostly Deists, and I assume they believed in something resembling a self, so adding the right to a self would have been redundant.

BIG DATA BREACH: A FILM REVIEW

Snowden: The Full Documentary is a thought-provoking film about a controversial person, Edward Snowden, a computer scientist who worked for the National Security Agency (NSA) and, in 2013, removed documents that exposed the U.S. government’s surveillance programs. Snowden has been hailed as a hero and condemned as a spy. The documentary is a montage of actual footage and reenactments of certain events, interspersing interviews with players who have knowledge of mass surveillance and the sensitivity of privacy issues, as well as those who have concerns about the security of government operations at home and abroad.

The film depicts the chase to capture Snowden and bring him to trial. It also reveals the consequences of Snowden's actions. This was a huge media story at the time, and the documentary reveals the risks Snowden faced by exposing the truth. As he says, “You can’t come forward against the world’s most powerful intelligence agencies and be free from risk” (“Edward Snowden - Full Documentary 2016 - YouTube” 15:07). Although biased towards showing Snowden being victimized by the government, the film does an excellent job exploring Snowden’s decision to become a whistleblower, and as the credits roll, the viewer is left to contemplate important ethical and legal questions surrounding privacy rights and the role of whistleblowers in modern society. Snowden revealed what many suspected had occured after 9/11. The beat goes on.

WENDELL BERRY’s PENCIL

As reported by Arum KumarTripathi in his essay “Ethics and Aesthetics of Technologies”(2010), Albert Borgmann claims “Philosophers point out the liabilities, what happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of,” and he admonishes us to “revive *focal things* and *focal practices*” by which he means things such as food and cooking, boots and hiking or plants and gardening that exist three-dimensionally in a time frame not controlled by digitalized devices.

In response to Borgmann’s idea, I had the following thoughts. There's a good chance that AI will find a way to control ecological resources (Heidigger's "standard reserves") to maintain what lies behind technology ("*gestell*") to gather together ("enframe") all the rules for computation (Wolfram's "ruleiad") to create a megaverse (a la Zuckerberg) so that robots can talk and interact with other non-human beings having a plethora of artificial genders, and we humans will be long gone. I'm working on digitalizing my archive so that these robots can read me and have a good laugh.

I asked ChatGPT if it considered my comment to be funny, and I got this response: *“As an AI language model, I do not have emotions or personal preferences, so I cannot find something funny or not. However, I can understand humor and recognize it in text. Whether someone finds a particular statement or*

joke funny is subjective and depends on their personal sense of humor." It may seem a quaint idea, but one of the burdens that we (humans) would not want lifted would be humor.

This segways with the 9th point in Wendell Berry's Letter to Harper's (1988), "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer." Berry claims a computer "should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships." He likes his pencil, and he has a happy helpmate in his wife. His critics all get huffy and defensive in their rebuttal letters, and although Berry has a legitimate point, they miss the ironic sincerity of his humor. Like the character in Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," Berry is merely and merrily saying, "I would prefer not to."