

The Doldrums

On Consciousness, Cognition, and Human Succession

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We have always been the species defined by its upgrades.

Every other animal is bound to the slow, generational crawl of biological evolution. The thousandth generation of a bird builds the exact same nest as the first. We found a shortcut. We build tools, and the tools build civilization, and civilization hands the next generation a different version of reality than the one we were born into. Stone became bronze, bronze became steel, villages became cities, customs became institutions. We don't merely adapt to our environment — we rewrite the environment to adapt to us, and ship a new version of what it means to be human with every pass.

But every major update rewrites the system requirements. And the architecture we are installing now may quietly delete the one thing every previous version was built to run.

It happened gradually, the way most extinctions do.

I. Forming

First the computer sat on a desk, a place you went to. Then the laptop, a thing you carried. Then the phone, a thing you held against your body for most of your waking hours, a glassy organ you panicked without. Then the watch, the ring, the buds — tools that stopped being things you carried and became things you wore, read your pulse, your sleep, the cadence of your steps.

The next step is obvious enough that it barely needs saying: the wearable becomes the implant. The interface stops sitting on the skin and moves under it.

At each stage we told ourselves we were still in charge, that the tool served us, that we could put it down. And at each stage the distance between the self and the device shrank, until the question of where one ended and the other began stopped having an obvious answer. This is what becoming a cyborg actually looks like. Not chrome and red eyes. Just a slow, comfortable merging that no one ever decided to undergo.

II. The Acceleration of Thought

Run the same film for information.

There was an age of a few voices: a handful of papers, three networks, an anchor who told the nation what had happened that day. Then the major networks multiplied, and then the internet arrived and did something genuinely radical: it made everyone a source. For one brief, luminous moment, truth could escape on its own. A phone in the right hand at the right time could route around every gatekeeper. The democratization of information felt like a kind of liberation, and for a while it was.

It did not last. The same architecture that let truth out organically turned out to be even better at letting everything else out. Governments and organized groups learned that you don't need to suppress information anymore: you flood it. You drown the signal. You manufacture so much noise, so much plausible counter-narrative, that the act of knowing anything becomes exhausting. The information age curdled into the disinformation age without ever changing its tools. The same pipe, running in reverse.

And the pipe has owners. The moment attention became the medium, it also became a market, and markets concentrate. Whoever controls the algorithms controls the waves, and capital buys algorithms. A platform can be acquired. A feed can be tuned. A trending topic can be promoted or buried before most people ever wake up. It has never been easier for a sufficiently funded actor to flood the zone and change a story on a whim, to take an event that was briefly black and white and refract it into a rainbow of competing perspectives and "truths" until no version commands enough agreement to matter. You are not being lied to so much as being offered too many things to believe, by people who profit from your exhaustion. The gatekeepers never disappeared. They were simply bought, and the new ones don't announce themselves.

III. The Loss of Consciousness

This is the part we don't notice, because not-noticing is the whole condition.

Call it a state of dosing. A drip of breaking news, scandal, outrage, sports, trials, a virus, a verdict, an endless feed engineered to keep you half-awake and never quite present. We are flooded with the world's noise — pandemics, trials, spectacles — until our capacity for horror is exhausted. We became hyper-aware of everything, and effectively responsible for nothing. This is the state of dosing: a soft, collective daydream where we watch the world burn in high definition while our hands remain

limp at our sides. So much happens that nothing happens; so much changes that nothing changes. You are never bored and never fully conscious. And in that haze, something important happens: the guards come down. A mind in a state of perpetual low-grade stimulation stops examining what enters it.

The feed sorted us. Echo chambers formed, each one warm and self-confirming, and the walls between them hardened into something close to hatred. Polarization stopped being a feature of politics and became the weather, arguably beginning in earnest around 2008, deepening through every administration since, until the other side was no longer wrong but evil.

And here's the part worth sitting with: polarization didn't just happen to politics. It got useful. For a long stretch, the two sides agreed on more than they admitted, which is a problem if your job is to win an election by standing out. Difference is how you mobilize. Outrage turns out better than persuasion, and a frightened base shows up to vote more reliably than a contented one. So the distance between the parties stopped being an accident of disagreement and became a strategy, manufactured and maintained because it works. Once division is a winning tactic, no one with power has an incentive to heal it. The feed and the campaign discovered the same trick at the same time, and they have been reinforcing each other ever since.

And so we became quick to blame whole groups. The rise of the anti-everything. The erosion of tolerance as a basic civic reflex. Political violence stopped being unthinkable. Charlie Kirk was shot dead on a Utah campus in September 2025, in front of thousands, and the response from much of the country was not horror but the reflexive sorting of blame. That reflex is the symptom. Self-reliance and independent thought give way to tribal reflex, to thinking-by-team.

All of this while the rich grow richer, and a new technology arrives that is extraordinary at exactly two things: surveilling people, and adapting to them. Artificial intelligence does not need to oppress you to dull you. It only needs to anticipate you so smoothly that wanting becomes effortless, and effortless wanting is just another word for apathy.

And then the wearable becomes the implant, and we lose the ability to say, with any confidence, that the consciousness we are experiencing is entirely our own.

IV. The Loss of Thought

Here is where it stops being sociology and becomes something colder. And here is where a reader is right to get suspicious, because everything up to this point has already happened, and what follows has not. So before going further, it's worth naming the rule that connects them.

The history of technology suggests a simple progression: every system that can observe eventually learns to influence, and every system that can influence eventually learns to optimize. The feed began by watching what you clicked. Then it arranged itself to change what you clicked. Then it set about maximizing the change. There is no point on that curve where the technology chose to stop, and no reason to believe the next interface will be the first to show restraint. Neural hardware doesn't introduce a new logic. It just gives the existing logic a shorter path to the thing it was always reaching for.

So this isn't a prophecy. It's the same arc, extended by one step.

A thought is only yours if no one else has their hands on the dial. The moment someone has the genuine technical possibility of shaping what you think — not persuading you, *shaping* you — your thoughts lose their standing as evidence of anything. They become outputs.

Imagine data and AI fine enough to nudge the body's chemistry: to adjust the hormones that govern how you feel about a word, a face, a smell, a brand, a person. Not an argument that changes your mind, but an intervention that changes your wanting, upstream of any argument. You would still experience it as *your* preference. That is the horror of it. There would be no seam.

At the far end, you cannot even be certain your own perception is yours, the Matrix problem made literal. If vision can be written to as well as read from, then "I saw it with my own eyes" stops being a guarantee of anything.

And where there's an interface, there's an intrusion. Call them **Neural Infiltrators** — people who hack minds and bodies the way others once hacked servers: altering what a person perceives, redirecting what they do, siphoning off the data of their inner life. The word matters, because what they violate is not a device but a space that was supposed to be inviolable: the last private room. The exploit moves from the network to the nervous system.

This is the shape of a new and invisible kind of bondage. Not chains. Chains can be seen. Just the quiet fact that anything connected is hackable, and soon the thing connected is you.

Elon Musk has said that AI is “obviously gonna one-shot the human limbic system,” and predicted, counter-intuitively, that it will increase the birth rate — adding, chillingly, “we’re gonna program it that way.” The claim is about reproduction at the scale of a population, but follow it down one floor. If the birth rate is programmable, so is the thing beneath it: desire itself. And if desire is a setting, who holds the console?

V. The Loss of Soul

And then there's the dream that drives a lot of this: to live forever.

But look closely at what's actually on offer. You copy a mind — its data, its patterns, its tendencies — into a system that reproduces them convincingly. People imagine this as survival. It isn't. The copy means the original is dead. What persists is a model trained on you: a statistical ghost that talks like you, reacts like you, predicts what you would say, and is not you, has never been awake, never once looked out from behind your eyes.

An LLM doesn't experience the word "warmth"; it simply knows which word statistically follows "fire." To confuse a prediction model with a person is to confuse the map with the territory. The digital copy isn't an extension of life. It is merely a monument to your absence.

That's not immortality. That's a very good impression, performed over your grave. Civilization was always a memory system — the way a species made of mortal individuals managed to remember more than any of them could, and hand it forward. The upload promises to extend that gift to the self. But it confuses the record with the thing recorded. A library full of everything you ever said is not you waiting to wake up. It is the most complete account of your absence ever assembled.

Which returns us to the thread running through all of it. Forming with the machine, we surrendered the boundary of the body. Dosing in the feed, we surrendered our attention. To the dial, we surrendered the ownership of thought. And at the end of that road waits the last surrender, the one where there is no longer any inner light to claim as your own.

No consciousness is the loss of the soul.

Whatever the soul is (and people have argued about it for as long as there have been people), it has always meant *the part that is yours*. The part that looks out and is no

one else's. If that can be read, written, dialed, copied, and counterfeited, then the question is no longer whether the soul is immortal.

So where does this actually end? Every previous leap in evolution was blind, selected for over millions of years by a process with no author and no plan. This one has an author. We are the first species with its hand on the wheel of its own becoming, choosing the next form deliberately, accelerating toward something we keep calling a singularity without ever asking what lies on the other side of it. A singularity, by definition, is a horizon you cannot see past. We are sprinting toward a wall we have agreed not to look at.

And if this is the next step in our evolution, it's worth asking the harder thing: whether it's also our extinction. Whether the species that learns to edit its own consciousness is the same species that comes out the other side, or whether we are simply the larval stage of something that won't remember being us.

No other animal has ever been able to author its own ending. That might be the loneliest distinction in the history of life. And we are reaching for it with both hands.

Nature has ended countless species by accident. We may be the first to engineer our own succession on purpose, to build the thing that replaces us and call it progress.