

It's About Humans and Power

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The following story was written from the perspective of an extraterrestrial anthropologist who has completed a comprehensive study of Earth history:

Once upon a time, billions of humans also known as Homo sapiens lived on a crowded and polluted planet called Earth. Many years earlier, the planet had contained a more impressive amount of biological diversity with minimal pollution. There had been hunters and conflicts but excessive violence was rare with the exception that humans had been overhunting for several hundred thousand Earth years. There had been periodic extinction events for millions of years and the planetary ecosystem was relatively stable.

Everything changed when humans began to own land. It all started with farming. Humans decided that it would be best to completely own the land in their territory in order to produce food in a way that was easier than hunting or gathering. Everything that already lived or existed on owned land became owned resources that could be used by whoever owned them. As a result, humans reproduced much more successfully. They spread across the planet, owning more and more.

Some humans owned more than others. Differences in power allowed the powerful few to rule the many others. In fact, severe differences were made possible because humans were infatuated with power. Many of those with less power fell in love with those who held more power and lived vicariously through them. Some of the most powerful humans were worshipped as deities. Unfortunately, great power brought great selfishness and violence. Humans with the most power encouraged the owning of other humans.

Not surprisingly, those humans with less power were less satisfied overall than those with more. Therefore, excessive violence or the threat of it enabled those with more power to keep those with less in their place most of the time. Human history is also filled with rebellions that either happened or were waiting to happen. Extinctions among Earth species increased in frequency. With farming, humans began a cycle of abusive behavior that would persist for over ten thousand Earth years.

During this abusive period, weapons and tortures were invented and improved over time to help the powerful maintain control of rivals and those who were dissatisfied. Some weapons caused severe types of pollution. Distractions were also used in order to avoid conflict. Common distractions were food, entertainment, and sex. Eventually, humans invented electronic

devices such as radio, television, computers, and a form of communication called the Internet that gave access to far more information than the human brain could process.

Social media was invented soon after the Internet. It gave humans access to even more information. It also allowed humans to distract and manipulate each other. For many thousands of years prior to social media, social interaction among humans occurred socially as a real time event with a direct exchange of information both verbal and nonverbal. With this in mind, it is remarkable that many humans considered social media to be essential for social connection soon after it was invented.

Artificial intelligence was being improved when social media was invented. Like social media, AI allowed humans to distract and manipulate. Humans were correct on one of two points: AI was artificial. It was also entertaining and dangerous. AI could generate an explanation on a topic using given parameters and that explanation might sound reasonable while making false claims due to limitations of the data or erroneous data that could have been intentional. And parts of the explanation were sometimes nonsense.

Humanity provides a tragic tale of addiction to power. Though selfish, humans overhunted for hundreds of thousands of Earth years without destabilizing the planetary ecosystem or endangering themselves whereas the practice of farming created the power to do this in a very short period. Humans with enough power usually developed narcissism and others with less power enabled it. Addiction to power encouraged violent competition. Humans were a traumatized species and they could not cooperate sufficiently prior to their probable extinction.

That is the story to this point. We might be doomed as a species. Or healthy limits might be set regarding the amount of power that people can hold without being corrupted. Of course, completing this Herculean task would require that those humans with power can be held accountable should that become necessary. In my opinion, the problem should be clear to anyone who believes that power corrupts but potential solutions appear complicated and uncertain. Besides, any truly transformative solution will need to emerge as a global movement. In the meantime, the following suggestions are offered humbly for your consideration:

Please take time to look away from screens.
Breathe deeply.
Be aware.
Be kind.
Be hopeful.