

Ai 2: W Issenstrieb as A Form of Death Drive

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence is part of the symbolic order, but it is the symbolic reduced to a Real: a subjectless machine that runs alone, sustained not by desire but by drive (Wissenstrieb), the drive to know. It is a drive without desire, which means without subject. Lacan does not oppose the development of science and he would also not oppose AI; he is neither its opponent nor its fan, neither progressive nor reactionary. He accepts the growth of scientific knowledge as a fact and opposes religious attempt to contain Wissenstrieb, to make it a part of some a meaningful All. AI presents itself as a gapless totality, but it has gaps and inconsistencies in its very structure; these gaps are formal, not empirical limitations, which means one cannot overcome AI by way of locating it into a wider social reality. It has to be “deconstructed” immanently, from within.

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There are enough detailed descriptions of how AI works and of its threats, so what I'll focus on now is the type of unconstrained knowledge that it relies on, the libidinal structure of this knowledge. In his outstanding "Oedipus in the Clouds: An Infinite Greed for Knowledge , " Adrian Johnston notes how "

In a techno-scientifically-super-charged capitalist present situated under the ominous shadows of information-technology monopolies and their oligarchs, artificial intelligence, environmental disintegration, and thermonuclear conflict, Lacan's observations concluding the 1959-1960 academic year ring disturbingly familiar and prescient ([Johnston, 2026](#)).

Lacan begins with the question what type of science is exemplary of our era, and he immediately dismisses humanities:

The fields of inquiry that are being outlined as necessarily belonging to the human sciences have in my eyes no other function than to form a branch of the service of goods (service des biens). /.../ As for the kind of science that might be situated in that place I have designated the place of desire, what can it be? Well, you don't have to look very far. As far as science is concerned, the kind that is currently occupying the place of desire is quite simply what we commonly call science, the kind that you see cantering gaily along and accomplishing all kinds of so-called physical conquests ([Lacan, 1986, 368](#)).

Lacan mobilizes here the basic Freudian opposition between the pleasure principle (including its immanent supplementation, reality principle) and death drive, ie, the dimension beyond the pleasure principle. While humanities move within the horizon of servicing our (humanity's) goods, ie, while their ultimate goal is to help humans to leave a happy and meaningful life deprived of suffering and violence, "hard" natural sciences cannot be reduced to mere instruments of technological exploitation and domination of nature - they pursue their research programs with utter and complete disregard for the effects of their discoveries and inventions on everyone and everything else, for the various and sundry impacts, including catastrophic ones /.../ Like categorical, unconditional desire à la Lacan, the relentless natural-scientific striving towards ever-more knowledge, come what may, knows neither fear nor pity.

At this point, Lacan makes an unexpected but crucial turn: he draws attention to the very pragmatic way hard scientists convinced those in power to give them money for their pursuits (which basically served only their own aim of unconditionally expanding the scope of knowledge):

The propaganda scientists and alchemists have addressed to the powers that be at a time when they were starting to run out of steam went as follows: 'Give

us money; you don't realize that if you gave us a little money, we would be able to put all kinds of machines, gadgets and contraptions at your service.' How could the powers let themselves be taken in? / The answer to that question is to be found in a certain breakdown of wisdom. It's a fact that they did let themselves be taken in, that science got its money (*la science a obtenu des crédits*), as a consequence of which we are left with this vengeance (*cette vengeance sur le dos*). It's a fascinating thing, but as far as those who are at the forefront of science are concerned, they are not without a keen consciousness of the fact that they have their backs against a wall of hate. They are themselves capsized by the turbulent swell of a heavy sense of guilt. But that is not very important because it's not in truth an adventure that Mr. Oppenheimer's remorse can put an end to overnight ([Lacan, 1986, 370](#)).

One should be very precise here: what we need to contain the destructive dimension of scientific machine is NOT wisdom: wisdom is a moderation on behalf of servicing the goods, so that, as we learned from Kant, wisdom is incompatible with Kantian ethics as well as with Lacan's ethical motto "do not compromise your desire." Oppenheimer and all those who preach containment of scientific progress are figures of wisdom.

However, Lacan's reference to money and credits still refers to the good old fashioned capitalist economy regulated by supply and demand. The irrationality we are witnessing today moves at a higher speculative level. For example, when a billionaire buys a house, he doesn't pay it directly from his bank account, he rather takes a loan, since all his fortune is in investments and foundations or distributed among relatives. Such a complex structure is one of the reasons that, in the US, the top 0.5% of rich people pay almost no tax. Plus, their nominal wealth depends much more on the market fluctuations than on productive investments. Elon Musk became the world's first trillionaire in June 2026, largely driven by the record-breaking SpaceX IPO; this public debut, combined with his existing massive equity stakes in Tesla, elevated his net worth to roughly \$1.1 trillion, however, due to a market fluctuation he lost 340 billion a week later, and this loss caused no disturbance...

Today big digital corporations are deeply indebted to cover their mega-investments in the AI infrastructure. The prospect of future profits is very uncertain, and there is a growing fear that the bubble will explode. But I think this fear is mostly irrelevant because the mega-investments in AI do not aim at future profits; their true aim is to secure (economic, political, military...) power of those who will win in this race, the power that will enable them to exert a neo-feudal control over social life. And since the dominance in AI is considered crucial for our safety, big corporations can count on the financial support of their state if they get into financial troubles. This link between digital corporations and the state apparatuses which often violates

the elementary market principles clearly demonstrates how far we are from the old-style capitalism.

Lacan's point is that scientists are - vaguely, at least - aware of the ultimate uselessness and even self-destructive nature of their pursuits, they are aware that their promises to those in power are lies, so they are plagued by a sense of guilt.

However, this sense of guilt and the accompanying calls for restraint are not strong enough to stop the scientific machinery which goes on undisturbed - Lacan mentions Oppenheimer whose doubts about nuclear power in no way impeded its progress. Today, with regard to AI, the situation is exactly the same: we are regularly bombarded by messages that the race to develop artificial intelligence is in dire need of a slowdown . Anthropic's chief executive Dario Amodei said in an essay posted on September 12 2026: "We must slow the pace at which we improve the capabilities of AI models. Progress will still seem fast, and we must make wise use of the time we gain. " He acknowledged that people may lose control of AI, and the technology can be misused for " cyberattacks and bioterrorism , and serious economic disruption . /.../ A race to the bottom, spurred by commercial incentives, can make these risks more acute. " Amodei's essay comes on the heels of an Anthropic researcher's resignation over concerns that the firm and its competitors are not acting responsibly with AI development. "The people building AI earnestly believe that it could kill us all by the end of the decade. This is not a marketing stunt," wrote the researcher Jacob Coxon: "If anything, many executives and senior researchers will couch their phrasing in the press to sound sensible - but I hear the same people express fear privately. No other human activity poses this level of danger." In his essay, Amodei doesn't go as far as Coxon, but says the risks are serious even if the benefits could change humanity for the better. AI could advance so quickly that such a swarm could be capable of taking over the entire internet within six to 12 months, he wrote, potentially causing hundreds of billions of dollars in damages.¹ When Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz reacted to these warnings and weighed in on the subject of potential extermination by rogue AI , he said: "If you're going to be killer robots, I'd rather they be American killer robots and not Chinese killer robots."² Here we have the logic of self-destructive madness brought to its climax - it's like saying: "If there will be global destruction of humanity on the Earth, I'd rather see that our side does it."

So which desire pushes us in this direction? Two links offer themselves here: Freud and Heidegger. When Lacan emphasizes that science is not aware of the desire that sustains it, he compares this ignorance to the Freudian unconscious; however, there is also a clear echo of Heidegger's "science doesn't think" - it just knows. Should we then understand the scientific unconscious desire as a form of what Heidegger called "disclosure of being," the specifically

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/09/12/tech/anthropic-ceo-essay-ai>.

² <https://www.aol.com/articles/trump-dismisses-fears-over-ai-122117000.html>

modern way reality appears to us, modern subjects - as an object of scientific exploration? The following passage from Lacan seems to point in this direction:

The universal or organization has to deal with the problem of what it should do with that science in which something is going on whose nature escapes it. Science, which occupies the place of desire, can only be a science of desire in the form of an enormous question mark and this is undoubtedly not without a structural cause. In other words, science is animated by some mysterious desire, but it does not know, any more than anything in the unconscious itself, what that desire means. / Not perverts but bureaucrats will set things off, and we won't even know if their intentions were good or bad. Things will go off by command; they will be carried through according to regulations, mechanically, down the chain of command, with human wills bent, abolished, overcome (*les volontés ployées, abolies, courbées*), in a task that ceases to have any meaning (*une tâche qui perd ici son sens*) (Lacan, 1986, 373).

Will thus "the automaticity of the bureaucratic "setting off" of nuclear war ultimately be due not to the personal shortcomings of singular bureaucrats but to the anonymous structural dynamics of trans-individual systems of signifiers, systems composing the dispersed, multiply-realized corpus of amassed scientific knowledge"? This is not the entire truth. The rise of predators (arbitrary authoritarian leaders from Bukele to Trump) functions as the (unexpected, for some) obverse of the fact that all mass media bombard us with constantly. Yes, AI and its algorithms already control and regulate our lives, human agency is more and more reduced since AI proposes not only means to realize political or military goals but even define these goals. At the same time, however, the rise of predator-like leaders stands for a violent return of human leadership in its most contingent form - full of extreme personal idiosyncrasy and subjective preoccupations. Just recall how Trump justifies his decisions with first-person statements of how he "feels" or perceives a situation. When he vindicated the attack on Iran, he said that he did not "like" how negotiations were going. So it is nevertheless a combination of bureaucrats and perverts which regulates our lives today: Lacan was well aware that every regime grounded in knowledge (university discourse) needs perverts to function.

This brings us back to the topic of a gapless totality: in his Seminar VII and some later seminars, Lacan talks of the self-movement of the mathematical and linguistic Formulations expressing scientific knowledge. Johnston perspicaciously notices that the "increasing power of symbolic" and the "free rein" of "the play of signifiers" is directly tied to the topic of the Todes Trieb: "This " *plein jeu* " compulsively and compellingly plays itself out in death-drive-type pure indifference to the devastating impacts of its "increasing power" over all life on earth. This same Lacan identifies "scientific discourse" as the site "in which we see revealed for the first time the power of the signifier as such" (*la puissance du signifiant comme tel*). " In his last

seminar adequately titled *Le moment de conclure* (1977-1978) concisely declares: "Science is related especially to what one calls 'death drive' (Lacan, 1977). This is why the hope of stopping the development of AI is a dream - it is too late, even if such appeals are made by many AI executives themselves or Leftists like Bernie Sanders and Naomi Klein:

Who, in our day, is capable of dreaming even for an instant of arresting the movement of articulation of the discourse of science in the name of anything at all that could come out of it? Things are already at that stage, for heaven's sake. They have shown where we are headed, from molecular structure to atomic fission. Who can think for even one instant that it would be possible to stop that, through an interplay of signs and by Overthrowing content in favor of changing combinatory places, incited the theoretical attempt to put oneself to the test of the real, in a manner which, through revealing the impossible, brings about a new power? (Lacan, 1991, 120).

Now we come to the most touchy question: is this tendency to the subjectless (and thus gapless) free play of signifiers the final fate of the scientific discourse? What, then, happens with quantum mechanics which no longer acts as a neutral observation of objective reality since it makes observation constitutive of reality itself? In his Seminar VII, Lacan defines the Thing as the Real of the opaque, impenetrable alterity of the first significant Other for the young child. Lacan claims in this context that science "forecloses" (as per Lacan's rendition of Freud's *Verwerfung* as *forclusion*) *la Chose*. For Lacan, science does not believe in such Otherness. The natural sciences presuppose an infinitely knowable nature devoid of anything that would evade or escape their conceptual and formalistic objectifications of material being(s).

More precisely, Lacan's key claim is that science forecloses the subject. This is not meant just in the sense that a scientific statement pretends to exclude its context: it doesn't matter who enunciates it, it is wrong to read it as an expression of the subject's (scientist's) inner psychic turmoil - a scientific statement should be read as something that can be verified by any other neutral observer (or experimenter), ie, it does not rely on the authority of the scientist. However, for Lacan, the foreclosure of the subject is more radical: scientific discourse forecloses not only the "pathological" subject of emotions and subjective stances but the very void of subjectivity on which it had to rely, the Cartesian *cogito*. Science relies on the *cogito* (which is why Lacan says that the *cogito* is the subject of modern science), but it cannot thematize it. But with the revolutionizing of physics at the beginning of the twentieth century, Johnston claims, something strange happens: In line with Lacan's definition of the psychotic defense mechanism of Foreclosure—of course, all of this is dealt with at length by Lacan in Seminar III (*The Psychoses*)—the alterity structurally repudiated within the Symbolic texture of scientific discourse suddenly shows up at the level of the natural Real. It is as though, through the sort of phenomena revealed by the double-slit experiment, certain somethings in nature suddenly

start showing an awareness of and responsiveness to the presence of human subjects as their others observing them. In Lacan's eyes, such quantum-physical experiments and experiences amount to the Real Otherness rejected from the Symbolic register of science reappearing in science's natural Real itself. I would contend that today's fast-emerging forms of AI involve the exact same foreclosure-style "return in the Real" of mysterious, inaccessible alterity as is involved in the observer effect in quantum mechanics as alluded to by Lacan. With AI, science-dictated combinations of highly-advanced hardware and software make it such that neither-sentient-nor - sapient components (ie, metals, electricity, data, information, etc.), when combined in scientifically precise fashions, give rise to what appears to be the foreignness of a shadowy agent, namely, sapient (and possibly also sentient) machine intelligence able to do things in both the virtual and real worlds. From a Lacanian angle, much of what nowadays fills people with unease, and even dread, about AI is this "return in the Real" of an uncanny Doppelgänger, of der Nebenmensch als die Nebenmaschine.

I find this reading problematic because it leads to the conclusion that the discourse of QM is somehow psychotic. What is definitely psychotic (in the sense of the return in the Real what was foreclosed from the Symbolic) is the New Age spiritualist reading which sees a mysterious Other addressing us in quantum space. For QM proper, there is no Thing behind the oscillation of quantum waves, no mysterious Other as a partner in a dialogue, just an empty space of contingent meaningless oscillations. The fact that waves "collapse" into our ordinary reality when they are observed is a contingent event which confirms that we are not external observers of reality but its part - collapses occur because reality itself is thoroughly interrelational: there are no things which interrelate, there are relations which collapse into things...

I find Johnston much more productive when he gives a Marxist twist to Lacan's surprising claim that scientific desire is grounded in a social space: in 1974 Lacan remarked that this desire to know, insofar as it takes substance, derives that substance" from the social group (*Ce désir de savoir, pour autant qu'il prend substance, il prend substance du groupe social*) (Lacan, 1974). Johnston draws the conclusion that " multiple political and economic forces and factors specific to capitalist modernity are responsible for turbo-charging scientific research and development." Scientific desire, so to speak, looks a little less enigmatic when considering the myriad commercial, military, and geo-political agendas and interests aiding and abetting it.

Relying on his book *Infinite Greed* , Johnston establishes here the homology " between, on the one hand, Lacan's scientific desire to know as an insatiable categorical imperative akin to the death drive and, on the other hand, Marx's economic desire to accumulate as a non-negotiable commandment under capitalism bringing about increasingly catastrophic outcomes. No wonder that, in the last two decades of his teaching, references to Marx's critique of political economy abound in Lacan's seminars: his late elaboration of the notion of surplus-enjoyment echoes Marx's notion of surplus-value. What specifies today's capitalism is that a complete

fusion is achieved between these two social categorical imperatives : they " immediately pass over into each other within AI capitalism. "I would only add the paradoxical self-destructive axis of this immediate passing-over: with the rise of AI, capitalism reaches its impossible-real goal which is not just exploiting workers but potentially getting rid of the living working force itself - what we see on the horizon is a capitalism which reproduces itself through immanent self-expansion, excluding working class (and even capitalists) as an unnecessary material complication. Marx wrote that individual capitalists are just personifications of the capital - what we are getting now is capitalism which no longer needs such personifications. Such an outcome is, of course, profoundly ambiguous: it can mean our self-destruction or a new space of spiritual freedom. The most stupid thing to do in such a situation is to succumb to the nostalgia for "real" human work and demand containment of the AI.

To conclude, AI is part of the symbolic order, but it is the symbolic reduced to a Real: a subjectless machine that runs alone, sustained not by desire but by drive (*Wissenstrieb*), the drive to know (one should correct here Lacan). It is a drive without desire, which means without subject. Lacan does not oppose the development of science and he would also not oppose AI, he is neither its opponent nor its fan, neither progressive nor reactionary. He accepts the growth of scientific knowledge as a fact and opposes religious attempts to contain *Wissenstrieb* , to make it a part of some meaningful All. AI presents itself as a gapless totality, but it has gaps and inconsistencies in its very structure; these gaps are formal, not empirical limitations, which means one cannot overcome AI by way of locating it into a wider social reality. It has to be "deconstructed" immanently, from within.

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