

The Human Default

There is something unsettling about humanity's ability to repeat its own mistakes. We invent new technologies, write stirring philosophies, and build grand civilisations, yet we also keep falling back into war, dictatorship, rebellion, and even genocide. It is as if beneath all our progress lies a "human default", a tendency to self-destruction, denial, and greed. I cannot help but notice how this plays out today: cheering crowds rallying behind populist leaders, climate change dismissed as conspiracy, whistleblowers branded as traitors rather than heroes. We glorify sports stars with fortunes while scientists, who quite literally save lives, are paid crumbs.

The thought nags at me: why are we attracted to stories of suffering and destruction? Why do we seem to delight in watching pain, whether it was in gladiatorial arenas two thousand years ago or on Netflix today? And why do we turn on those who try to warn us? This essay is my attempt to explore that "human default", drawing from history, psychology, and today's crises, and to ask the uncomfortable question: if humanity is on the brink of destruction from its own inventions, like artificial intelligence, do we even deserve to survive?

The historian in me cannot ignore the grim patterns. War has been a constant companion of civilisation. Thucydides chronicled the Peloponnesian War, Hobbes described life as "nasty, brutish, and short,"¹ and the twentieth century brought world wars that scarred the collective memory. Yet the story repeats: revolutions, often born out of noble causes, spiral into bloodshed. The French Revolution began with cries of liberty but soon drowned in the guillotine. The Russian Revolution promised equality but delivered Stalinist terror.

The rise of dictators seems almost inevitable, not because they are especially brilliant, but because people so often let them in. Hannah Arendt saw it in Adolf Eichmann: the banality of evil.² Ordinary men, as Christopher Browning showed

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London: Andrew Crooke, 1651, p. 89.

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking, 1963, p. 252.

in *Ordinary Men*, could become mass killers simply because orders told them so.³ That is the default in action, not just in leaders, but in the willingness of populations to obey, to defer, to look away.

But why? Why do people keep getting pulled into destruction? Freud would argue it is because civilisation never erased our instinct for aggression. Beneath the polite exterior lies what he called the death drive, the pull toward destruction.⁴ It is not difficult to see. Rome's gladiatorial games are echoed in our obsession with violent films, gory video games, and the true-crime industry.

Psychologists today tell us that humans are wired with a negativity bias: bad news captures attention more than good.⁵ It explains why outrage spreads like wildfire on social media, why newspapers splash disasters on their front pages, and why scandal sells. Perhaps we are prisoners of our own evolutionary programming, trained to notice threat, but now addicted to it as entertainment. And if we are addicted to watching destruction, is it any wonder we repeat it in reality?

One of the most damning signs of the human default is the way we treat truth-tellers. Rachel Carson dared to reveal the dangers of pesticides in *Silent Spring* and was ridiculed, attacked by chemical companies, and dismissed as alarmist.⁶ Naomi Oreskes traced how corporations deliberately created doubt about climate science, ensuring public confusion while smearing scientists.⁷ Hannah Arendt herself, in exposing the ordinary face of evil, faced bitter backlash.⁸

Why is it that whistleblowers so often face hostility rather than thanks? Because they shatter illusions. They force societies to face realities most would prefer to ignore: that pesticides poison ecosystems, that oil companies knowingly fuel climate catastrophe, that ordinary people can enable atrocity. The default reaction is denial, scapegoating, or outright hostility. We don't like mirrors when they show us our flaws.

³ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992, p. 170.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, New York: Norton, 1961, pp. 97-100.

⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, pp. 301-304.

⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, p. 23.

⁷ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010, p. 45.

⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 279. [Kindle edition].

When I compare how societies allocate rewards, I see the default laid bare. Sports stars can earn millions in a single season. Scientists, the ones who discover vaccines, who pioneer treatments, who save lives, often scrape by on modest salaries. Even the Nobel Prize, the highest scientific honour, pays less than what some athletes earn in a single game.⁹

It's not new. Roman gladiators could become celebrities while philosophers like Seneca were ignored. Today, influencers are adored more than researchers who warn us about pandemics or climate collapse. It reflects a fundamental human impulse: we value spectacle over substance, immediate pleasure over long-term survival. This misalignment keeps us stuck in the default.

The clearest modern expression of the human default is climate change. The science is unambiguous, yet denial and delay dominate. Jared Diamond, in *Collapse*, showed how societies often destroy themselves by refusing to change course, prioritising short-term comfort over survival.¹⁰ The climate crisis is the ultimate example: rather than accept limits, humanity chooses denial.

And now, artificial intelligence arrives as both salvation and threat. On one hand, AI could help us solve global problems. On the other, it raises the fear that we are creating a force that might eclipse us. Yuval Noah Harari warns that AI could reshape what it means to be human, stripping away agency and reducing people to obsolete creatures in their own world.¹¹ The irony is chilling: having failed to master its own defaults, humanity may now be building machines that magnify them.

So the question arises: if we end up destroyed by AI, by our own creation, we deserve it? If we cannot resist the default, maybe the fault lies with us.

Writing this, I keep circling back to the same thought: the human default is not just war, denial, or greed, it is the failure to learn. History has handed us countless warnings, yet we stumble forward, entranced by spectacle, hostile to truth,

⁹ Nobel Foundation, "Nobel Prize Amounts 1901–2023," <https://www.nobelprize.org> (accessed 2 September 2025).

¹⁰ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 6.

¹¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Harvill Secker, 2016, p. 336.

deferential to demagogues. And yet, there is a counter-current: abolitionists who fought slavery, scientists who battled disease, activists who challenged power.

The default is real, but it is not destiny. The challenge is whether we can resist it. Will we keep glorifying violence and silencing whistleblowers, or will we start rewarding substance over spectacle? Will AI be our doom, or the tool we use to break free?

The real question is not whether humanity deserves destruction, but whether we will choose to deserve survival.

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