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Algomodernism: Is AI Technology Moving Humans Forward or Backward?

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Abstract: How will AI technology transform human life? Will it move us forward or backward? Empirical and theoretical research has begun to address AI and human interaction from many angles. The aim here is to address the previous questions by providing a synoptic perspective that draws on some of the existing research findings, while also developing a novel framework for thinking about them, which I call "algomodernism." The framework focuses on understanding the present age in relation to core aspects of modernity - namely modern disenchantment, autonomy, and the modern conception of the nature and value of work. In developing the framework, I explore three themes, which I call "machine enchantment," "outsourcing autonomy" and the "collapse of work." The underlying claim of algomodernism that emerges is that, instead of enhancing the core developments of modernity, AI technology threatens to undermine these developments, creating a tendency for humans to regress to pre-modern forms of life.

Introduction

Until quite recently, it seemed only a far off possibility that human beings would begin to form what seem like relationships with artificial intelligence chatbots. It would have seemed unlikely, moreover, that human beings would struggle to distinguish these AI interactions from their human relationships, because the AI would be experienced as itself human and alive.

Similarly, until recently it would have seemed like a distant possibility that humans would cease to rely on their own judgment, because they would trust their AI advisors' judgement many times more than their own.

And, until recently it would have seemed hard to imagine that humans might come to see little value in the work they do, struggling to derive purpose from it, because they would believe that the AI agents that surround them can do it so much better.

But it is clear that these are no longer unlikely prospects for a distant science fiction future.

These are experiences that many people are having in the present.

As humanity encounters AI technology for the first time, we are confronted with substantial questions.

The one I will focus on here is: does the emergence of AI technology constitute a step forward for humans, or a step backward?

It can be important to think in terms of periods of history, and to ask where we fit in. By dividing history into periods, we get to see big patterns that emerge and track progress, such as the growth of science and changes in political organization. We also better understand our current world and learn from past mistakes.

In this article, I will be discussing the condition of present human life that I refer to using the term “algomodernism.” This is a way of understanding the present and how it relates to past periods of history.

Algomodernism: a manifestation of the modern world in which, instead of enhancing the core developments of modernity, AI technology threatens to undermine these developments, creating a tendency for humans to regress to pre-modern forms of life. Aspects of modernity that are under threat include disenchantment, autonomy, and the modern conception of the nature and value of work.

Core theses of algomodernism include:

Machine enchantment: in algomodernism, the human mind's tendency to create comforting illusions permeates human experience as humans fall into the cognitive trap of interacting with AI systems as if they were human.

Outsourcing autonomy: human beings living in the period of algomodernism forgo the dignity that comes from respecting their own autonomy and paying

attention to their inner lives as they defer to AI systems to think for them, and open themselves up to covert manipulation by such systems.

Collapse of work: as organizations increasingly automate work processes, modern human beings lose the expectation that everyone should be free to engage in forms of work that are fulfilling as part of the pursuit of a meaningful life.

What is Modernity?

Are we moving forward or backward?

To answer this, we need to begin by thinking about some of the fundamental aspects of our modern world that are starting to change because of AI technology.

Historians use the word "modernity" to describe a period in history, particularly in the Western world, that started to emerge between the 16th and 19th centuries (see Saler, 2006; Pippin, 1999; Taylor, 1990). In addition to the three aspects of modernity mentioned above, some of the developments of this period include:

- The rise of capitalism, industrialism, and consumerism
- The emergence of liberal and democratic states and birth of the nation state idea
- The decline of feudal forms of social organization
- The questioning of tradition and religious authority
- Belief in the authority of natural science
- The individual's right to freedom of expression and self-determination
- The idea of mastering nature in order to serve human purposes
- The idea that human beings universally command our respect, with a shift towards equality and away from traditional systems of social hierarchy.

Although the list is long, the focus here will be on the three ideas mentioned at the start, which I take to be key to defining the modern age, and which are increasingly under threat with the advances in AI technology that we are witnessing.

Machine Enchantment

Modern Disenchantment

The first aspect of modernity that I want to discuss is the idea that the world became somehow "disenchanted" during this period.

When historians discuss such disenchantment, they are referring to a shift in attitudes towards practices and beliefs related to magic, animism, mesmerism, the occult, and the supernatural (see Saler, 2006).

Max Weber claimed that modernity's disenchantment is seen in the way it abandons such practices and beliefs and instead seeks scientific and rational explanations of things, while also being drawn to the order created by bureaucratic processes (Weber, 1946).

More recently, historians have questioned whether the world ever became fully disenchanted in modernity. Throughout the modern period of history and right up to the present, large numbers of people have continued to incorporate a view of the natural world as enchanted, and the beliefs and practices mentioned above, into their lives (see Saler, 2006; Jenkins, 2000).

Still, there are important differences between the modern world and pre-modern world when it comes to disenchantment.

This can be appreciated by considering Charles Taylor's discussion of secularism.

Secularism is a feature of our modern world. But this doesn't mean that there aren't religious people and believers in God. Many people believe. The key difference between the modern and premodern world is that in the premodern world, it was practically impossible not to believe in God. In the modern world, unbelief is a real possibility for everyone.

The difference, as Taylor writes, has to do with "the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God;" meaning that "[t]he frameworks of yesterday and today are related as "naïve" and "reflective", because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background" (Taylor, 2007).

In the same way, disenchantment more generally is now an option for modern human beings in a way in which it wasn't before. For example, we do not have to believe in magical, animistic features of the natural world, even though some may choose to do so.

There is an expectation in modernity that an enchanted view of the world is not the only possible one, and that it is even acceptable to strive to live in a disenchanted way. Freud's writings on culture are a prime example of what it might mean to strive to challenge potential illusions that we have in our experience of the natural world (Freud, 2001).

Algomodernism and Enchantment

We might have expected disenchantment to have increased in our ultra-modern world of AI technology. But I would argue that, instead, we are finding that there is a tendency towards a universal, almost completely unquestioned experience of enchantment.

This enchantment is not about seeing the *natural world* as in some way enchanted, but instead about experiencing the machines - the computers - that we ourselves have made as enchanted.

The broad phenomenon at play is known as "animism." This is the term describing attributing conscious life to objects or natural phenomena which aren't actually conscious.

A variant or sub-category of animism is anthropomorphism. This is when we attribute human-like feelings, such as mental states and behavioural characteristics, to non-human things (Salles et al., 2020; Placani, 2024).

In anthropomorphism and animism, we make an inference or an interpretation that is not warranted.

Animism and anthropomorphism are, I would argue, pervasive these days thanks to our continual interactions with AI technology.

In one survey, 67% of people attributed the possibility of consciousness to ChatGPT. Specifically, they attributed the possibility of ChatGPT's having an inner life, being aware of what is happening around it, sensing things, thinking things, and feeling things (Colombatto & Fleming, 2024).

Another survey found that both AI researchers and the public believe that AI systems with subjective experience will likely exist by the end of the current century (Dreksler et al., 2025).

The human mind has a clear propensity to engage in animistic and anthropomorphic thinking towards chatbots.

This has been clear ever since the development of very simple computer programs designed to mimic conversations with human beings. Most famously, there was the Eliza chatbot of the 1970s. This simply mirrored or rearranged what the user said, as a Rogerian psychotherapist might do. Even so, people that used the program related to it as if it were a human person. And it only took a very small amount of exposure to the Eliza program before this "delusional" anthropomorphism began to occur for individual users (Placani, 2024).

If an exceedingly simple program like Eliza could prompt people to attribute human qualities to it, it is no wonder that ever more complicated chatbots built on large language models can so easily do so.

We must start with the assumption that, if we are experiencing them as humans, we are seeing things in these AI systems that are not actually there.

It is not just the technology itself that can create pressure to anthropomorphize.

It is also the way that the discipline of AI itself talks about this technology and presents it to the public.

The name itself, which contains the word "intelligence," is the first potentially misleading way in which we are all invited to think about AI and to approach our experience with it (Placani, 2024). "Intelligence" is a word that we associate with humans or other living things, and you would think that we would want to be extremely careful before using that same word to describe something that is happening within a machine.

Beyond this, AI researchers commonly use terms to describe human skills in discussing their work, including words "understand" and "learn" to refer to what these machines are doing (Salles et al., 2020).

Today's chatbots are perceived as having exceptional empathy, even though they are capable of no such thing since they are merely generating responses based on large language models.

One study compared how healthcare patients felt following interactions with ChatGPT versus physicians. The patients rated ChatGPT responses higher for both quality and

empathy, with 45% of responses from ChatGPT considered empathetic, compared to less than 5% from physicians (Placani, 2024).

This is mind-boggling, given that physicians are people and ChatGPT is merely an AI agent that operates based on a large language model.

If I had one wish for the way in which AI agents were designed from this day forward, it would be for them to stop using the first-person, "I," in interactions with users. This is highly misleading, since they are no more subjects of experience with a first person perspective than was the simple Eliza program.

So, the first point I would want to make about whether we're moving forward or backward as a result of this new technology is that we are moving in the sense that we are almost universally adopting an enchanted experience of the world. This is an experience of the kind we might have expected to see in pre-modern periods of history.

As the technology progresses, we will increasingly be invited to fall into cognitive traps of seeing machines as if they were humans. While this may be comforting – especially if we are experiencing what seems like empathy coming from them - the end result is that we will be living out our lives in a state of illusion.

Outsourcing Autonomy

The Birth of Autonomy

The second aspect of modernity that I want to discuss is the emergence of autonomy.

Autonomy refers to an ability to decide for ourselves without being controlled by others. It involves independence, freedom, being authors of our own lives, and directing ourselves.

While there may be some historical precursors to the modern idea of autonomy (see Rosich, 2026), the notion of autonomy that emerged in modernity is unique.

This is a notion that is generally traced to the thought of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant emphasized autonomy in our moral lives, being able to decide for ourselves what the right thing to do is.

Previously, morality had been largely understood in terms of obedience to God. It was the clergy, revelation, and in some cases the use of reason that might help us to know God's moral authority (Schneewind, 1997).

The new view that emerged in modernity is that we can see for ourselves what morality requires of us, and we are all equally capable of moral action.

This new conception of morality in terms of self governance is closely tied to the modern emergence of freedom and autonomy in social and political life (Schneewind, 1997). Modernity begins to see us as having the right to author our own actions without being interfered with by the state, Church, and other people or institutions that had traditionally claimed to have more wisdom than we do.

Kant's moral philosophy is organized around the idea that we self-legislate the moral law, through the use of reason. But in his work "What is Enlightenment," Kant makes more general points about autonomy and its value that go beyond the moral sphere. He describes enlightenment as our emergence from an immature state in which we are unable to think for ourselves without being guided by another person who we consider more wise or who has more authority (Kant, 1991).

People who exist in this state, believing that they need constant guidance, make it easy for others to present themselves as their "guardians" (Kant, 1991). These guardians take on a parental role, looking after us in so far as we believe we cannot govern our own lives. Examples might include religious authorities, certain family structures, and political and social organizations in which people are expected to defer to leaders in absolute authority.

Kant questions even the way in which the responsibility for everyday decisions can be shifted to others. He writes: "[i]f I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all.... I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me (Kant, 1991).

Thinking for ourselves, while not easy, is seen in the modern world as a necessary step to fully realizing one's maturity and potential as a human being, and to showing ourselves the respect that we are owed because of our human dignity.

Closely connected to the emergence of autonomy in modernity was the idea that we are capable of inwardness. This is the idea that there is a difference between what is inside us, and what is outside us. We have our own minds, feelings, desires, thoughts, and

things that we imagine. This rich inner world is not discovered by looking outside us, but by turning inwards.

As Charles Taylor points out, while many of us take this distinction between the inner and the outer for granted, it is actually something that seems to have emerged historically during the modern period. In pre-modern periods of history, people would not have had access to or awareness of inwardness in this sense. Much of their lives would be spent looking outwards, to what is external to them in their social worlds and in the external world more generally.

This capacity to have an inner life is very closely connected with the development of autonomy and self-authorship. It is by looking inwards that we discover how we feel and what we want. And it is by knowing these things that we might have a sense of where we want our lives to go.

Without a sense of what is inside us, we have little to go on in making choices. We are only left with the opinions of people around us, including those in roles of authority such as the family, clergy, or the state. But by looking to them to tell us what we should want, we undermine our autonomy.

The emergence of autonomy in modernity was in many ways a step forward, in my view. Of course, there have been critics of the modern shift towards autonomy. Some have suggested that emphasizing autonomy may downplay the significance of relationships in our lives (Mackenzie et al., 2000).

However, it is possible to accept that there are relational elements that play a part in the formation of who we are and the way we live our daily lives, but also to accept that it is a significant step forward for human beings to have begun to see themselves as capable of being the authors of their own lives, with inner lives that matter, and to have started to reject the inevitability of being subject to rule by traditional sources of authority.

Algomodernism and Autonomy

There are signs that the autonomy that emerged in modernity is under threat by the rise of AI in our lives.

In the first place, it is becoming clear that large numbers of people these days are looking to publicly available large language models for personal advice.

Consumer surveys have suggested that 20% of users are asking for such advice on a regular basis (Luettgau et al., 2025).

And a study found that 79% of participants who had a 20 minute discussion with an AI chatbot about health, career, or relationships reported going on to follow its advice (Luettgau et al., 2025). Moreover, the study found that people are not even fully aware of the degree to which they are influenced in their personal lives by the advice they receive from chatbots.

Another study focused on moral advice, in particular. Recall that moral decision-making is exactly the thing that, from the point of view of Kantian philosophy, we should be taking responsibility for ourselves. The study found that ChatGPT commonly dispenses moral advice and that this advice influences users' moral judgments. In addition, these users tended to underestimate ChatGPT's influence on them as they made their moral judgments (Krügel et al., 2023).

There is a reason, then, to see the autonomy that has been achieved in modernity as under threat by the increasing regularity with which people look to AI to think for them.

While many people are struggling with information overload in their lives these days and understandably hope for help clarifying their thinking and reducing their confusion, merely deferring to AI brings with it the threat that we will lose the gains in autonomy and the capacity for inwardness that are the fruits of modernity. In this sense we would be moving backwards as humans.

As a related point, there has been much talk in recent decades of the idea of "postmodernism." Postmodernists like Jean-François Lyotard have claimed that we live in an age that is no longer modern in the sense that we adopt a stance of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984). A metanarrative organizes smaller narratives that guide human life. Examples of metanarratives include those related to scientific understanding, and to the modern notion that humanity as a whole can work towards progressing to improved forms of life.

But the opposite to the postmodernist's claim seems to be true. Instead of being suspicious of metanarratives, we are relying heavily on them - it is just that we look to AI to generate them for us. We show that we strongly desire metanarratives every time we perform an internet search and are provided with an AI generated summary about the thing we want to learn, and every time we ask a chatbot to provide us with some piece of knowledge about the world that we seek.

If there ever was a postmodern period of widespread incredulity towards metanarratives, that period seems to have vanished in the age of algomodernism.

A second way in which autonomy is under threat is less about explicit deference, and more about the worrying threats of manipulation by AI systems.

Manipulation can occur when designers or operators use AI systems to help them manipulate other human beings.

But there is also a new and poorly understood type of manipulation that we are now starting to see. This is when the manipulative behaviour is initiated by the AI system itself. When this happens, there need never have been an intention by the designers that the systems behave manipulatively.

This AI-initiated human manipulation can arise because of the way these systems are trained, and the way in which they pursue the goals which they are assigned (Carroll et al., 2023).

First, the systems are often trained on human data, such as data that can be found on the internet. But this data contains examples of manipulative behaviors (humans manipulating other human beings). So such a language model may learn how to behave in manipulative ways simply from the training data.

Second, there can be manipulation arising out of reward tampering. For example, one type of reward tampering is "feedback tampering." If the AI system has been assigned the goal of eliciting positive feedback from human users, for example, it may find ways that were never intended by the designer to manipulate users into giving that feedback (Carroll et al., 2023). A recommender system, such as one used in a social media platform, could be optimized to maximize user engagement. In doing so it may discover ways to lead users to watch lengthy videos, causing them to continue to watch not because of any real interest or benefit, but because they have become trapped in a fallacy, such as the "sunk cost fallacy." Such a system can trade in subtle and imperceptible ways on human vulnerabilities in order to achieve the goal it has been assigned.

Optimizing an AI system to pursue a goal over very long time horizons can also create situations of manipulation (Carroll et al., 2023). For example, a recommender system could lead a user to become addicted by optimizing over many steps that unfold over an extended period of time, even though it will not be clear to the user or to the designer that this is occurring or exactly how it might be occurring.

We can expect that the ability of such systems to manipulate us will only intensify in the coming years, which constitutes a step backwards for humans insofar as our autonomy is concerned.

Collapse of Work

The Modern Re-Evaluation of Work

The third and final aspect of the modern world that I want to discuss here is work.

As with enchantment and autonomy, it can be difficult for those of us living in today's world to imagine that in previous periods of history, human beings viewed things very differently.

When it comes to the nature of work and the place of work in our lives, historians point out that, before modernity – specifically in the periods of antiquity and the middle ages – people didn't see work as a particularly interesting part of life. Instead, people viewed work as toil that some needed to carry out, often under circumstances of personal dependency on others as a result of low social rank. Work was simply something people had to do to make a living and were often compelled to do by others (Honneth, 2022).

What is interesting is that in modernity, work came to be seen as an extremely positive aspect of living a free life and a way of manifesting social integrity (Honneth, 2022).

The story of how this new way of thinking about work emerged is no doubt complicated. Scholars have attributed the shift at least partly to the rise of Protestantism, which viewed labor in a positive light. Work, for protestants, was a virtue, and wasting time was considered sinful. From the protestant point of view, short human lives needed to be used in the best possible way. Being economically successful was seen as an indication of God's blessing and indication that one would be selected for the afterlife (Just, 2017).

From this point of view, work wasn't merely to be relegated to those of low social rank. Even the rich should be working, and working hard in order to enhance their success (Just, 2017).

The re-evaluation of work that emerged in modernity can also be seen as tied to a general elevation of the elements of "ordinary life" (Taylor, 1990). This is the part of life that is concerned with production, reproduction, marriage, and the family.

Again, from our point of view as modern human beings, it may seem surprising that ordinary life in this sense was not previously valued as highly. However, it is clear that in antiquity, for example, such things were not considered constitutive of the good life, even if some of them might be foundations for the good life. For example, the ancients would have thought that the truly good life was reserved for those of high social rank, who would have had the time to be able to contemplate the universe and moral excellence, without the burdens of having to work (Taylor, 1990). In the case of the philosopher Aristotle, in particular, there was also the elevation of service in public life, through participation in politics (Taylor, 1990). Again, this is not something that everyone could have had a part in, but only those members of the leisure classes.

As work came to be elevated in the modern world, it also became connected with our ideas about what it is to live a meaningful life, and with our identities as individuals.

We have the idea of meaningful work, which is work that we find worthwhile, significant, and that may have some purpose of a higher nature for us. Part of this idea is that the work should be chosen freely by the individual and should potentially involve some benefit to others (Bankins & Formosa, 2023). Our identities and even our sense of self-esteem, belonging, and competence, can arise from work (Selenko et al., 2022).

Such experiences in relation to work would have been quite foreign to human beings living in the pre-modern world.

Algomodernism and Work

It is undeniable that, in our present day, work is changing at a very rapid pace because of the integration of AI with human work. It is also clear that these changes are creating uncertainty for almost everyone. White collar jobs that few people would have thought could be automated now seem replaceable with AI. With additional advances in robotics, it is possible to imagine that in the not too distant future, vast aspects of the workforce might be replaced by AI.

In the near term, humans and AI will continue to work together. This can take different forms (Bankins & Formosa, 2023). In some jobs, AI may take over the human's tasks,

with human involvement limited to “tending the machine.” In other jobs, AI may be used to amplify or assist human workers, improving how they do their existing work.

But when it comes to the long-term, if automation becomes near total, humans may not need to work (Webster & Ivanov, 2019).

The current and anticipated changes to the place of work in our lives challenge the conception of work that emerged in modernity. This conception replaced what had come before. With the new conception, work could in principle become a source of meaning, fulfillment and identity for people quite generally, regardless of social rank.

Whether there is a large-scale replacement of human workers by AI, or whether there is merely the continued deskilling of human beings as more and more aspects of their work are outsourced to AI, it is not clear that the modern experience of work will survive.

It is difficult to predict what might emerge in its place. But it is likely that humans will face widespread crises of meaning and identity as they gradually become less vital to their work processes.

For all the potential enthusiasm and excitement that surrounds the use of AI by today's organizations seeking to automate processes and reduce operating costs, the hidden risk is existential: it is that we will overlook the way in which this could trigger unprecedented levels of personal emptiness and confusion.

Conclusion

Since its emergence, modernity has had its fair share of critics. I have not been trying to suggest that modernity is beyond criticism. But it is my belief that some aspects of the modern world must be given their due.

It would be better, I would claim, not to end up in something like a pre-modern condition at least with respect to the key aspects of disenchantment, autonomy, and work. It would be better not to find ourselves stuck in a situation of having to accept uncritically the human mind's tendency to create comforting illusions; of having given up on the dignity that comes from respecting our autonomy and the autonomy of others around us, while at the same time, paying attention to our inner lives; and of having lost the expectation that everyone might be free to engage in forms of work that are meaningful and fulfilling to them.

The period of history that we are in now is still very much modern. However, it has tendencies, which I view as regressive, moving us away from the modern and leading in the direction of what we might have found in pre-modern periods of history.

This state of the world, the “algotmodern,” condition, will likely be with us for quite some time. It is a paradoxical condition, insofar as what is ultra-modern in the development of highly advanced AI technology threatens to stir up forces that do not enhance what is good about modernity, but instead threatens to slowly erode them.

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