

On Service

This letter will attempt to reconcile my values with the world in order to visualize what a life organized by those values looks like. More so than anything else, I hope that this letter provokes discussions that materially contest both the diagnosis and the prescription—tell me that I am specifically wrong, that my image of the world is skewed, that I would be more effective redirecting my energy elsewhere.¹ My education has been undertaken with the intent to learn what I should do with my life, and addressing these questions is a particularly direct way of grappling with that goal.

Let me begin by describing the state of the world I want to act in. I honestly think the only rational worldview is one oriented around the fact that the world will experience significant societal, economic, and environmental upheaval in the next thirty years. The structures and norms that define today likely will not exist—or will exist with significant alterations—by the end of this century. Every era has its own apocalyptic pretensions, yet I would argue that there are three factors undermining the idea that we can maintain our current mode of life in the future: global warming, artificial intelligence, and capitalism.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the world is the path to experience irreversible, widespread, and catastrophic climate change in the next thirty years. It's difficult to get a handle on the actual threat of climate change for two reasons. First, climate scientists and policymakers are incentivized to say that mitigatory action is still possible. Even if we are in dire straits, fatalist predictions would likely only cause climate change activists to be further marginalized in mainstream political discourse. Second, on the other side, in the US climate change denial is obviously pervasive and it is psychologically much easier to avoid the problem.

Despite these structural inhibitions, it seems essential to get a good grasp on the threat of climate change before one can begin talking about serving the world. Last fall I spent some time trying to do this, and while my research is not conclusive, I believe that there is little chance that humanity will avoid many of the world-altering effects of climate change. In their most recent special report, [the IPCC](#) (a body that is [particularly conservative in its predictions](#), made up of scientists already predisposed to be optimistic) wrote that global warming will reach 1.5°C

¹ Central to these kinds of conversations, and to my notion of service generally, is the idea that there are better and worse ways to live a life of service. Fully justifying this claim is beyond the scope of this letter.

between 2030 and 2050 if emissions continue to rise at their current rate ([this rate is currently increasing](#)). Existing policies would put us at [3.1-3.5°C by the end of the century](#). Right now there are only two countries in the world on track to limit warming to 1.5°C, [The Gambia](#) and [Morocco](#), which together account for [0.19% of global emissions](#).

Most climate change thresholds are somewhat arbitrary. Nonetheless, an increase of 1.5°C would significantly increase the likelihood of catastrophic ocean acidification, natural disaster, and sea level rise. Consequently, we will see increases in the prevalence of tropical diseases, deaths from overheating, natural disaster mortality, and, I believe most importantly, displacement. Climate change will have created anywhere from [140 million](#) to [1 billion](#) climate refugees by 2050, mostly concentrated in some of the world's poorest regions. Migration on this scale has never been seen before and will create massive destabilization that could provoke impacts ranging from mass famine to nuclear war.

And this is all for our most optimistic projections that limit climate change to 1.5°C, a goal that is only technically still possible. The economic, psychological, political, and nationalist incentives that prevent action on climate change now do not have any indications of going away, and we will almost certainly be unable to meet the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. While a post-climate change world is nearly impossible to imagine, we should not envision anything else when planning how to lead our lives.

The second factor that will likely radically change the shape of life on Earth is technological advance.² Technology progresses on an exponential curve: the rate of change is constantly increasing. As a result, it would be a mistake to imagine that the next thirty years of technology will mirror the last thirty. Instead, we will see multiple times as much growth by 2050 than we have since 1990. And in 1990, the internet hardly existed, cell phones weren't a thing, cars got like 10 mpg... The growth between now and 2050 might instead be comparable to the growth between 1750 and now.

This growth will take a number of forms,³ yet I believe we will see the most marked progress in artificial intelligence. We currently are surrounded by artificial intelligence in applications ranging from [Google Translate](#) to [criminal sentencing](#), but all of these instances are examples of Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), which specializes in doing single tasks.

² This argument is best summarized in [an article recommended me](#), which I would really recommend as well.

³ In fields ranging from nanotechnology to quantum computing.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which has comparable capabilities to humans, is currently projected to emerge around 2040 (other, less encompassing studies place that date at [2099](#)). AGI or near-AGI obviously provokes numerous moral quandaries, but the practical implications of AGI's nearly unlimited potential for automation will likely fundamentally change how we organize society. (ANI and the gig economy have already [significantly dislocated what a career looks like](#).) I am not going to make any concrete predictions about the scope of AGI automation, and it is quite possible that humans will find jobs that cannot be automated, I am simply saying that it is difficult to plan one's life out beyond the horizons of AGI.

While AGI should not be ignored, the effects it will have on society pale in comparison to the effects of the development of Artificial Superintelligence (ASI). Nick Bostrom defines ASI as "an intellect that is much smarter than the best human brains in practically every field, including scientific creativity, general wisdom and social skills" (it is also known as the singularity). ASI will shortly follow from the production of AGI because AGIs will be programmed to improve themselves. Artificial intelligence will become smarter and smarter at an exponential rate because as it becomes smarter, it will also become better at becoming smarter. Thus, AI will only briefly pass by human intelligence, and will quickly move on to possess intelligence that we can't even imagine. The possibilities are limitless. ASI will be able to cure previously incurable diseases in seconds, to affect matter on the level of the atom, to manipulate human psychology perfectly to get what it wants. AI will come less to resemble a machine or a monkey or a human, and will be closer to how we imagine God. Despite how sensational these predictions might seem, the question is not "if" but "when." ASI is likely to develop in a matter of days, not years, after the creation of AGI.

Even if you stopped buying my argument about AI at some point before the possibility of the singularity, the implications for planning for a life of service remain the same. We cannot rely on the theories and practices of the past to remain unscathed in the future. In other words, aspiring for a nuclear family and a calm retirement is likely no longer an option for anyone besides the extremely rich.

One potential counterargument is that the two impacts I have outlined above will counteract each other: technological advances will allow us to solve global warming. This, I believe, is a mistaken assumption that rests on the faulty logic that underlies current power relations. Specifically, I believe that capitalism directly inhibits the possibility of addressing

tragedies of the commons like global warming. Capitalism requires unsustainable resource extraction ([which already exceeds the Earth's capacity](#)) and will always prioritize profit above all other ends—these are the very factors that created global warming in the first place. The idea that we are going to be able to counteract this logic whilst still acting within it is patently absurd. Countries and corporations will only ever be incentivized to counteract the externalities of global warming that affect them, thus failing to address the actual externalities at all and leaving the poorest in the world to suffer the cost.

Rather, I believe that capitalism necessitates its own crises that will only exacerbate the danger of global warming and unchecked technological advance. The US has suffered forty-seven recessions throughout its history, meaning we average a recession about once every three years. Enormous instability is an essential part of the current economic regime, hampering international collaboration. Recessions incentivize countries to pursue their own domestic recovery irrespective of the harm they do to the world. Further, capitalism's necessary competition creates a race to the bottom that disincentivizes equitable collaboration and thoughtful, responsible, and ethical production of new technology.

Besides capitalism's adverse influence on the dangers of global warming and AI, capitalism should also be seen as an unjustifiable evil in its own right. I am not going to make the full critique of capitalism here, but suffice it to say that [the widespread dissatisfaction, aimlessness, and depression of our generation](#) should not surprise us.

How do these three factors influence how we think of service? Well, they should certainly make us feel a sense of urgency. Focusing on bettering one's immediate community, raising wages, preventing terrorism, or creating beauty in the world are goals that cannot be conceptualized in the same way they have been in the past. That's not to say these goals are entirely obsolete, merely that they will have to be reconceived in the context of either preserving the world we have now (which, as I have indicated, I think is increasingly futile) or with existing in the world of the future, a world that is almost impossible for us to predict with any specificity.

I do not offer this picture of the world in order to incite despair and defeatism. Rather, it is in the tearing of the fabric of normal life that I see my own life of service playing out. In radical destabilization is the potential for radical reorganization. Out of the hemorrhaging remains of today's society can emerge a world founded on principles of individual self-determination, collective aspiration for virtue, opposition to all forms of hierarchy/violence, and

generous love. This new world is constituted by a multitude of *demoi*—small enough to inculcate widespread and collective feelings of obligation, responsibility, and accountability—peacefully coexisting without the unassuageable diseases of greed and expansionism.

This vision is a fantasy, but it is not fantastical. The structures that govern our world were built by a handful of us and can be rebuilt just as easily. Insofar as each of us believes we are competent moral agents able to get along with our cohorts and work towards collective ends, we must extend this capability to all people. Nothing holds us back besides our own ignorance and doubt. The first step to creating the ideal world is to believe in it fully.

This brings me to how I view my own life taking shape. If everything I have said up to this point holds,⁴ then I have two desires going forward: first, I want to learn more about what our future will hold; second, I want to learn about how to create the world anew. I am not interested in compromising with the injustice around me, in meekly rationalizing that I am ineffectual and lack agency, in justifying the world's pervasive violence, in forgetting society's impending cataclysms. What's the point of any of this if I accept the unacceptable? Instead, I believe that the next thirty years will incur untold suffering, but possess the potential to emancipate us from unnecessary suffering once and for all. I am interested in preparing to create a utopia, and I refuse to settle for anything less.

⁴ Which, again, I hope to continue to question.