

CHEN QIUFAN

How to Think Unlike Humans?

Chen Qiufan provocatively interrogates the anthropocentric biases constraining human cognition, advocating for a radical epistemological recalibration through speculative fiction. Drawing upon emblematic literary works—Ken Liu's exploration of multi-temporal beings, Jorge Luis Borges's infinite informational labyrinth, Ted Chiang's linguistic determinism, Vladimir Nabokov's perceptual paranoia, N.K. Jemisin's urban symbiosis, and Ursula Le Guin's ecological sentence—Chen critiques humanity's limited cognitive frameworks, suggesting they impede meaningful interactions with diverse intelligences. He challenges alignmentism in artificial intelligence, positing that reproducing human-centric thought risks catastrophic outcomes. Instead, Chen proposes embracing cognitive architectures embodied in nature's distributed intelligence, exemplifying symbiosis as a paradigm for evolutionary and existential resilience. Urging a shift from individualistic consciousness to collective and ecological empathy, he articulates a vision where humanity must learn to "think unlike humans," engaging imaginatively and compassionately with the planetary and cosmic others, thus enabling coexistence amid crises of unprecedented scale and complexity.

Chen Qiufan (a.k.a. Stanley Chan) is an award-winning speculative fiction author, translator, curator, and futurist. He focuses on issues of climate change and the environment, artificial intelligence and cybernetic society, and reflects on how to incorporate ancient non-dualistic philosophies into the narrative framework for constructing a future symbiotic society. His works include the debut novel *Waste Tide* and *AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future* (co-authored with Dr. Kai-Fu Lee).

EDITORIAL

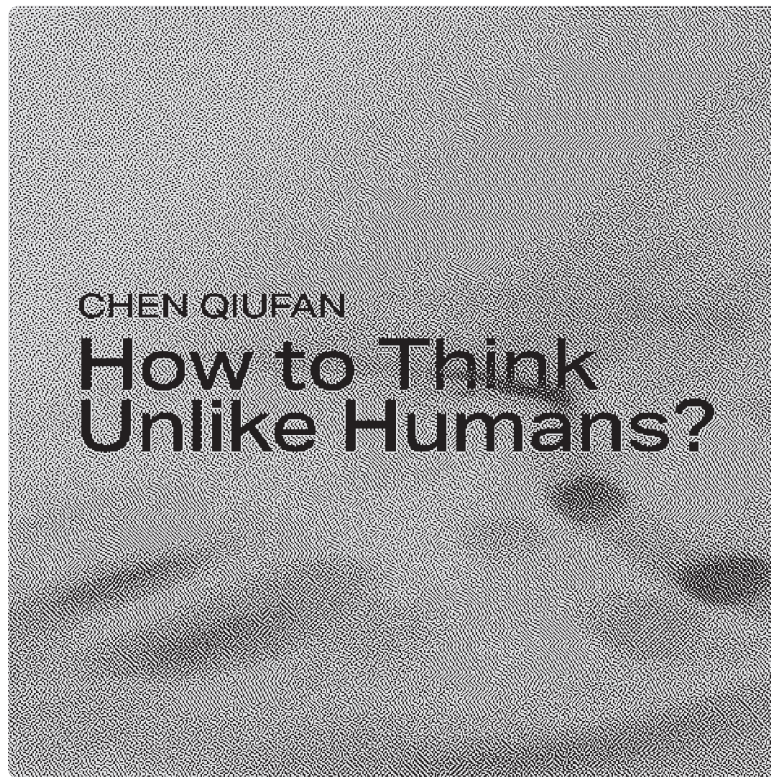
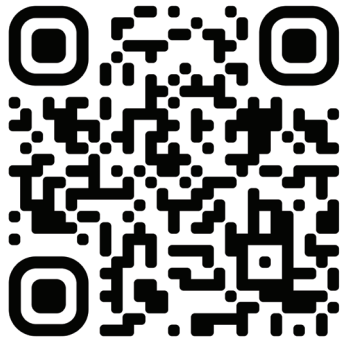
Chen Qiufan's talk explores the challenge of understanding non-human intelligence, be it in AI or alien lifeforms, and argues for the necessity of expanding our cognitive frameworks beyond human-centric biases. Chen draws on examples from speculative fiction to illustrate alternative modes of perception and cognition.

Chen critiques AI alignment, suggesting that designing AGI solely based on human cognitive architecture and values could lead to catastrophic outcomes. He contends that humanity's short-term, individualistic focus hinders our ability to address long-term, planetary-scale challenges. He argues that speculative fiction offers valuable tools for imagining radically different forms of thought.

He references Ken Liu's "The Time Keepers Symphony," which depicts beings with vastly different perceptions of time, and Jorge Luis Borges's "The Library of Babel," which imagines an infinite, externalized information system. These examples illustrate how variations in temporal experience and information processing can fundamentally alter cognition. Chen discusses Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life*, where an alien language reflects a simultaneous awareness of past, present, and future, and Vladimir Nabokov's "Symbols and Signs," which portrays a patient experiencing meaning through non-linguistic phenomena. These works prompt questions about the relationship between language and thought, and whether thoughts can exist entirely devoid of language.

Chen also explores the concept of the body in N.K. Jemisin's *The City Born Great*, where a person merges with New York City, and in his own work, "As Water Over Your Scattered Bodies," which imagines a future where technology separates humans from their physical selves. These scenarios raise questions about individual agency and the balance between collective intelligence and connection to our physical selves. He further examines the nature of feelings, drawing on Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and Ursula K. Le Guin's "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow," which depict alien entities with vastly different emotional experiences. He questions whether feelings are fundamental protocols of existence and suggests that empathy could be a mechanism for consciousness to propagate and evolve.

Chen delves into the concept of self, referencing Peter Watts's *Blindsight* and Greg Egan's *Permutation City*. Watts suggests that self-awareness might be an evolutionary accident, while Egan imagines consciousness existing in a scattered, non-linear form. These ideas challenge the notion of self-awareness as the ultimate goal of intelligence and prompt a rethinking of AI development. Chen concludes by advocating for a willingness to "unlearn" human-centric biases and embrace the alien within and without ourselves. He suggests that the future may require a new kind of cognitive flexibility and an openness to diverse forms of intelligence.



Thanks everyone for coming. And thank you Antikythera and Berggruen Institute, who brought me all the way back from Rome to London, to UAL, Central Saint Martins to share some of my thoughts, which haunt me for quite a while.

So last week I attended the event hosted also by Berggruen Institute and American Academy in Rome to listen to the whale researcher Giovanni Petri and speculative fiction writer Ken Liu talking about alien translation. I was deeply fascinated by how far we actually go in understanding another species, which we were hunting for centuries, even till now, while our anthropocentric bias nearly blinds us to an intelligence that has been sharing our planet for millions of years. Whales are definitely not a single case, right? Think about the octopus. The fungus and microbes, if you may. Then, how can we hope to recognize, let alone communicate, with intelligence or lifeforms distinguished from our own if we remain trapped within the human mode of thought?

PART ONE: TIME & SPACE

02:25

Part One: Time & Space

And now think about AI, right? To me alignmentism is a joke. If we design AGI based solely on human cognitive architecture and values, we risk creating entities with godlike intelligence but potentially catastrophic motivations. So stakes are even higher as we grapple with global crises.

We're beginning to recognize that human connection with its short-term bias and individualistic focus make it ill equipped to address planetary scale long term challenges like climate change, and species extinction. Yet, all around us, Mother Nature offers way more profound examples of distributed intelligence and collective problem solving that put our efforts to shame.

And that's why it matters to think unlike humans. As we stand at this pivotal moment in history, we find ourselves in need of new cognitive tools, new frameworks for understanding and engaging with forms of thought radically different from our own. And where better to find these things than in the realm of speculative fiction? So, let us turn to some of my favorite works.

I would love to read some excerpts to help you immerse into this non-human mind even in human language. So forgive me, I'm not a professional voice actor, but I'll try my best, so bear with me if there are any funny pronunciations. Since inventing novel terms is also part of the tradition in the genre.

So, the "Time Keepers Symphony" by Ken Liu:

"In the cloud forests of Paek Sigma II, the inhabitants do not keep time, but stretch and slice it. The first humans who arrived on the planet were amazed by the fauna. There's the stone-armored petradrakon, draped in twenty thousand scales each a meter across, who lays a clutch of eggs only every one thousand and nine times. Paek Sigma II has revolved around its prime sun. There's a glass-winged slisli fly, whose two-phased life cycle, alternating between koniphyte and neophyte generations, lasts a brilliant seventy seconds,

the average duration it takes for the living silicon snowflakes to drift from the mist-shrouded canopy to the sulfur-infused earth. There's also the deep-sea abyssal bynaasaa, who slithers no more than a centimeter in a century. There's the red-shafted needlebeak, whose erratic, darting flight, changing direction a hundred times a second, can make a single mating pair appear to be a whole swarm to the novice observer. On no other planet has life evolved to occupy so many timescales and niches all at once. It is a temporal Galapagos, a Mendelian garden of crisscrossing timelines. Little wonder, then, that the settlers of Paek Sigma II began to look for new ways to inhabit the stream of time. Slow down or speed up—altering the metabolic clock. It is the only way to meet the inhabitants of the planet in their own temporal realms.”

So the second is from “The Library of Babel” by Borges:

“The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations, which inevitably degenerated to banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned suicides more or more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species, the unique species, is about to be extinguished, but the library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret. I have just written the word “infinite”. I have not interpolated this adjective out of rhetorical habit; I say that is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it to be limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons can conceivably come to an end—which is absurd. Those who imagine it to be without limit forget that the possible number of books does have such a limit. I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder, which, thus repeated, would be an order: The Order.”

Ken's work presents beings experiencing time on vastly different scales, from seventy seconds lifespan to millennia long existence. The variants in temporal experience fundamentally alter cognition.

For short-lived entities, decision making becomes instinctual and immediate. For long-lived beings, patterns invisible to a shorter-lived entity become apparent, allowing for complex multi-generational strategies. So, imagine cognitive architecture arising from this different temporal experience, slicing time, suggesting an ability to perceive and manipulate time non-linearly across scales. One might see holistic problem solving with high dimensional projection and reduction or temporal arbitrage, exploiting information asymmetries across time frames, which we already commonly experience in hyper-frequency trading markets.

Turning to Borges' Infinite Library, we see an outsourced, externalized, distributed information system taken to extremes, so there's a shift from knowledge retention to information navigation in the world of infinite accessible information, the primary cognitive skills becomes finding and connecting relevant information rather than memorizing facts. The library represents the future where individual computational power is less relevant than the ability to interface with collective intelligence. Creating meaning might become an act of curation and interpretation rather than generation. Indexing, searching, and the UI design will be extremely crucial.

PART TWO: LANGUAGE

11:52

Part Two: Language

Let's talk about language. These are two of my favorite authors. The first one, Ted Chiang's “Story Of Your Life”:

“When the ancestors of humans and heptapods first acquired the spark of consciousness, they both perceived the same physical world, but they parsed their perception differently; the world-views that ultimately arose were the end result of that divergence. Humans had developed a sequential mode of awareness, while heptapods had developed a simultaneous mode of awareness. We experienced events in an order and perceived their relationship as cause and effect. They experience all events at once and perceived a purpose underlying them all. A minimizing, maximizing purpose. At that stage of your life, there'll be no past or future for you: until I give you my breast, you'll have no memory of contentment in the past, nor expectation of relief in the future. Once you begin nursing, everything will reverse and all will be right with the world. Now is the only moment you'll perceive. You'll live in the present tense. In many ways, it's an enviable state. What distinguishes the heptapod's mode of awareness is not just their actions coincide with history's events, it's also that their motives coincide with history's purposes. They act to create the future, to enact chronology. Language wasn't only for communication, it was also a form of action. According to Speech Act Theory, statements like ‘you're under arrest’, ‘I christen this vessel’ or ‘I promise’ were all performative. A

speaker could perform the action only by uttering the words. For such acts, knowing what would be said didn't change anything. Everyone at the wedding anticipated the words 'I now pronounce you husband and wife,' but until the minister actually said them, the ceremony didn't count. With performative language saying equaled doing. Instead of using language to inform, they use language to actualize. Sure, heptapods already knew what would be said in any conversation, but in order for their knowledge to be true, the conversation would have to take place. Like physical events, with their causal and teleological interpretations, every linguistic event had two possible interpretations: as a transmission of information and as a realization of a plan."

From "Symbols and Signs" by Nabokov:

"The system of his delusions had been the subject of an elaborate paper in Scientific Monthly, which the doctor at the sanatorium had given to them to read. But long before that, she and her husband had puzzled it out for themselves. "Referential mania," the article had called it. In these very rare cases, the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy, because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the starry sky transmit to each other by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His in-most thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way, messages that he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. All around him, there are spies. Some of them are detached observers, like glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart. Others, again (running water, storms), are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him and grotesquely misinterpreted his actions. He must be always on his guard, and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If only the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings, but alas, it is not! With distance, the torrents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still further away, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up, in terms of granite and groaning firs, the ultimate truth of his being."

So Ted Chiang's work presents us with an alien whose language would reflect a simultaneous awareness of past, present and future. This radically different linguistic structure suggests that the very fabric of our thinking, our perception of time and causality, a linear progression that mirrors our sentence structure, might be simultaneously shaping and be shaped by our language.

In the story, we can reverse engineer our cognitive infrastructure simply by learning an alien language, just like an operating system. Saying equals doing. Language doesn't just describe reality, it actively shapes and creates it. Somehow it happened in our current LLM practice—if we view all these trainings and fine tunings and even scaling law itself as a certain kind of linguistic operation.

But can we conceive of thoughts entirely devoid of language? Nabokov's referential manic patient received meanings in nonlinguistic phenomena: cloud formations, pebbles patterns, etc, etc. This suggests a mode of thought transcending normal linguistic structures like spatial reasoning or emotional processing. However, communicating these thoughts often requires translation into still linguistic forms.

In the story we can see how apophenia and overfeeding phenomenon that happens on human cognition becomes acceleration forming, since it's lacking an intermediate layer to filter, to translate and to prioritize all this overwhelming information. And the protagonist got very, very sick. He's in that digital environment we're creating right now, thinking about all these fresh new build video platforms and algorithmic, cybernetic trap houses.

I'm just so curious, why didn't any companies come up with any better solution to reconcile the obvious gap between two heterogenous cognitive systems? It is going to be the next speeding business or trading business for mankind, and it will save us all. Or the opposite. Who knows? Let's talk about the bodies.

PART THREE: BODY

22:02

Part Three: Body

"The City Born Great" by N.K. Jemisin:

"I raise my arms and avenues leap. (It's real but it's not. The ground jolts and people think, Huh, subway's really shaky today.) I brace my feet and they are girders, anchors, bedrock. The beast of the deeps shrieks and I laugh, giddy with postpartum endorphins. Bring it. And when it comes at me I hip-check it with the BQE, backhand it with Inwood Park, drop the South Bronx on it like an elbow. (On the evening news that night, ten construction sites will report wrecking-ball collapses. City safe-

ty regulations are so lax; terrible, terrible.) The Enemy tries some kind of fucked-up wiggly shit—it's all tentacles—and I snarl and bite into it 'cause New Yorkers eat damn near as much sushi as Tokyo, mercury and all.

Oh, now you're crying! Now you wanna run? Nah, son. You came to the wrong town. I curb stomp it with the full might of Queens and something inside the beast breaks and bleeds iridescence all over creation. This is a shock, for it has not been truly hurt in centuries. It lashes back in a fury, faster than I can block, and from a place that most of the city cannot see, a skyscraper-long tentacle curls out of nowhere to smash into New York Harbor. I scream and fall, I can hear my ribs crack, and—no!—a major earthquake shakes Brooklyn for the first time in decades. The Williamsburg Bridge twists and snaps apart like kindling; the Manhattan groans and splinters, though thankfully it does not give way. I feel every death as if it is my own."

This one is from my own. "As Water Over Your Scattered Bodies" collected in the anthology co-edited by Benjamin Bratton, Anna Greenspan and Bogna Konior, *Machine Decision is Not Final: China and the History and Future of Artificial Intelligence*:

"The condition of people like you who suffer from Offload Syndrome is different. We were unable to detect skin conductance response signals when you were taking the blind box text. In short, for some unknown reason, your body is no longer a part of your integrated cognitive system. All there's left is your brain. Then, what is Offload Syndrome all about? In my opinion, the core of Offload Syndrome lies in the fact that different types of intelligent subjects are conflicting with one another within the same body schema. Here's a simple example: imagine that you have a family history of type 1 diabetes, and you manage your blood sugar level on a daily basis with the help of an eSpoon. One day, your parents make you your favorite childhood dessert. Although you are eating the dessert with a regular spoon instead of an eSpoon, you find the dessert significantly less delicious than it should be—it's because that the algorithmic residue of distributed intelligence continues to impact your mental and somatic response, disrupting your gustatory system. The most reasonable guess is that humans have ceded too much agency to distributed intelligence; the algorithmic logic they abide by but does not necessarily couple well with the human cognitive system. Just think about the level of chaos there would be if two conductors are trying to lead a single symphony orchestra. But distributed intelligence is everywhere. They've even infiltrated dust particles. Can humans still go back to what we used to be?"

In Jemisin's "The City Born Great" the narrative becomes one with New York City itself. This isn't just embodied cognition, it's embodied urbanism. The city's physical infrastructure becomes an extension of the protagonist's nervous system. Or the other way around—an individual becomes an objective vessel for a larger entities' will. While my Offload Syndrome flips the script presenting a future where our cognitive processes have become so intertwined with external technologies that our bodies are left behind. This is unconscious subjectivity going haywire, where our subjective experiences are shaped by algorithms we could not even perceive.

The eSpoon example is a delicious irony. A tool designed to objectively manage our health ends up subjectively altering our perception of taste. It's as if our attempts at conscious objectivity through technology have backfired, creating a new form of unconscious subjectivity that we can't escape. So what if those scenarios are simultaneously true?

So this isn't just sci-fi navel gazing as we hurtle towards a future of smart cities and ubiquitous AI, these questions become urgently relevant. How do we maintain a sense of individual agency when our connection is increasingly distributed? And how do we balance the benefits of collective intelligence with the risk of losing touch with our physical selves?

Just as a city can turn on its citizens, embedded AI optimized for wrong objectives could lead us astray. Perhaps the answer lies in a new kind of cognitive flexibility. In this brave new world of embodied or disembodied connection the most valuable skill might be the ability to constantly recalibrate our sense of self. Let's talk about feelings.

PART FOUR: FEELINGS

30:05

Part Four: Feelings

Solaris by (Stanislaw) Lem:

"The human mind is only capable of absorbing a few things at a time. We see what is taking place in front of us in the here and now, and cannot envisage simultaneously a succession of processes, no matter how integrated and complementary. Our faculties of perception are consequently limited even as regards fairly simple phenomena. The fate of a single man can be rich with significance, that of a few hundred less so, but the history of thousands and millions of men does not mean anything at all, in any adequate sense of the word. The symmetriad is a million — a billion, rather — raised to the power of

N: it is incomprehensible. We pass through vast halls, each with a capacity of ten Kronecker units, and creep like so many ants clinging to the folds of breathing vaults and craning to watch the flight of soaring girders, opalescent in the glare of searchlights, and elastic domes which criss-cross and balance each other unerringly, the perfection of a moment, since everything here passes and fades. The essence of this architecture is movement synchronized towards a precise objective. We observe a fraction of the process, like hearing the vibration of a single string in an orchestra of supergiants. We know, but cannot grasp, that above and below, beyond the limits of perception or imagination, thousands and millions of simultaneous transformations are at work, interlinked like a musical score by mathematical counterpoint. It has been described as a symphony in geometry, but we lack the ears to hear it.”

“Vaster Than Empires” by Ursula K. Le Guin:

“They are, indubitably, connections. Connections among the trees. Right? Now let’s just suppose, most improbably, that you knew nothing of animal brain-structure. And you were given one axon, or one detached glial cell, to examine. Would you be likely to discover what it was? Would you see that the cell was capable of sentience?”

“No. Because it isn’t. A single cell is capable of a tactical response to stimulus. No more. Are you hypothesizing that individual arboriformes are ‘cells’ in a kind of brain, Mannon?”

“Not exactly. I’m merely pointing out that they are all interconnected, both by the root-node linkage and by your green epiphytes in the branches. A linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent. Why, even the prairie grass-forms have those root-connectors, don’t they? I know that sentience or intelligence isn’t a thing, you can’t find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It’s a function of connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness. It doesn’t exist. I’m not trying to say it exists. I’m only guessing that Osden might be able to describe it.” [...]

“Then why do you receive fear?” Tomiko asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know. I can’t see how awareness of objects, of others, could arise: an unperceiving response But there was an uneasiness, for days. And then when I lay between the two trees and my blood was on their roots—” Osden’s face glittered with sweat. “It became fear,” he said shrilly, “only fear.”

Both Lem’s incomprehensible symmetry and Le Guin’s sentient forest aren’t just sci-fi fever dreams. They challenge us to reconsider the nature of sentience and the role of feelings in cognition.

We’ve long considered feelings highly personal and unstructured. Thus little effort has been made to decipher them in an engineering way. But what if feelings aren’t just byproducts of evolution, but fundamental protocols of existence?

A universal language of beings transcending the limitation of individual perception even among species. Like in the story, we humans empathize with the fear of a forest, or even an entire planet. They are not just responses to stimuli, but integral components of information complexes in a higher dimension. In this paradigm empathy isn’t just about understanding each other, it is the very mechanism by which consciousness propagates and evolves.

If we could feel the pain of melting icebergs, acidifying oceans, or bleaching coral reefs. If humans could empathize with nature within an emotional structure, what might change? And imagine if machines can resonate with the sufferings of humans and all the other sentient species, even the environment and the planet? What transformation might occur? So the future isn’t just about thinking differently. It’s about feeling in dimensions we’ve yet to imagine. Perhaps the greatest human feeling is awe—to all we cannot yet feel and all that we may yet learn to feel. Let’s talk about self.

PART FIVE: SELF

38:01

Part Five: Self

Blindsight by Peter Watts:

“Evolution has no foresight. Complex machinery develops its own agendas. Brains — cheat. Feedback loops evolve to promote stable heartbeats and then stumble upon the temptation of rhythm and music. The rush evoked by fractal imagery, the algorithms used for habitat selection, metastasize into art. Thrills that once had to be earned in increments of fitness can now be had from pointless introspection. Aesthetics rise unbidden from a trillion dopamine receptors, and the system moves beyond modeling the organism. It begins to model the very process of modeling. It consumes evermore computational resources, bogs itself down with endless recursion and irrelevant simulations. Like the parasitic DNA that accretes in every natural genome, it persists and

proliferates and produces nothing but itself. Metaprocesses bloom like cancer, and awaken, and call themselves I. Do you want to know what consciousness is for? Do you want to know the only real purpose it serves? Training wheels. You can't see both aspects of the Necker Cube at once, so it lets you focus on one and dismiss the other. That's a pretty half-assed way to parse reality. You're always better off looking at more than one side of anything. Go on, try. Defocus. It's the next logical step."

Permutation City by Greg Egan:

"Now he was...dust. To an outside observer, these ten seconds had been ground up into ten thousand uncorrelated moments and scattered throughout real time – and in model time, the outside world has suffered an equivalent fate. Yet the pattern of his awareness remained perfectly intact. Somehow he found himself, "assembled himself" from these scrambled fragments. He'd been taken apart like a jigsaw puzzle –but his dissection and suffering were transparent to him. Somehow—on their own terms—the pieces remained connected. Imagine a universe entirely without structure, without shape, without connections. A cloud of microscopic events, like fragments of space time... except there is no space or time. So what characterizes one point in space, for one instant? Just the values of the fundamental particle fields, just a handful of numbers. Now, take away all notions of position, arrangement, order, and what's left? A cloud of random numbers. But if the pattern that is me could pick itself out from all the other events taking place on the planet, why shouldn't the pattern we think of as 'the universe' assemble itself, find itself, in exactly the same way? If I can piece together my own coherent space and time from data scattered so widely that it might as well be part of some giant cloud of random numbers, then what makes you think that you're not doing the very same thing?"

Egan's protagonists scatter like confetti across time and space, still managing to assemble a coherent sense of 'I'. While Watts provocatively suggests that self-awareness itself might be an evolutionary accident, a byproduct of the brain's readiness, recursive modeling of its own process, a parasitic illusion telling itself to maintain a false sense of continuity and agency. So, in that context, it might be a total mistake to view it as an ultimate goal of cognition or intelligence to emerge consciousness. We might need to radically rethink how we approach AI development, rather than striving to recreate a human-like self-awareness, we might need to pursue alternative forms of intelligence that avoid the traps. As Peter Watts suggests, that our very survival as a species might depend on building intellects greater than our own, and those might not be conscious at all.

But what's the benefit of all this nihilistic worldview, besides creating an even greater existential crisis to all? It seems to be resonating perfectly with Buddhism and Daoism, which have long argued for a conception of selfhood and of reality as an illusion and ever shifting. But the moment we realize it is the moment we will wake up from the ever lasting, self-refracting game of the cosmos. And finally, we touch upon existence.

PART SIX: EXISTENCE

45:08

Part Six: Existence

"I'm Waiting For You" by Kim Bo-Young:

"I mated with Aman in one of my lives. As soon as I returned to the Dark Realm, Aman, who had been waiting for me, shrieked with joy and embraced me. This was when we were feathered creatures, half bird and half reptile. "You're alive!" Aman looked almost exactly like they had in their last life. They bit my neck and licked my face and snuggled into me, their tail bobbing. "I knew we'd meet again! I knew you'd come back! The afterlife really exists. Life is eternal, I tell you, eternal!" "Aman, wait, calm down." Thinking I would never be bored as long as this one was around, I laughed and pulled Aman from me. "What are you going on about? Of course the afterlife exists, why do you sound surprised?" Aman stared at me as if they longed to merge, looking like they wanted to suck in all my molecules right there and then, if only they could. It took a while before the smile vanished from my face. "Aman, are you by any chance still..." When I tried to inspect Aman's body, they shook their head. "I don't have genes. They rotted away in the Lower Realm, of course." "Then why...?" Their powerful need for survival and mating, their desire for affection and communication, what did it all mean? Why had the desires of the Lower Realm spilled into the Dark Realm? "Teacher," Aman said feverishly. "I never imagined I could feel such rapture, such tumultuous sparks of the heart. That I could pine for someone, cherish them so much that I forgot myself, that I saw another as myself. While this may have made an impressive speech in the Lower Realm, here it was far from it. It had the same effect on me as if Aman were saying, "Oh, Teacher, I've realized one plus one is two, how wondrous!" "Aman, you and I are the same self. I am not the Other." "Yes, I know. But I don't feel that it's true. Here it's a fact as cliché as saying, 'My body is mine.' But there, I felt it in my bones with every breath I drew. I felt it more acutely because I could hardly believe it. Did you not experience that,

Teacher?" I thought back to my previous life. I had been a feathered beast roaming the forest with little on my mind except for food and shelter. I wept for days when my lifelong partner died before me. I wandered the forest, mad with grief. I thought no more of eating or sleeping. Life spent with my partner was joy, life without them lost all meaning. I met my death, almost willingly. I would not have been so devastated had I been the one to perish. I did, but I was partly under the influence of hormones. And, besides, the instincts to mate and to grieve are to some extent just fabrication for the sake of convenience, are they not? They are not real, after all. But then Aman gazed at me with the eyes of a beast, eyes that shone, as they had in the Lower Realm, a primitive soul, enthralled by the joy of life growing within. "Teacher," Aman said in a small animal voice, "if we don't believe life is real, what can we ever hope to learn from it?"

Kim's beautiful written story challenges us to reimagine existence not just as a binary of life and death, but as a continuous spectrum. Death becomes not an end, but a transition between planes of being, the self possessed, shared in one form and history for another. Yet these planes of existence are not created equal in their existential gravity.

Realness, it seems, may be a function of intensity rather than literal truth. The searing passion of love, the act of loss, and the yearning for connection for themselves into Aman's being. Feeling more real than reality itself. Even if these sensations arise from evolutionary quirks, their functions might operate on a deeper, more profound level. We might ask: are dreams, memories, fictions, movies, games, myths, all different planes of reality, equally effective in their realness? This is where belief enters the equation.

Belief acts as a cognitive adjustable lens, allowing us to navigate through different levels of realness and existence, reconciling a self that is both continuous and fractured, unitary and multiple. But isn't that belief another cognitive illusion? As in some Buddhist philosophies, the illusion of separateness may be generative, even necessary. If we didn't believe on some level in the reality of our individual lives, we might never fully immerse ourselves into the ecstasy and agonies that make us feel truly alive. The forgetting of our oneness permits a richer, if more perilous experience of being.

So the key lies in how we can maintain the ability to adjust, to zoom in and out, to live beyond the confines of reality boxes, and to gain a meta perspective of our own greyscale of realness. And then you might realize you are not just on a spectrum of existence. You are the spectrum.

So how can we learn to stop thinking as humans and love the alien?

EPILOGUE: WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

53:07

Epilogue: What We've Learned

We need diversity, not just for natural selection, but for the richness of experience and the robustness of our collective connection. We've placed a placeholder for consciousness, but now it's time to reevaluate its nature and necessity. Crucially, we need to learn to unlearn, to shed the human-centric bias and taken-for-granted values that limit our understanding. It's time to tell a new story about humanity and its position in the world. Let's not forget the facts.

No single creature can survive or evolve in isolation. Each grand leap forward in evolutionary history can be seen as a form of symbiosis or endosymbiosis. This means progress isn't about one entity devouring or conquering another, but about communication, integration, reconciliation, and unification to become something greater, more robust, and more adaptive than any individual parts. To achieve this, we must be willing to forget, to surrender, to give up at least part of ourselves. Only then can we view new protocols, new infrastructures, new systems for coexistence.

I've explored all these themes in my forthcoming novel, *Amnesic Sea*, where humans, machines and nature find a way to build a more compatible and adaptive cognitive infrastructure to save the world ravaged by climate change. Of course, always those lives, sacrifices, battles and hallucinations. Refracting all these great works I quote here, I question the genre itself. Can we truly imagine something beyond the human-centric narrative trap, or are we just pretending? Can we push harder to become a bit more alien, even just by losing ourselves? What's lacking here?

As a fiction writer, I'm fully aware how incapable I am to answer any of the above questions. I believe the answers might come from all of you. As Ursula Le Guin said, the future is already full. It's much older and larger than our present, and we are all alien in it. In a universe of nearly infinite cognitive possibilities, an open and metaphorical mind might be our greatest asset. So let's try harder. Imagine the impossible. Think the unthinkable. And in doing so, embrace the alien within or without ourselves. Thank you.