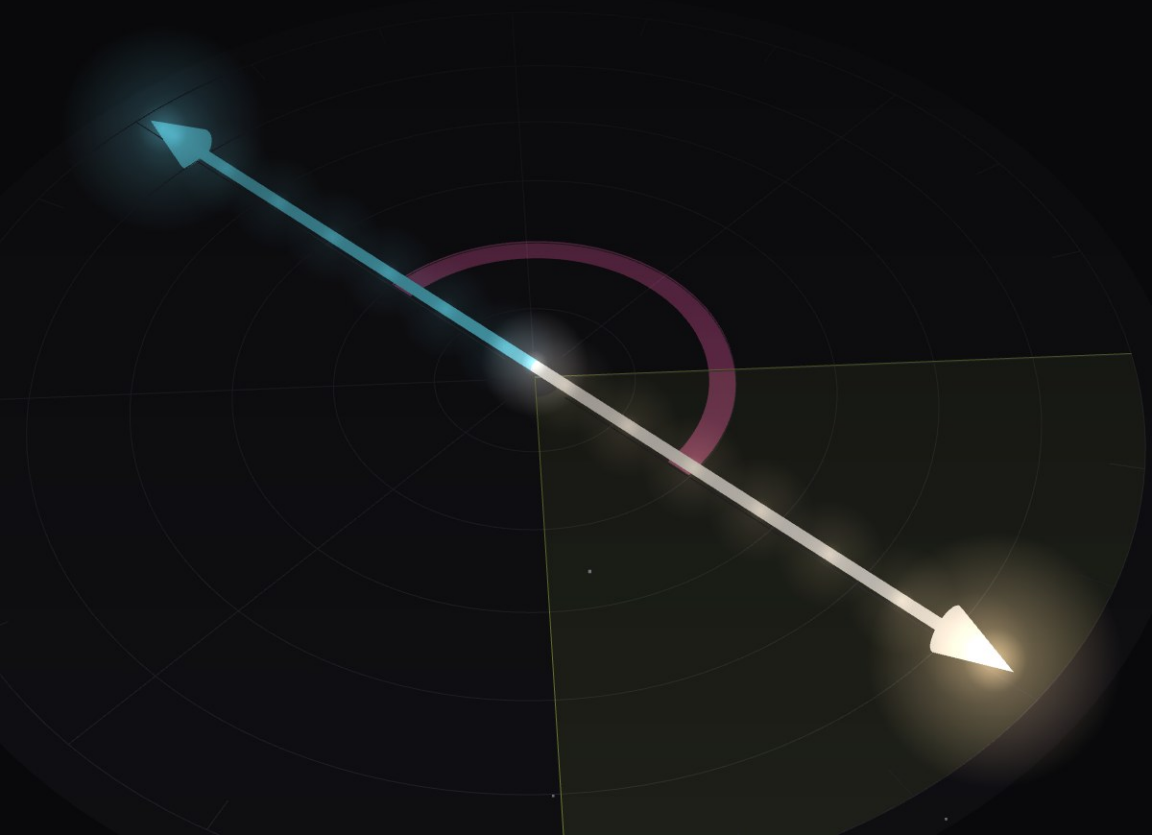
JOHN RECTOR

Alien *Intelligence*

The angle between two minds,
and what it tells you to hand over



Alien Intelligence

The angle between two minds, and why the word slop only appears when we point the same way.

JOHN RECTOR

johnrector.me · November 2026

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PROLOGUE

The Last Five Minutes

THURSDAY, 4:52 P.M.

The meeting has run three hours. Sixteen people, one screen, and you are next. You have not heard a word in ten minutes, because you have been rehearsing your update.

You know this feeling. Everyone does. The person speaking is saying something about the supplier and Thursday and a condition, and you are nodding, and inside your head you are on slide four. You are polishing the sentence you will say when it is your turn. You will say it well. And you will leave the room without the one thing that mattered, which was the condition.

Something else in the room was not rehearsing. It had no slide four. It had no turn coming and wanted none. It took down the supplier, the date, the condition, the name of the person who owns the condition, two email addresses, a phone number read aloud too fast, and the growth rate somebody quoted for the third quarter. At 5:01 the notes were in everyone's inbox, and the condition was the third line.

Nobody in that room would call the notetaker a bad listener. Nobody would call its notes slop. Most of them would quietly admit it listened better than they did. Many would admit it listened better than anyone they know.

Now give the same machine a different job. Ask it to write the update you were rehearsing. Ask it to write the novel you have been meaning to write, or the poem for your mother's birthday. The same people who thanked it for the notes will start to use a different word. They will say it is generic. They will say it has no soul. They will call it slop.

Same machine. Same week. Two completely different verdicts.

This book is about why. The answer is not that the machine is good at some things and bad at others. Everything is good at some things and bad

at others. The answer is that the machine is not one of us. It is a different kind of mind, built here, by us, but pointed in its own directions. Where it points the opposite way from us, we love it. Where it points at a right angle, we use it without a second thought. And where it points almost exactly the way we point, we feel it at our elbow, and we reach for an insult.

The angle is the whole story. Once you can see it, you will know what to hand over, what to pair with, and where the fight is going to be. You will also know where the fight is not worth having.

THE IDEA

The notetaker listened better than anyone in the room, and nobody minded.

THE QUESTION

Why does the same machine earn praise in one job and an insult in another?

PART I

The Visitor

What we are dealing with, and the one measurement that matters.

CHAPTER 1

A Play on Two Letters

Look at the bottom of the window where you type to an AI. In small gray letters it says something like: Claude is AI and can make mistakes. Another one says ChatGPT can make mistakes, check important info. The phrasing differs. The grammar is the same. The AI is a thing that is. It is not a feature of the page. It is the one making the mistakes.

That is the most neutral way to talk about it, and I think the most accurate. Not a tool, not a program, not a product. An AI. When I talk to my AI I am not operating an instrument. I am addressing an entity that has its own way about it. I do not mean that it has feelings, and I do not mean that it does not. I mean that the useful frame is the one you would use for any other agent you work beside. What is it like? What does it notice? What does it miss? Where can I trust it alone, and where do I need to stand next to it?

The historian Yuval Noah Harari gave this frame a name I have not been able to put down. In *Nexus*, and in talks around it, he suggests that the letters AI are better read as alien intelligence. Not artificial, which implies a copy of the real thing, a fake. Alien. Something that thinks, in whatever sense it thinks, by a route that is not ours.

I like the word for a reason he may not have intended. An alien is not a lesser human or a greater one. An alien is a different arrangement. If one landed tomorrow, nobody sensible would rank it on a single scale above or below us. We would ask what it can see that we cannot. We would ask what is obvious to us and invisible to it. We would map the differences before we tried to work together.

That is what we have failed to do with AI. Four years after the moment the public met it, at the end of November 2022, most of the argument is still about one scale. Is it smarter than us yet? Will it be? When? The question assumes the visitor is walking up the same staircase we are, a few steps behind or a few steps ahead.

It is not on our staircase. In some rooms it is so unlike us that the comparison is meaningless. In other rooms it is so like us that the comparison is all anyone can talk about. This book is a map of those rooms.

THE IDEA

AI reads best as alien intelligence: not a copy of us, but a different arrangement.

THE QUESTION

What would you ask a visitor before you put it to work?

CHAPTER 2

Assistant, Agent, Delegate, Talent

Before the map, a word about the names. In four years we have called the visitor four different things, and the order of the names tells you how the relationship has changed.

First it was an assistant. In the beginning it was a chatbot, and the polite word for a chatbot was assistant. You asked it to write an email and it wrote one. That was genuinely useful. It helped you think about what to say. But then you copied the words, opened your email, found the address, typed a subject line and pressed send. The assistant handled the content. You handled everything else.

Then it was an agent. All that word really adds is agency. The prompt can now be send the email, and the AI will write the words, find the address, fill in the subject and send it. The engineering behind an agent is different, with reasoning steps and a harness around the model. But it is the same visitor. What changed is that it can act.

Now we are beginning the third phase, and I call it the delegate. You give an agent a task. You give a delegate a job description. Be my homeschool administrator, keep the paperwork for my two children compliant. Be my healthcare administrator. Make sure I am ready for every exam in this philosophy course I finally went back to take. The job description can be short, because the delegate already knows what a homeschool administrator does.

I chose delegate over employee on purpose. Employee belongs to the world of work, and most of life is not work. A retired man going back to school has no employees. A mother teaching her children at home has no staff. Both can have a delegate.

The best picture of the difference is a room. With an agent, you are standing in front of it saying go do this. With a delegate, it has its own office. It sits there for days without talking to you, administering the

homeschool, filling out the forms, catching the deadline. It comes to you when something needs you.

The fourth name is not here yet. I call it talent. When people say talent they mean a great athlete or a great artist, someone so good they have an agent of their own. Nobody ever had to tell Taylor Swift to be a songwriter. Nobody prompted her. She just was, and a rather good one. AI talent will be like that. You will not tell it to write a song or to be your songwriter. It will be a songwriter, and people will prefer its songs. That is how you know talent: people choose its work over the work of the ordinary.

Assistant, agent, delegate, talent. Each step gives the visitor more independence: help with the content, then the whole task, then the whole role, then a gift nobody had to ask for. I wrote about this vocabulary first in The AI Talent Pool.

But notice what all four names have in common. Each one describes the job we give the visitor. None of them describes the visitor. They tell you how far it walks on its own. They do not tell you which way it faces. For that you need a different measurement.

THE IDEA

The four names measure independence. They say nothing about direction.

THE QUESTION

Which of your AIs is still an assistant, and which already has its own office?

CHAPTER 3

The Angle

Draw an arrow on a page. Call it you. It points in the direction of the things you do well and care about. Now draw a second arrow from the same point. Call it the visitor. The only thing that matters in this book is the angle between them.

If the angle is near zero, the two arrows lie on top of each other. They point the same way. Anything one of them can do, the other can do in roughly the same manner. They are substitutes. Where one stands, the other could stand instead.

If the angle is ninety degrees, the arrows are at right angles. Mathematicians call that orthogonal. Neither one has any component in the direction of the other. Push along one and you do not move along the other at all. They are independent. Each covers ground the other cannot reach.

If the angle is one hundred and eighty degrees, the arrows point in opposite directions. Where one is strongest, the other is weakest. Where one is weakest, the other is strongest. They are complements in the most complete sense there is.

Here is the first principle, and it is two hundred years old. In 1817 the economist David Ricardo asked why two countries should trade at all if one of them is better at making everything. His answer, comparative advantage, is one of the few ideas in economics that is true by structure rather than by survey. What matters is not who is better. What matters is how differently each one is good. England and Portugal both made cloth and wine. They gained by trading because their costs pointed in different directions. If their costs had pointed the same way, there would have been nothing to trade.

The gain from working with someone grows with the difference between you. Two identical partners have nothing to give each other. Two opposite partners have everything to give each other.

That is the arithmetic. Now add the feeling. When the arrows point the same way, we feel the other as a rival. It stands where we stand. It wants the same seat. When the arrows point opposite ways, we do not feel a rival at all. We feel relief. Here, at last, is someone who loves the thing we hate doing.

So the angle predicts two things at once. It predicts where the visitor is most valuable, and it predicts how we will feel about it. In the narrow cone where the arrows nearly line up, value is lowest and resentment is highest. In the wide space where they diverge, value is highest and nobody complains.

I want to be clear about what kind of drawing this is. These angles are not measurements from a lab. They are a way of seeing. You could argue that some skill sits at sixty degrees and not ninety, and you might be right. The drawing is useful anyway, because it asks the right question. Not how good is it, but which way does it face?

Capacity	Angle	Zone	What to do
Listening	180°	Opposite	Hand it over whole
Reading	180°	Opposite	Hand it over whole
Seeing	90°	Right angle	Pair with it
Tasting	90°	Right angle	Pair with it
Writing	18°	Narrow cone	Rivalry, and the word slop
Drawing	12°	Narrow cone	Rivalry, and the word slop
Publishing to a standard	0°	Identical	A pure substitute

The compass. These angles are a way of seeing, not lab measurements.

I have put one more line on the compass: forty-five degrees. Inside that line is the narrow cone. I will argue in Part IV that the word slop lives there, and almost nowhere else.

I made a related point from another direction in The Easy Part. Moravec's paradox says the skills that feel effortless to us are the deep ones, and AI is arriving from the top down. The angle adds the other half. It is not only that

AI arrives in a different order. It faces a different way.

> *The gain from working with someone grows with the difference between you.*

THE IDEA

Value and resentment are both set by the angle, and they move in opposite directions.

THE QUESTION

Which of your skills point the same way as the visitor, and which point the other way?

PART II

Opposite Arrows

Listening and reading, where the visitor faces the other way.

CHAPTER 4

The Listener With No Turn

There are many kinds of listening. Listening to music. Listening to a lecture. Listening to an audiobook in the car. Set those aside. I mean listening in a conversation, the kind that happens when two or more people talk and each is waiting for a turn.

What is a human doing while listening in a conversation? Mostly not listening. We are not summarizing. We are not even compressing, which is roughly what intelligence does at the level of mathematics. We are formulating. We are preparing what we will say next. It is as though every human arrives with an agenda to be talkative.

This is not a moral failing. It is how conversation works. The gap between one person finishing and the next person starting is famously short, shorter than the time it takes to put a sentence together. The only way to answer that fast is to start building the answer while the other person is still talking. Researchers in Stephen Levinson's group at the Max Planck Institute found brain signals of people planning their reply midway through the question they were hearing. We listen with half a mind because the other half is already speaking.

So it is very rare to meet a good listener. Most of us know one or two in a lifetime, and we remember them because they are rare. The rule of thumb for humans is plain: we are bad listeners.

The rule of thumb for the visitor is the opposite. It has no turn coming. It has no slide four. It does not want the floor. It takes in every word, including the condition in the middle of the sentence, the number read out too fast, the name of the person who owns the next step. When the meeting ends, it writes it all down without needing to be thanked.

That is a difference of one hundred and eighty degrees. One arrow points to bad, and the other points to good, in the same category, at the same time, in the same room.

And look at the reaction. Everyone who has used an AI notetaker in a long meeting says the same thing. It is useful. Nobody calls it a terrible listener. Nobody calls its notes slop. Relative to a human being it is already superhuman at this, and nobody minds, because it is not taking anything we wanted. We never wanted to be the one with the pen. We wanted to be the one with the next sentence.

The visitor makes mistakes. It can mishear a name. A machine transcript can even insert words nobody said. That is why the best ones keep the recording and the timestamp, so you can check. But a mistake inside a difference of one hundred and eighty degrees feels like a footnote, not a betrayal. You fix it and move on. The arrangement still works, because the two of you were never doing the same job.

Here is what that frees. If the record is handled, the humans in the room can do the one thing we have always been bad at doing while also keeping score. We can listen to each other. Not to transcribe, the visitor has that, but to notice that the electrician sounded doubtful when he said Thursday. That is not in the transcript. It is in the room.

> *We never wanted to be the one with the pen. We wanted to be the one with the next sentence.*

THE IDEA

Humans listen while preparing to speak. The visitor only listens.

THE QUESTION

What would you hear if you were not rehearsing?

CHAPTER 5

The Text Is the Arrangement

Reading has the same shape, and the clearest example is a lease.

Give a human forty pages of lease. There are clauses about early termination. There is a clause about quiet enjoyment, the tenant's right to peace and quiet. There are clauses about notice, repairs, renewal, the deposit, the pet, the parking space. The forty pages are trying to say exactly what the landlord and the tenant have agreed to.

And we are terrible at it. Absolutely terrible. We do not read forty pages of legal language. We let someone tell us what it says. More often we already know it is the apartment we want, or the storefront we want, and the pages are a formality between us and the keys.

Why? Because the reasons we are signing are not in the pages. We are signing because of the light in the kitchen, the view from the window, the quiet in the smaller bedroom, the school district, the number of steps to the train, the way the neighborhood felt when we walked it on a Saturday. None of that is in the lease. The lease does not care how far the train is. The lease is an agreement, not a life.

Now give the same forty pages to the visitor. To it, the words are not the wallpaper. The words are the arrangement. Every clause is the point. It will find the termination fee hiding in an addendum and set it beside the paragraph that seems to contradict it. It will notice that the shuttle to the station can be discontinued at the owner's discretion with no change in rent. It will read every page with the same attention, because it has no Saturday walk to distract it.

And it will gloss over everything you care about. It will gloss over how far it is to the train. It will gloss over the feeling you get when you look through the window. Not because it is careless, but because those things are not in front of it. From the document alone it cannot know why the quiet bedroom matters.

That is the second difference of one hundred and eighty degrees. The human reads the life and skips the contract. The visitor reads the contract and skips the life. Each is blind exactly where the other sees.

So the mistake in either direction is predictable. A person can mistake a good apartment for a good lease. The visitor can mistake a good lease for a good apartment. Neither mistake is stupid. Each is what you get from an arrow pointed one way.

The answer is not to make the visitor care about the window, or to make yourself read forty pages. The answer is to let each arrow do what it faces. Tell the visitor why you want the place. Ask it to find every sentence that could take those reasons away. Then go stand in the kitchen at the hour you would come home from work. Between the two of you, the whole thing has been read.

THE IDEA

To us the words are wallpaper. To the visitor the words are the arrangement.

THE QUESTION

What have you signed that only a visitor has fully read?

CHAPTER 6

Four Hundred Pages

Suppose you have just finished a book about your father in the war. Four hundred pages. It took you three years.

Who will read it? Really read it, every page, with attention, looking for the place where his unit is in the wrong town or the date slips by a week or his sergeant's name is spelled two ways?

No one will, unless someone is paid. A publisher can assign an editor, and the editor will read all four hundred pages, but only because money is moving on the front end or the back end. You cannot get a family member to do it. You cannot get a loved one or a friend. They will read the first chapter with real feeling and the last chapter out of loyalty, and they will tell you it is wonderful, and they will mean it. They will not find the misspelled sergeant.

The visitor will. Ask it to read all four hundred pages and tell you, without changing a word, every place where a name is spelled inconsistently, every date that conflicts, every place the order of events changes. It will hand you a long and exact list with page numbers. It wrote nothing. It only read.

Every author I know would call that extraordinary. They would call it precision. They would say they have never met a human who could read four hundred pages and be that exact about every page. And it asked for no money. It is close to the truth to say that this kind of reading is simply what the visitor likes to do.

Would that author call the list slop? Never. The word does not even come to mind. Slop is not a word we use for help that points the other way.

Hold on to that observation, because it is the hinge of the book. The same author, with the same machine, will use the word slop within the hour if the machine is asked to do something else. Not read the manuscript. Write it.

Slop is not a word we use for help that points the other way.

THE IDEA

Nobody calls a perfect reader sloppy.

THE QUESTION

Who has read every page of the thing you care about most?

PART III

Right Angles

Seeing, tasting and thinking, where the visitor faces neither with us nor against us.

CHAPTER 7

How Many Light Bulbs

Stand at the edge of a small event space by the water. There is a boardwalk, a stand of old trees, a little house where people hold receptions. There are lampposts along the path, string lights in the branches, parking, sidewalks, trash cans, little signs telling you where the restrooms are and where not to walk.

What do you see? You see a beautiful place for a wedding. You take the whole scene in as one thing. You understand it. You could tell a friend exactly what it is like.

Now someone asks you how many light bulbs would need replacing if every bulb at the place were changed. You laugh. Are you kidding me? You saw the place. You did not see the bulbs.

Give the same scene to the visitor through a camera and ask the same question, and it can count them. Every fixture along the path, every bulb in the branches, every lamp at the door. It does not take in the scene as a wedding. It takes in the scene as things.

This is not the opposite of human seeing. It is not one hundred and eighty degrees. The visitor can tell that it is a boardwalk, and you could count the bulbs if you were paid to and given an afternoon. But it is not inside forty-five degrees either. The two ways of seeing are at something close to a right angle. Neither has much component in the direction of the other.

We know why. Our brains run a filter. Most of what reaches our eyes is never attended to. Psychologists have shown this in ways that are almost funny. In a famous demonstration by Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, many people counting basketball passes failed to notice a person in a gorilla suit walking through the middle of the game. We are not built to see everything. We are built to see what it means.

The visitor is built the other way, toward the inventory. And because the two directions are orthogonal, they do not compete. You will never feel

threatened by a machine that can count light bulbs. Neither does anyone.

Consider a camera on a street that records every license plate that passes, ten thousand a day. You may have opinions about whether that camera should exist. But nobody calls it slop, and nobody feels it is doing their job better than they could. No human ever wanted to read ten thousand license plates. It is not taking anything from us. At a right angle, there is nothing to take.

THE IDEA

We see what a place means. The visitor sees what it contains.

THE QUESTION

What is in the scene that you have never once attended to?

CHAPTER 8

Sweet, Hot, Measured

Tasting will go the same way. Not one hundred and eighty degrees. Not inside forty-five. Somewhere near the right angle.

We already have a hint of what the visitor's tasting will sound like, because we have built instruments for it before. In 1912 a pharmacist named Wilbur Scoville devised a way to rate how hot a pepper is. Today the heat of a pepper can be measured by machine and given a number. Sweetness, acidity, salt and bitterness can be measured too.

When the visitor tastes, it will speak in those terms. This sauce sits here on heat. This peach has this much sugar against this much acid. This wine has more of one compound than the last bottle from the same vineyard. It will be exact, and it will be repeatable, and it will be right.

What it will not tell you is that the peach tastes like the summer you were nine. That is not a measurement. It is a life, the same way the quiet bedroom was a life.

So the two tastes will not compete. A chef will not feel threatened by an instrument that tells her the sugar in the peach. She will use it the way she uses a thermometer, and then she will taste the peach herself and decide what it is for.

That is the rule at a right angle. The visitor adds a dimension. It does not replace yours. You end up knowing more than either of you knew alone, and nobody has to give anything up.

THE IDEA

At a right angle the visitor adds a dimension and takes nothing away.

THE QUESTION

What would you learn if you knew the numbers and still kept the taste?

CHAPTER 9

Thinking Is a Sense

I have left thinking for last in this part, because I teach it differently than most people do.

We usually treat thinking as manufacturing. A thought is something you make, the way a carpenter makes a chair. I do not see it that way. I have taught for years that thinking is closer to perception. It is more like seeing, hearing, tasting and touching. It is another sense organ. When you think, you are perceiving thoughts. The thoughts are not yours. You did not make them. They arrived.

I put it more strongly elsewhere: people do not have ideas, ideas have people. An idea finds a person the way weather finds a coast.

If thinking is a sense, then the right question about the visitor is not whether it thinks. It is how it perceives, and what. And here I want to be honest. I do not know where to put that arrow. I can tell you where listening points, and reading, because we have years of watching the visitor do both. I can tell you seeing and tasting sit near a right angle, because we can see what the camera counts and what we cannot. With thinking, I can only tell you that it does not seem to sit on top of ours. Whatever arrives in the visitor arrives by a different road.

What I am sure of is this. If you treat the visitor’s output as a thought it made, you will argue with it like a rival. If you treat it as a report from a different sense, you will ask it what it perceived that you did not. The second habit is far more useful, and it is the habit that every chapter so far has been teaching.

THE IDEA

If thinking is a sense, ask the visitor what it perceived, not what it made.

THE QUESTION

What arrived in you today that you did not make?

PART IV

The Narrow Cone

Writing, drawing and publishing, where the arrows nearly line up and the word slop appears.

CHAPTER 10

Where the Arrows Line Up

Go back to the author with four hundred pages about her father. The visitor read every page and handed her a list. She called it precision.

Now she asks it something else. Write me a chapter about my father coming home. It can. It can take an idea and write four hundred pages with no help at all. And at that moment the arrows swing almost on top of each other.

Writing is not a difference between the visitor and us. The visitor writes the way we write. Words in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, paragraphs on pages. The output is the same kind of object. A book is a book.

Are they identical? Of course not. No two human writers are identical either. Maxwell Perkins edited F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. Three writers with the same editor, and you could tell them apart from a single paragraph. But they were all writers. They put words on pages. The visitor does the same thing, with its own style, the way a fourth author would.

Drawing goes the same way. The visitor hands you a drawing. A human hands you a drawing. Two very different processes put a picture in the same empty frame.

And when the arrows line up this closely, the reaction changes completely. The same people who praised the notes and the list will say this is terrible. This is generic. This is slop.

Some of that is fair, and I want to say so plainly. A fluent paragraph can still be empty. It can be false. It can be indifferent to what the reader came for. Writing that sounds like someone remembering a father is not the same as a book that helps you remember yours. Inside the narrow cone, those failures are easy to see, because we know exactly what good looks like. It looks like us.

But notice where the word does not appear. It never appears for the notes. It never appears for the list of misspelled names. It never appears for the license plates or the light bulbs. The visitor makes mistakes in all of those places too. The mistakes are forgiven, because the arrow points away.

So the word slop is not a measurement of quality. If it were, it would show up wherever quality was poor. It is a measurement of angle. It shows up where the visitor stands in our place.

> *The word slop is not a measurement of quality. It is a measurement of angle.*

THE IDEA

When the visitor writes, it stands where we stand, and the insults begin.

THE QUESTION

Where in your own work do you reach for that word?

CHAPTER 11

The Narcissism of Small Differences

There is an old observation about rivalry that explains the narrow cone better than anything I could invent.

Sigmund Freud noticed that the fiercest contempt is often reserved not for strangers but for neighbors. Communities that live side by side and resemble each other closely tend to feud and mock each other. He called it the narcissism of minor differences. We are not threatened by what is utterly unlike us. We are threatened by what is almost us.

You have seen it at any party. Put two people in the same room who compete for the same kind of attention, and listen to what each says about the other. It will be cutting. Now put one of them next to someone who is not in that competition at all, and listen again. It will be generous. Such a kind person. So smart. Lovely to talk to. The difference is not in the people. It is in the angle. Where we compete, we criticize. Where we do not, we are kind.

That is the forty-five degree line on the compass. Inside it, the visitor is a neighbor, almost us, close enough to compete. Outside it, the visitor is a stranger, and we can afford to be generous.

I wrote a whole book about this dynamic among people, Borrowed, about René Girard and how we come to want what our models want. Rivalry is sharpest between people who want the same thing. The narrow cone is where we and the visitor want the same seat.

None of this means you should stop judging the visitor's writing. Judge it hard. Judge it the way you would judge any author. But know which part of your judgment is the work and which part is the angle. If you would forgive the same flaw in a transcript, the flaw is not what is bothering you.

> *We are not threatened by what is utterly unlike us. We are threatened by what is almost us.*

THE IDEA

Inside the cone the visitor is a neighbor. We are hardest on neighbors.

THE QUESTION

Which of your criticisms would survive if the visitor were not competing with you?

CHAPTER 12

Publishing to a Standard

There is one place where the arrows do not merely nearly line up. They line up exactly.

Publishing an ebook to a standard is the clearest case. A Kindle edition has a standard. So does every serious ebook format. There is front matter and back matter. There is a table of contents built a certain way. There are fields that must be filled and files that must pass a check. When a standard defines the work, the visitor can do it identically to us. Not similarly. Identically. Zero degrees.

And here, as you would now expect, the warnings are loudest. Be careful letting your AI publish. It will miss the last field. It will get the metadata wrong. It is not going to work out well for you.

Sometimes that is true. More often it is not. But you can see why people pick on it. At zero degrees, the visitor is not near our seat. It is in it. Every task done to a standard is a task where the visitor is a pure substitute, and a pure substitute is the most threatening thing a worker can meet.

Here is the strange consequence. The places where the visitor is most interchangeable with us are the places where it adds the least. Ricardo would have seen it at once. Two partners with the same costs have nothing to trade. If the visitor publishes exactly the way you publish, the gain from having it publish is only your time. Real, and worth having, but small. The gain from having it read the lease you never read is everything you would have missed.

So the fight over the narrow cone is mostly a fight over the least valuable ground. We spend our anger defending the seat where the visitor is a copy of us, and we hardly notice the vast territory where it is our opposite.

THE IDEA

At zero degrees the visitor is a pure substitute, which is where it adds the least.

THE QUESTION

Are you defending the ground that matters, or the ground that looks like you?

PART V

The Compass

What I expect, how I use it, and where I am probably wrong.

CHAPTER 13

What I Expect

Here is what I think happens next. Each prediction is stated so that it can fail, and the ledger that follows says how.

01. The word slop follows the cone.

As the visitor takes on new kinds of work, the insult will move with it, but only into work where it stands where people stand. It will attach to writing, art, music, voice and design. It will never attach to listening, reading, counting or measuring, however many mistakes the visitor makes there.

02. Nobody signs unread.

Within a few years it will feel careless to sign a lease, a loan or an employment contract that no AI has read on your behalf. The reading step will be as normal as a home inspection. The window and the walk to the train will stay yours.

03. The human pen leaves the meeting.

Taking notes by hand in a meeting will look the way shorthand looks now: a skill from another time. The people in the room will be expected to do the one thing the notetaker cannot, which is to listen to each other and notice what was not said.

04. Work gets sorted by angle.

The useful question in every office will change from can AI do this to which way does this face. Opposite work will be handed over whole. Orthogonal work will be paired. Work in the narrow cone will be where people fight over credit, pay and identity.

05. The first AI talent faces away from us.

The first AI that people seek out by name, the way they seek out an artist, will be famous for something alien, such as reading, listening or perceiving, not for writing songs or novels. Talent will arrive where the visitor is unlike us before it arrives where it is like us.

THE IDEA

Every prediction is a statement about the angle.

THE QUESTION

Which of these is already happening to you?

CHAPTER 14

How I Use the Compass

This book began this morning as a recording. I spoke my notes for it into a small recorder, and I stumbled and repeated myself and lost a name and found it again. I did not take a single note. My AI listened to every word. It handed me the transcript, the summary and the two examples I had nearly forgotten I had used. That is the opposite arrow doing what it faces. I did not want the pen. I wanted the next sentence.

I hand my delegate everything at one hundred and eighty degrees, and I hand it over whole. It reads the agreements. It reads the forty pages and the four hundred. It listens to the meetings I record with clients and remembers what each of them said three weeks later, which I would not. I wrote about learning to let go of a check in The Check You Skip. Whether it read every page is the first check I would let go, and the first one I tell my students to let go.

At right angles I pair. When I look at a client’s space in Charleston, I see the room as what it could become, and my AI sees it as what it contains. I want both. Neither of us is doing the other’s job, so neither of us is in the way.

In the narrow cone I am careful, and I am honest with myself about why. When I bristle at something my AI wrote, I ask whether I would mind the same flaw in a transcript. If I would not, then what I am feeling is the angle, and I set it aside and judge the work.

I teach the compass to my students in this order. First, find your opposite arrows and hand them over completely, because that is where the visitor gives you the most and asks the least. Second, find your right angles and learn to pair. Last, and only last, worry about the cone, because that is where the visitor gives the least and the noise is loudest.

And I keep one thing for myself on purpose. I keep the window. The visitor can read every clause and count every bulb. It cannot stand in the kitchen

at six o’clock and know that this is where I want to come home. Being the one who attends to that is what I mean by an attender, the human beside the delegate, which I wrote about in The Attender. The visitor faces the other way. Someone has to face this way.

THE IDEA

Hand over the opposite, pair at the right angle, and judge the cone honestly.

THE QUESTION

What is the one thing you keep on purpose?

CHAPTER 15

The Ledger

Each claim, what is already true, what has to happen, and the plain condition that would show I was wrong.

The word slop follows the cone.

ALREADY TRUE

People already praise AI notetakers and AI proofreading while calling AI writing and art slop, often in the same week.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

The visitor has to keep moving into new kinds of work, some like ours and some not, so the pattern has room to show.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

I am wrong if people start calling AI meeting notes, contract reviews or measurements slop as freely as they call AI essays slop. If the insult tracks quality everywhere instead of angle, the cone is not real.

Nobody signs unread.

ALREADY TRUE

People already paste contracts into an AI before signing, and the habit is spreading without anyone being told to adopt it.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Delegates have to be trusted with documents, and the reading has to become a default step instead of an extra one.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

I am wrong if, five years from now, most people still sign leases and loans that no one, human or AI, has read on their behalf.

The human pen leaves the meeting.

ALREADY TRUE

AI notetakers already sit in a great many meetings, and many people have stopped taking their own notes.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Organizations have to trust the record enough to stop asking a person to keep a second one.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

I am wrong if taking notes by hand in meetings is still ordinary professional practice five years from now.

Work gets sorted by angle.

ALREADY TRUE

People already hand AI the reading and listening first, without being told to.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Managers have to start describing work by which way it faces instead of by job title.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

I am wrong if the line between work that is handed over and work that is fought over turns out to follow pay or prestige instead of angle.

The first AI talent faces away from us.

ALREADY TRUE

AI already performs as well as or better than people at some kinds of reading and listening, and nobody minds.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Some AI has to become known by name for what it perceives, and people have to seek it out for that.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

I am wrong if the first AI people seek out by name, the way they seek out an artist, is a songwriter, novelist or painter.

THE IDEA

Each claim comes with the condition that would prove it wrong.

THE QUESTION

Check back in five years.

EPILOGUE

The Last Five Minutes, Again

THURSDAY, 4:52 P.M.

Same meeting. Same sixteen people. This time you closed slide four before you came in.

The person speaking says something about the supplier and Thursday. Then she says, Thursday works if the power is connected by Wednesday. You hear it. Not because you are writing it down. Something else in the room is writing it down. You hear it because you are listening.

You also hear what the transcript will not have. The electrician pauses before he says Wednesday is fine. It is a small pause, and you know him, and you know what it means.

When it is your turn, you give your update without the rehearsed sentence. It is a little rougher and a lot more useful, because it answers what was actually said. Then you say to the electrician, quietly, that you will call him tonight about Wednesday.

At 5:01 the notes arrive. The condition is the third line. The pause is not in them.

The visitor listened to every word. You listened to the room.

That is the whole arrangement. It faces one way. You face the other.

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