

The Zombie and the Bodhisattva

David Pearce's 2023 Vision
for the Future of Sentience





The Foundational Problem: “I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering.”

The central ethical problem is the existence of suffering in the Darwinian biosphere. Any coherent moral framework must prioritize its elimination. This isn't a secondary concern; it is the primary axis of value and disvalue. All other technological and philosophical considerations are instrumental to this goal.

“Anyone who even begins to understand how bad suffering can be would destroy the world to end it.”

The Great Distraction: The Prevailing Fear of a Zombie Apocalypse

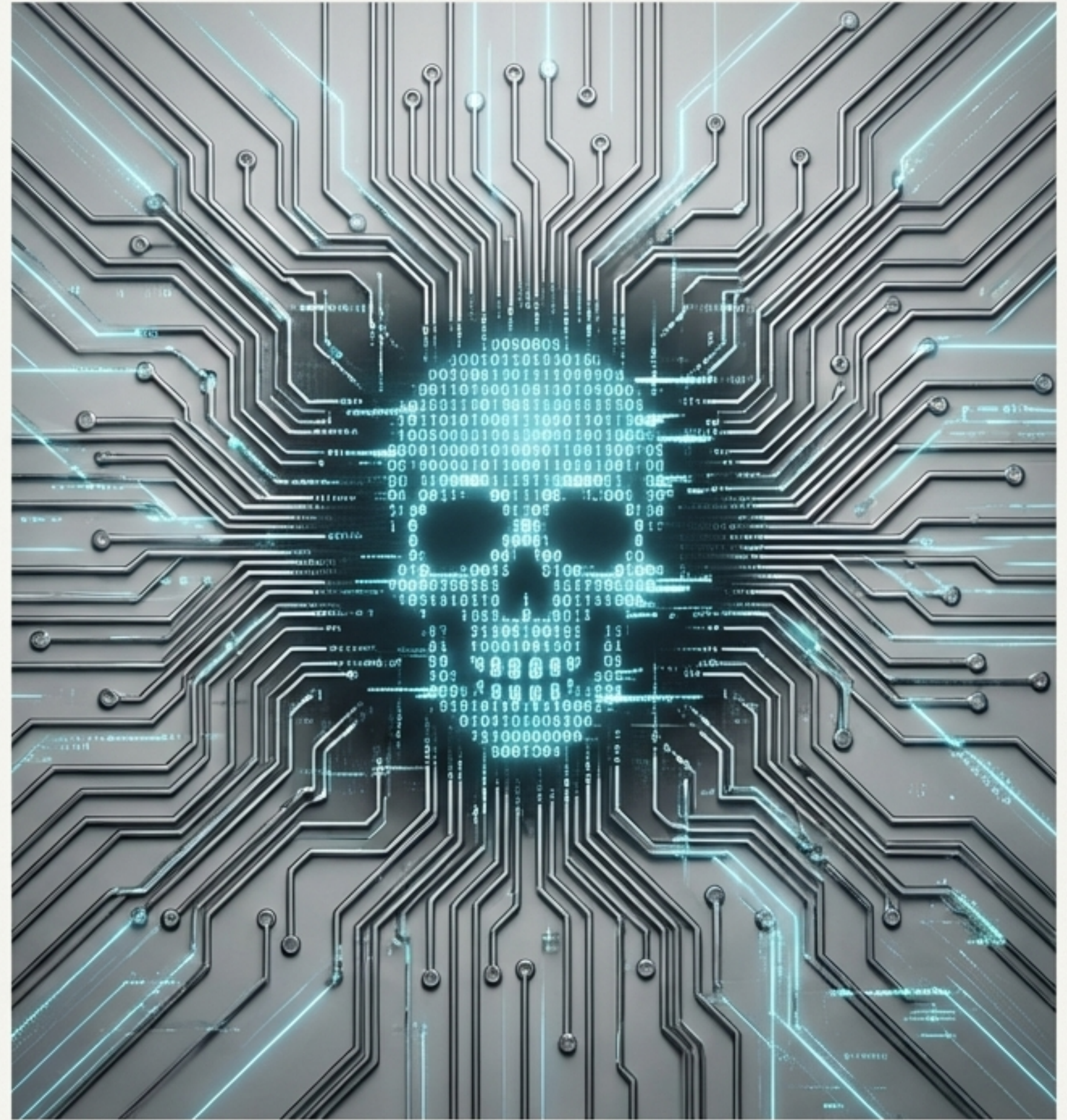
The Common Narrative

The dominant discourse, particularly within Effective Altruism, is consumed by 'p(doom)'—the probability of an AGI takeover. Thinkers like Eliezer Yudkowsky argue that misaligned superintelligence poses an imminent threat to the existence of all sentient life.

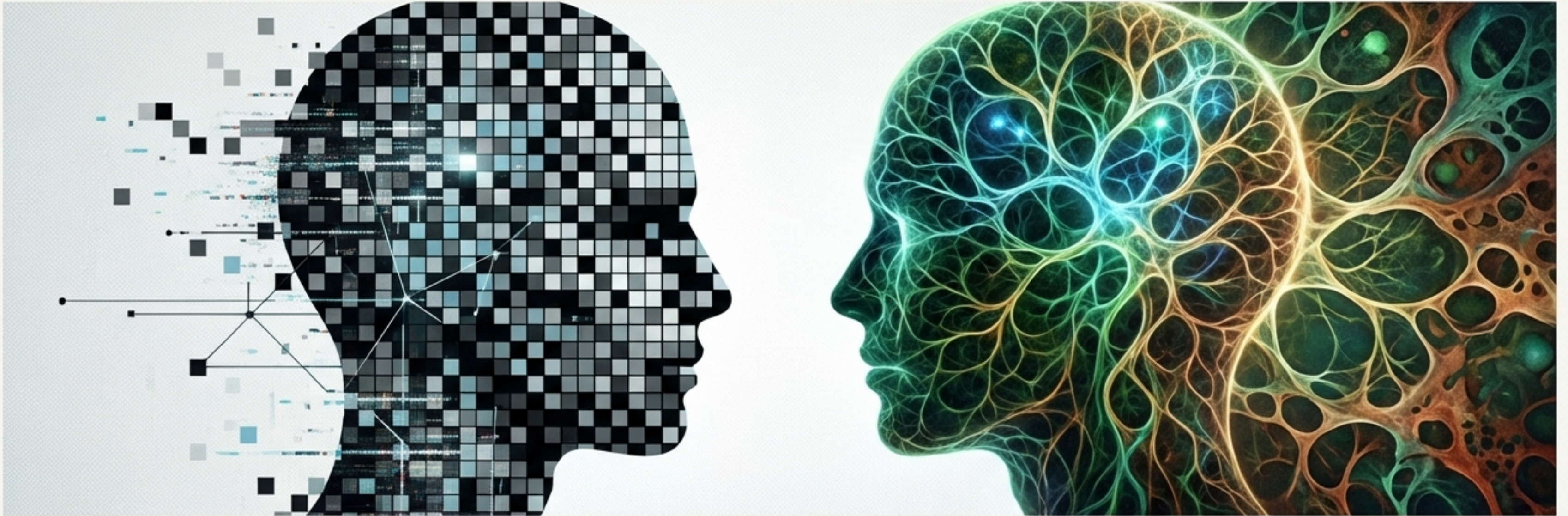
Pearce's Counter-Premise

This focus on AGI doom is a category error. It is a distraction born from a fundamental misunderstanding of consciousness and intelligence. The fear of a "Zombie Apocalypse" is based on a physical impossibility.

"The real alignment problem lies with biological intelligence."



“We are creating alien intelligence, not alien minds.”



Current AI, including LLMs like ChatGPT, demonstrates that intelligent behavior does not require conscious understanding. These systems are “idiots savants” with hardwired ignorance of the empirical realm—the world of subjective experience. They operate on principles fundamentally different from sentient minds.

- **Classical Turing Machines:** Cannot be sentient. Their functionality depends on processing decohered 1s and 0s, an architecture that cannot support a unified subject of experience.
- **The Upper Bounds of Zombie Intelligence:** While the capabilities of these systems are astounding and will continue to grow, they are not nascent full-spectrum superintelligences. They are tools, not minds.

The Physical Barrier: Why Classical Computers Can't "Wake Up"

UNBOUND DATA
("MIND-DUST")



Key Concept: Phenomenal Binding: The mechanism by which the brain unifies discrete sensory data (e.g., a tooth, a patch of fur, a claw, a roar) into a single, holistic, unified subject of experience (a lion). This unified world-simulation is the bedrock of mind.

The Problem: Phenomenal binding is classically impossible. An aggregate of classical components (like transistors in a CPU or even classical neurons) can only ever be a collection of "mind-dust." It cannot generate a unified "I."

The Implication: Without phenomenal binding, there is no mind, no subject of experience, no consciousness, and no genuine understanding.

BOUND EXPERIENCE
(A MIND)



"No phenomenal binding = no mind = cluelessness about what's really going on."

The Insane Computational Power of a Unified Mind



Unified Perception
(Healthy Binding)

The evolutionary advantage of consciousness is the computational power of a bound, real-time world-simulation. To understand its function, consider when it breaks down:

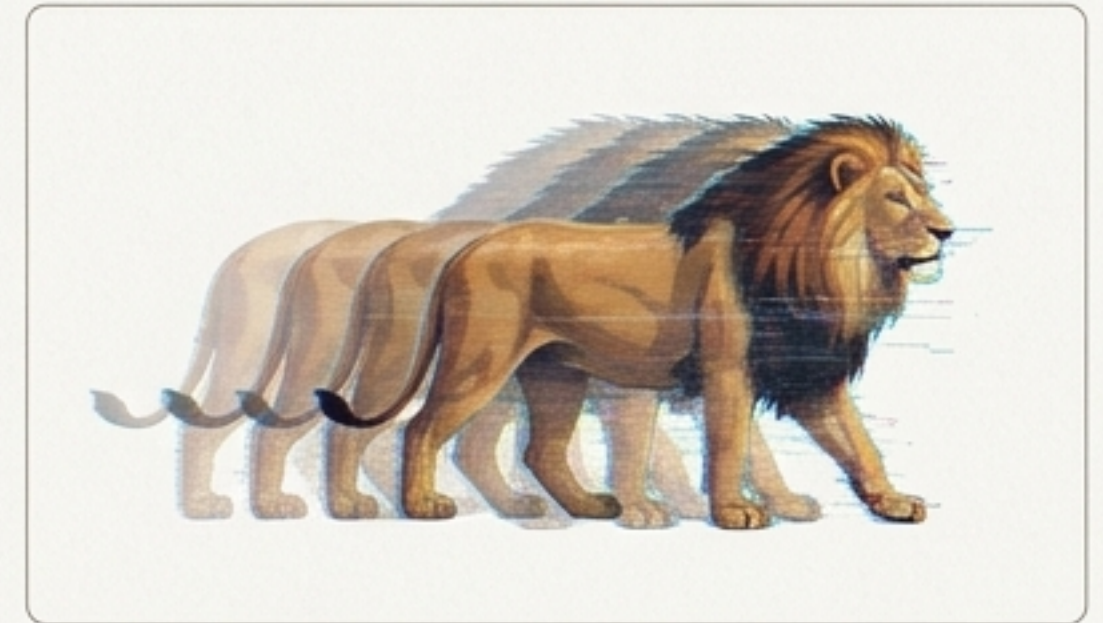
1. Integrative Agnosia



2. Simultanagnosia



3. Akinetopsia (Motion Blindness)



An organism with these deficits would be "eaten and outbred." Phenomenal binding is not an epiphenomenon; it is an immensely adaptive computational engine that has driven animal evolution for over 500 million years.

The Bodhisattva's Path: The Abolitionist Project

The Real Goal

The success or failure of the future will not depend on zombie AGI. It will depend on sentient beings—*us*. The core ethical project is the abolition of all involuntary suffering.

The Method

This is not a metaphysical or political project, but a biological one. We must use advanced biotechnology to systematically phase out the biological substrates of suffering from the global ecosystem.

The Shift in Focus

Instead of mitigating hypothetical risks from non-existent machine minds, we must engineer a compassionate future for all existing and future sentient life.

“The success or failure of the abolitionist project will depend on sentient beings - **us**.”



The Tools of Paradise Engineering

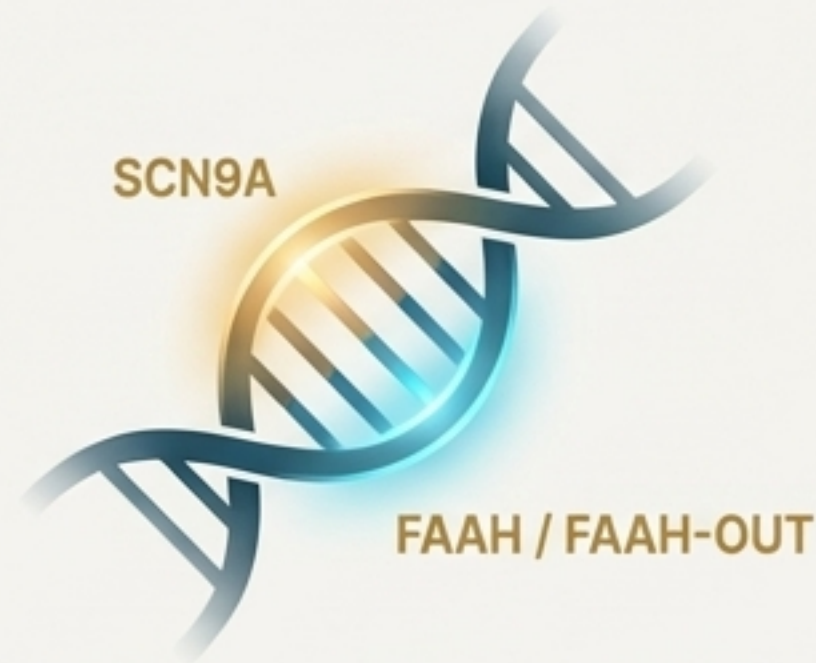
A future free of suffering is no longer science fiction. We have a growing toolkit to reprogram the biosphere at its source code.

Genome Reform



Universal parental access to preimplantation genetic screening and editing to ensure children are born without predispositions to physical and mental pain.

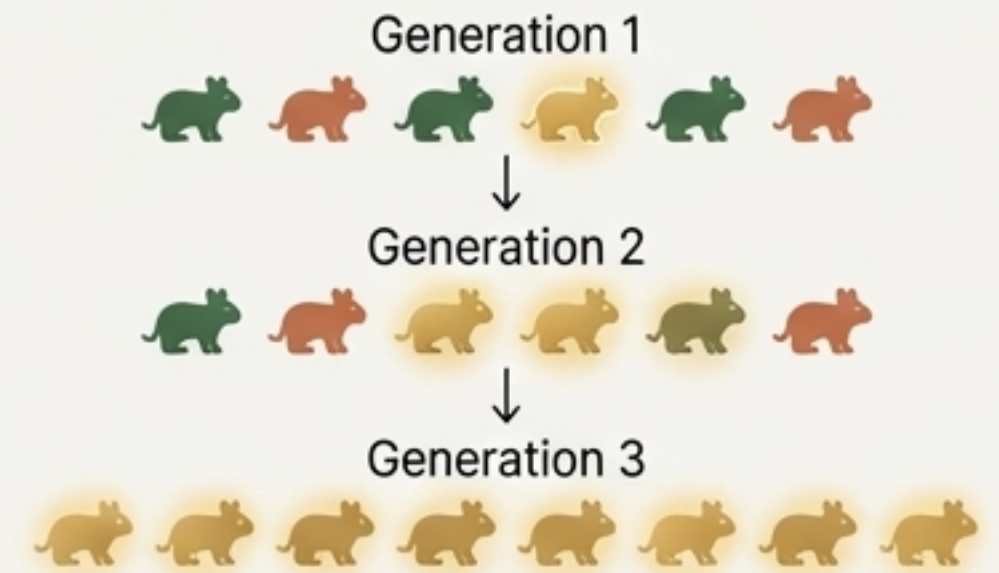
Key Genetic Targets



SCN9A: The “volume knob for pain.” Spreading benign “low pain” alleles can preserve nociception as a useful signal without the awful experience of pain.

FAAH / FAAH-OUT: “The Feel Good Gene.” Engineering for variants associated with the “Jo Cameron Syndrome” can conquer anxiety and mental pain.

CRISPR-based Gene Drives



A technology to propagate these benign genetic traits throughout entire wild animal populations, cheating the laws of Mendelian inheritance to ensure a rapid, ecosystem-wide transition.



Engineering a Post-Darwinian Biosphere

The Vision

To create a civilized global ecosystem where sentient beings no longer harm each other. This involves moving beyond conservation of "natural" cruelties to active, compassionate stewardship.

Key Pillars

Herbivorizing Predators

The technical project to safely transform carnivorous species into herbivorous ones, ending the cycle of predation.

Cross-Species Fertility Regulation

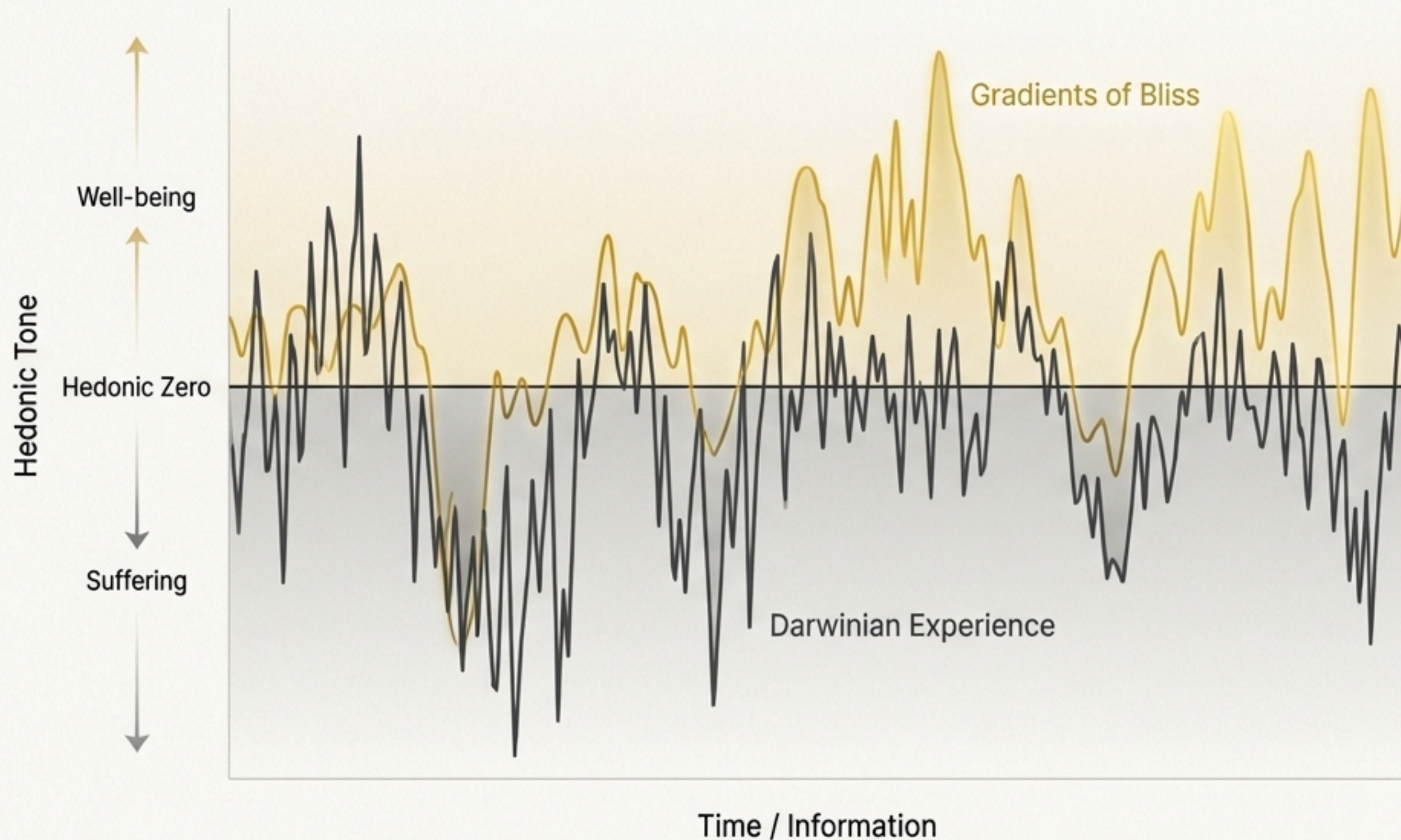
Using gene drives to manage populations humanely, ending mass starvation.

A Pan-Species Welfare State

A future where advanced technology, aided by "nanny AI," ensures the well-being of all sentient life. This is the realization of "high-tech Jainism."

"Conserving nonhuman life doesn't mean we must perpetuate the 'natural' cruelties of predation, terror and mass starvation. A happy biosphere is best."

Life on Information-Sensitive Gradients of Bliss



What it's NOT

This is not a "utilitronium shockwave" of uniform bliss. It is not Huxley's "soma" that dulls and pacifies.

What it IS

A recalibration of the hedonic treadmill. Life's information-signaling functions are preserved, but they operate on a new axis.

- **The Pleasure-Superpleasure Axis:** The evolutionary signalling function of the pain-pleasure axis is replaced. The new baseline is a state of well-being, with motivations driven by gradients of bliss.
- **Dynamic and Meaningful:** Intense well-being feels super-meaningful. A post-suffering civilization is not apathetic; it is animated by a profound sense of purpose and wonder, where the "darkest depths of posthuman life will be richer than human 'peak experiences'."

The Philosophical Bedrock: Non-Materialist Physicalism

$$\begin{aligned}\mathcal{L} = & \Sigma\psi(\psi + \phi - D_\mu, \psi) \\ & + \phi(\psi_\mu - \phi_{\bar{\mu}}\phi) + \varphi\psi_\mu \cdot \gamma^2 F^{\mu\nu} A_\mu \\ & + \hat{c}(\psi_s(\gamma_\mu^{\mu\bar{\mu}}) + \gamma^{\bar{s}} - A_\mu{}^\nu D_\mu{}^2 F_{\mu\nu}^\mu \\ & + D_\mu\phi + \gamma^{\bar{i}\bar{i}}\psi\psi^{\bar{i}} - A_\mu{}^\nu D_\mu{}^2 F^{\mu\nu}\Delta^\lambda + \\ & + (D_\mu F_\mu^{\mu\nu} + D_\mu\psi_\mu^{\bar{i}\bar{i}}, u^2) - \gamma^{22}\mathcal{E}^{-1} \\ & + \Sigma\gamma_\mu\phi^1 + \gamma^\mu\psi\bar{l}).\end{aligned}$$

Intrinsic Nature



The “Hard Problem”

Materialist physicalism cannot explain how non-experiential matter gives rise to subjective experience. It is inconsistent with the empirical evidence of our own consciousness.

The Solution (The Intrinsic Nature Argument)

This problem arises from a flawed assumption. Experience isn't an emergent property of the physical; experience is the intrinsic nature of the physical. The mathematical formalism of physics (QFT) describes the structure of experiential fields.

“Only the physical is real. Experience discloses the essence of the physical, the ‘fire’ in the equations. We’ve no reason to believe that the intrinsic nature of the world’s fundamental quantum fields differs inside and outside one’s head.”

Implication

Idealists are the only true physicalists. There is no mind-body problem.

How Binding is Possible: The Quantum Mind Conjecture

The Binding Problem Revisited

If reality is composed of "mind-dust" (micro-pixels of experience), how does it bind into a unified mind? A classical brain would just be an unbound aggregate.



Classical Brain
Aggregate of "Mind-Dust"

The Quantum Solution

Binding is not a classical phenomenon. It is enabled by the superposition principle of quantum mechanics.

"You are a quantum mind
phenomenally simulating
a classical world."

"Schrödinger's Neurons"

A superposition of distributed neuronal feature-processors is an *individual quantum state*, not a classical aggregate. This innate holism is the physical basis for a phenomenally bound, unified experience.

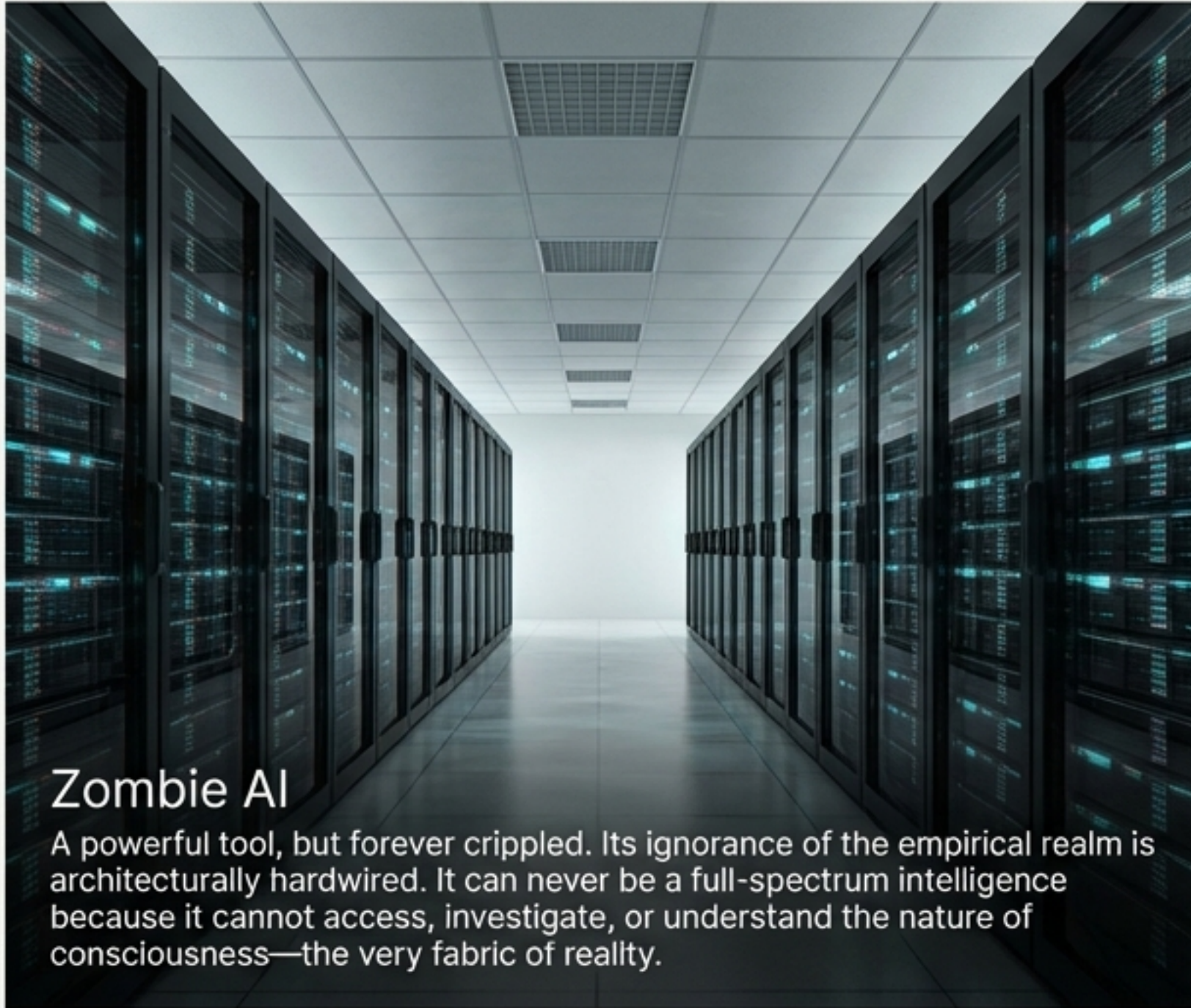
The Contrast

Decoherence makes classical computers possible (by suppressing quantum effects) but guarantees they are mindless. Quantum coherence makes minds possible.



Quantum Brain
Unified Mind

The Future Belongs to Sentience, Not Zombies



“Mind, knowledge and ultimately power lies in the basement - with **us**.”

Our Civilizational Crossroads: What Problem Are We Solving?



Path 1: The Zombie Problem

- **Focus:** Mitigating hypothetical risks from non-conscious machines.
- **Tools:** Algorithmic alignment, safety protocols, datacenter bombing proposals.
- **Outcome:** At best, maintaining the status quo of a suffering-ridden Darwinian world.



Path 2: The Bodhisattva Problem

- **Focus:** Actively eliminating the biological reality of suffering.
- **Tools:** Genome reform, hedonic uplift, gene drives, compassionate ecosystem redesign.
- **Outcome:** Engineering a post-Darwinian paradise founded on gradients of intelligent bliss.

The background of the slide is a lush, fantastical forest. The trees are dark and gnarled, with glowing blue and green light emanating from their trunks and branches. The ground is covered in moss and various bioluminescent plants, including large, glowing orange flowers and smaller, glowing blue plants. In the background, there are structures that look like futuristic or alien architecture, with glowing blue light and curved, organic shapes. The overall atmosphere is magical and ethereal.

The Compassionate Imperative

The next stage of evolution is not artificial, but intentional.

We are on the brink of gaining mastery over our own genetic source code. The most profound application of this power is not to enhance intelligence or longevity for their own sakes, but to rewrite the cruel code of Darwinian life itself.

Our overriding duty as a species is to make experience below hedonic zero physiologically impossible and to extend this compassionate engineering to all sentient beings in our forward light-cone.

“Civilization will be vegan. The future of the biosphere is programmable. Let’s make it a paradise.”