Fear and Loathing in Silicon Valley: How AI Threatens Human Valuing

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ABSTRACT: We often react with some mix of fear and loathing to the prospect of AI taking over our creative activities or being used to demonstrate care and concern. What justifies this reaction? In this paper, I argue that AI raises two existential threats to our valuing practices. The first threat is *forward-looking*—when we offload our labor onto AI, we risk flattening our valuing landscape, turning activities and products that could have once been valued for the meaningful processes that resulted in their creation into things that can only be valued for their functionality. This is a serious risk, and it's reasonable to fear it. The second threat is *backward-looking*—AI forces us to reckon with the valuing discord that already exists in our lives. When we see that other people don't care about whether the art or writing they're consuming is AI-produced, we must reckon with the fact that they never shared in our valuing practices. We have good reason to care about sharing these practices, and so we have good reason to loathe this discord.

Introduction

Let me tell you about a writer I know.

Marshall[1] was, from grade school onwards, a gifted storyteller. He just always knew how to make even the most mundane moments sound like madcap adventures. It was no wonder to anyone who knew him as a child that Marshall eventually decided to pursue a career in journalism. But the job market was unkind, and in his late twenties, Marshall ended up working for a company that produces 'advertorial content'. You all know what this content is, even if you haven't heard it referred to by name before. It's the sort of advertisement that *looks* like a real article or blog post, but is ultimately just shilling for some product or service.

Marshall has spent the last half-decade producing advertorial content. He'll offer his readers five tips for traveling to the Grand Canyon—where one of those tips will be to buy travel insurance from Allianz—or he'll write a blog post on how to winterize an apartment that appears on the website of a property management company. Marshall didn't love the job, to be sure, but he had made his peace with it. He found ways to inject his particular brand of storytelling into his posts, and he learned how to draw on his own

[1] Name, and some identifying details, changed.

expertise (he's a well-versed traveler, for instance) to make his content genuinely informative.

And then ChatGPT entered the scene.

ChatGPT hasn't cost Marshall his job, but it's transformed his job description. Marshall is no longer an advertorial writer—now, he's a *prompt engineer.* Here's how Marshall's job now works. He'll get tasked with producing a particular advertorial piece—come up with four reasons to get a new set of luggage (from Samsonite), for instance. He'll then write a ChatGPT prompt:

> Generate a listicle with three reasons to buy a new set of luggage. Make sure to reference the brand 'Samsonite', making clear that it is *particularly* good at meeting these considerations.

And ChatGPT will churn out something like the following:

> **Three Reasons to Invest in a New Set of Luggage (and Why Samsonite is the Best Choice)**
>
> Traveling can be an exhilarating experience, but having the right luggage can make all the difference. Here are five good reasons to update your travel gear, with Samsonite leading the way.
>
> **Stylish Design**
>
> First impressions matter, and your luggage is part of that. Samsonite offers a wide variety of chic designs and colors that cater to all tastes. A new set can elevate your travel aesthetic, making you feel confident as you check in for your flight.
>
> **Enhanced Organization**
>
> Packing efficiently can be a challenge, but Samsonite luggage is designed with organization in mind. Features like multiple compartments, packing cubes, and expandable options help you maximize space and keep your belongings tidy.
>
> **Long-Term Value**
>
> Investing in quality luggage pays off in the long run. Samsonite's reputation for durability means you won't have to replace your bags frequently, saving you money over time. A new set isn't just a purchase; it's a commitment to better travel experiences.

Marshall will then copy-edit the piece, making sure that ChatGPT hasn't said anything blatantly false or nonsensical, and send it off to his boss. The resulting advertorial won't

have Marshall's spark, to be sure. But it really doesn't need to—it's not like any of us read advertorials for their *literary flair*, after all.

Marshall's job is much easier. And yet, he can't help but feel that it's decidedly worse: AI makes him anxious, and even a bit disgusted. To be sure, some of this anxiety is employment-related: even if his job is secure for now, it's hard to imagine that it will be for much longer. But the anxiety isn't purely pragmatic. Marshall would be feeling very different if the threat to his employability was coming from some recently graduated advertorial protégé—as a writer, Marshall's used to *that* sort of competition already. That the threat is coming from a ghost in a machine feels decidedly different.

Even though ChatGPT has not encroached on my job in the way that it has Marshall's, I find his reaction familiar. We often respond to AI with some mixture of fear and loathing: we recoil at AI-generated term papers, feel unnerved upon discovering that the art we purchased for our living room was generated by Midjourney, and react with disdain to the realization that the love poem that our partner sent us was actually generated by a ChatGPT prompt.

What exactly justifies this reaction? After giving a general account of how we value objects (§1), I'm going to suggest that AI[2] poses two different existential threats to these valuing practices. The first existential threat (§2) is *forward-looking*—when we offload our labor onto AI, we risk flattening our valuing landscape in at least two ways. First, we simply risk reducing the *quality* of the products that populate our lives: the *good* is transformed into the *good enough*. Second, we narrow the guises under which we can value these products. While we can value AI-produced art and writing[3] for what functions they perform, we cannot generally value them for being the *products of valuable processes*. Insofar as this second type of valuing is relevant to human connection, this is a significant loss and it warrants some measure of fear.

But AI also poses a *backward-looking* threat to our valuing practices (§3), and it is this threat that (I think) most acutely haunts Marshall. The influx of AI-generated products into our lives have revealed *valuing discord*: when we notice that nobody around us cares that these products are often worse than their human-created predecessors, or that nobody cares that humans are no longer making such products, we realize that the way we value is sharply at odds with the way that others value. This can prompt some seriously existentially-frightening self-interrogation: have we been mistaken about what to value,

[2] In this paper, I am primarily interested in *generative* AI. While the exact features that make an AI model generative is subject to dispute, what these models have in common is that they create novel content. Common examples of the content generated by generative AI include: text (e.g. ChatGPT, Claude), images (e.g. Midjourney, DALL-E), video (e.g. Google Veo) and audio (e.g. ElevenLabs, Mubert). Not all AI is generative: many AI models, like spam filters and medical diagnostic models, classify data without creating new content. My argument generally won't apply to these sorts of AI models, though there may be some exceptional or borderline cases.

[3] Philosophical discussions about generative AI have so far focused heavily on AI *art*, asking questions like: is AI art *really* art (see e.g. Coekelbergh 2017, Trujillo 2022; Cross 2024, Anscomb 2022)? And can we use AI to produce art (see e.g. Cross 2024; Anscomb 2022)? This paper takes a broader focus: I'm interested in AI-generated products *generally*, and not simply AI-generated creative products.

and how to value it, all along? Have other people just been humoring us about our values? This, I think, will get us the loathing.

1. Valuing Objects

I'm going to ultimately argue that AI threatens our valuing practices. To do this, however, I need to say something about what these practices are. This is a complicated matter. 'Valuing' does not pick out any single disposition, reason for action, or belief. Instead, I follow Samuel Scheffler (2011; see also Svavarsdöttir 2014; MacKenzie 2018) in thinking of valuing as a 'complex syndrome 'of doxastic attitudes, affective attitudes, actions, and commitments. When we value something, we typically: judge it to be valuable, see it as a source of reasons for actions, and have particular affective attitudes (e.g. care, concern) towards it.

To be sure, valuing's complex syndrome admits of limits. Not all attitudes are compatible with valuing (utter contempt, for instance, is generally anathema to it), and we can still discern general patterns in how we value. I'm going to focus on two such patterns that reveal themselves when we think about how we value the *objects*[4] in our lives.

To start to get a picture of this part of our valuing practice, consider what happens when I instruct ChatGPT to write a love letter to my spouse:

> My Dearest [Spouse's Name],
>
> As I sit down to write this, I can't help but reflect on all the moments we've shared—the laughter, the quiet evenings, and even the challenges we've faced together. Each memory is a thread woven into the beautiful tapestry of our life together, and I cherish every single one.
>
> I want you to know how much I admire your strength and resilience. Even when life gets tough, you manage to show kindness and care, not just to me but to everyone around you. Your ability to uplift others, even when you're feeling weighed down, is something I deeply admire.
>
> I love you more than words can express, and I'm looking forward to all the adventures that still lie ahead for us. Thank you for being you—wonderful, loving, and uniquely you.
>
> With all my love,

[4] I'm using 'objects' very expansively, to include things like erasers and clocks, and also things like novels and sonnets.

[Your Name]

Is this a good love letter? There are at least two ways that we might answer this question. First, we might make a *quality assessment*—perhaps by comparing the letter to a personally-written counterpart. If I had been writing this myself, for instance, I probably would have included some more specific content and avoided some clichés. To be sure, I also probably would have rambled and fallen into my own well-worn tropes—but I'd like to think that I can still write a better love letter than ChatGPT.

But we might assess the letter from a different vantage point, looking not at its *quality*, but at the process through which it came into being. Here, the question of which is the better love letter becomes almost nonsensical.[5] If part of what it takes for something to *be* a love letter is that it was *written* by a lover, the ChatGPT letter just doesn't make the cut. It's a letter, and it's about love, but the method of its production disqualifies it from being a love letter.

These two different vantage points pick out two different ways in which we might value an object: we might value it for its *qualities* and we might value it for the particular way in which it entered our lives. Call the first sort of valuing 'qualitative valuing', and call the second 'process valuing'. No doubt this division does not carve nature at its joints (valuing is a complex syndrome, after all), and it is not meant to be exhaustive. Nevertheless, I think it picks out two common ways of valuing that are potentially threatened by AI.

There are, to be sure, further distinctions to be drawn within these categories. Here's one that's relevant for our purposes. Sometimes, when we value something qualitatively, we take up a *maximizing* or *aspirational* attitude towards it. And so, valuing a coin collection might drive me to acquire more coins, and valuing my latest painting might require me to compulsively fiddle with a bit of shading that isn't quite right yet.[6]

Sometimes, however, valuing something for its qualities requires no such commitment to 'maxing out the stats'. Instead, we can *satisfice*, trading off the 'good' for the 'good enough'. I value my can opener insofar as it allows me to open cans, but I don't particularly care if it's the best model out there—it's good enough, and that's what matters.

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[5] For a similar observation, see Weirich (2023). As Weirich points out, some writing is 'emotional labor', and as such, can't generally be successfully outsourced to AI.

[6] Although I am interested in the question of *how* we value works of art, I will remain largely silent on the question of what it takes for something to have aesthetic value, and what it means to increase that value (though see Shelley 2019 for an overview of the concept). This is because I'm interested in a dimension of artistic valuing that comes apart from judgments of aesthetic value, viz. how we value art when we deem it to be the product of a valuable process. Crucially, I can value a piece of art as part of a valuable process *without* perceiving it to be aesthetically valuable: kitschy art might be bad art while still being the product of a valuable process.

Note that valuing an object qualitatively generally brings along with it a recognition that the object is *exchangeable*.[7] This is most obvious when we take a maximizing attitude towards the objects we value—if we value them because they have valuable qualities, and we view maximizing those qualities as good, then we ought to remain open to the possibility of replacing them with objects that better instantiate those qualities. But it's also true in the satisficing case: after all, until we have achieved satisfaction, we'll still have a maximizing attitude. And even once we've satisficed, we'll have to recognize that any similarly valuable object would similarly satisfice. What matters to qualitative valuing, after all, is that the object has some particular valuable qualities, and not that the object is *that* object in particular.

But we can value objects in a very different way—as entities with distinct histories that come into being and enter our lives in particular ways.[8] Here, we attend not to the qualities of the objects, but to the particular processes that brought them to us. From this vantage point, ChatGPT's love letter just misses the mark—and it would still miss the mark even if it were *substantially better* than anything I could have written myself. It just didn't come about through the right sort of process.

To be sure, not all processes are created equal—and there are certain types of processes that seem especially valuable to us. Most typically, we value things for their processes when those processes were *creative*. In recent work, Lindsay Brainard has argued that creativity is a particular sort of process, characterized by deliberation, subjective novelty, and epistemic achievement (2024). When a creative process is successful, Brainard contends, it provides its practitioner with something of epistemic value—the creative person comes to know something new ('how to resolve the cliffhanger', 'how to wire up those lights without shorting this circuit' etc.) (2024, 18-19). And we might value creative processes for other reasons. For instance, creativity can help foster human connection, by giving us insight into what other people are like as inquirers (Brainard, 2025-a) and valuers (Brainard forthcoming). These sorts of insights are often necessary for the formation and maintenance of close interpersonal relationships.

But when we're valuing something as part of a process, I don't think we're automatically valuing it as part of a creative process. Think about some of the most meaningful gifts you've ever received. For me, that honor goes to a 1960's starburst clock that my beloved aunt gave me when I last visited her. That clock had hung in her living room for over fifty years, but when I offhandedly mentioned how much loved it, she didn't hesitate to take

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[7] Of course, this is not to say that we're under constant rational pressure to "trade up" the objects in our lives. There are, for instance, cognitive and financial costs associated with trying to acquire the best of the best, and these costs often give us reason to satisfice. My point still stands: when we're looking at an object in terms of its qualities, we enter the world of comparability—if I value X for its durability, and Y has +1 durability over X with no obvious trade-offs, then I ought *prima facie* to prefer Y over X.

[8] Many of the objects that we value as parts of processes have what G.A. Cohen has called 'personal value' (2011). We have, he suggests, a propensity to value as irreplaceable objects that connect us to meaningful experiences and noteworthy people. And so, Cohen wouldn't replace the eraser he bought as a young professor with a newer model (for *that* eraser isn't *his* eraser). When we assign personal value to something, we take up a conservative attitude towards it, wishing to preserve it as it is, and eschewing value-maximizing attitudes towards it. My account of 'process valuing' can be seen as a story about how we often end up assigning personal value to objects in our lives.

it off the wall and give it to me. I value the clock not for the process that went into its production, but for the process that went into me having it on my wall. My aunt loved that clock, and the fact that she didn't even pause to consider whether to give it away speaks to how much she loves me. Or think about the way that Marshall values his advertorials. Such writing might not be sufficiently novel to qualify as creative on most leading philosophical accounts of creativity,[9] but he still values it as part of a process that reflects who he is.

Here, it seems that our practice of process valuing generally tracks attributions of *agency*. There are no doubt exceptions to this story: think about how you might value a rock that was formed through an interesting geological process, or a piece of driftwood that resembles your dog. But the generalization is still forceful. Much of the time, when we value something as part of process, we do so because that process speaks meaningfully to our (or a relevant other's) agency.

This is clear in the creative case. Taking Brainard's (2025-a) line, we might say that creativity concerns our *inquisitive* agency: that part of us that seeks to answer questions and understand the world. But we find expressions of our agency in non-creative processes as well. Marshall's tendency to draw from his travels when writing listicles speaks to his life experiences. My aunt's unflinching decision to give me her beloved starburst clock, meanwhile, speaks to how much she cares about me. Indeed, a lot of our care-based labor *isn't* particularly creative—we follow recipes, we read our children the same bedtime stories *ad infinitum*, we help our friends put together Ikea furniture. But insofar as this labor expresses our care, it is inextricably bound up with our sense of who we are as agents.

So valuing something as part of a process can connect us with the agents who undertook this process. This explains why we sometimes experience a sort of moral pressure to value products as parts of processes. Think about how you value your child's artwork. Sure, you might think that some of it is aesthetically pleasing—but you have reasons beyond the aesthetic for hanging it on the fridge. Specifically, you probably value your child's artwork because it's *hers*. And valuing in this way seems morally good—insofar as caring about your child requires you to care about the projects she's invested in, you'll have some moral reason to try to value the products of those projects as non-disposable, and as worthy of a place on the fridge.

The story that I'm telling about process valuing helps explain why, when we value an object as part of a process, our ability to swap it out while retaining that value is greatly diminished.[10] I can't replace my aunt's clock with an identical one because that other

[9] Most philosophers working on creativity build some sort of 'novelty' condition into their account, which thus excludes Marshall's writing from being significantly creative. See, e.g. Beardsley (1965), Boden (2010), Brainard (2025-b), Gaut (2018). Though see Chung (2023) for an account that does not contain a novelty condition.

[10] Though not entirely eradicated. I can value a novel as the product of a literary process without thinking that there would be something wrong with swapping it at a book exchange. Similarly, I can think that not all literary processes are created equal—some are more interesting than others. But even in these cases, we still have some conservative impulses—many people abhor the idea of throwing out books, after all. My

clock didn't hang on my aunt's wall for half a century. Valuing an object as part of a process then, typically involves connecting ourselves to the people who contributed to that process. We don't (and shouldn't) view those people as interchangeable, and so we don't (and shouldn't) view the objects that they bring into our lives as interchangeable.

2. AI's Forward-Looking Existential Threat

Now that we have this story about valuing objects at our disposal, let's put it to use. I'm ultimately going to argue that AI poses two particular threats to our valuing practices, and that these threats help to explain and justify our fear and loathing. But what are these threats? To answer, let's first consider how AI might impact our ability to value objects *qualitatively*.

2.1—Will AI 'Max Our Stats'?

How might AI impact the quality of the objects that populate our lives? Here's one thought: it might make them *much better*. If this is right, then our AI anxiety might really just be jealousy. We recognize that AI is (or almost is) better than us at performing some of the activities that give our lives great meaning. And it just sucks to be bested in one's own game.

We've felt this anxiety before. Think back to Garry Kasparov's 1989 match against Deep Blue, the IBM supercomputer. Kasparov won the match, but his record was a disquieting 4-2.[11] I imagine that those watching the match couldn't help but feel that something monumental had just happened: the best chess player and human history had clung on to his superiority, but only by a thread. And that thread has now been long severed. No human has beaten a computer in a chess tournament in the last 15 years (Kasparov himself lost to Deep Blue in a 1997 rematch).[12]

The problem is that this explanation won't work for cases like Marshall's. ChatGPT can produce advertorials at an astounding rate, but its outputs lack Marshall's spark. And any professor who has had to read a ChatGPT-generated paper in the last few years will attest to their blandness.

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account captures this hesitance: writing a book is an incredible agential process, after all. So we should give books a little respect.

[11] "Deep Blue versus Garry Kasparov," *Wikipedia*, last modified September 3, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deep_Blue_versus_Garry_Kasparov

[12] The Ruslan Ponomariov vs. Fritz (Computer) 'Puttin' on the Fritz' game is arguably the last win by a human against a chess computer. It occurred during the 'Man vs Machine World Team Championship' (2004-5), which was handily won by the machines. ("Human-Computer Chess Matches," *Wikipedia*, last modified August 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human%E2%80%93computer_chess_matches#cite_ref-23).

Of course, this is just the beginning. We're in the middle of the first Kasparov-Deep Blue match, not the second. Perhaps ChatGPT's listicles will eventually capture Marshall's wit, and perhaps AI-generated term papers will soon be indistinguishable from their human-written counterparts. But I can't help but think that the anxiety that Marshall feels is not anticipatory in this way. Marshall is not afraid that AI will someday be a better writer than he is. Rather, he hates those ChatGPT listicles as they exist right now—in all their generic, boring glory.

2.2—Or Will It Force Us to Satisfice?

So maybe *that's* it! Perhaps we're anxious about AI not because we think it's better at doing what we do, but because we fear it might be worse. There's lots of anecdata to recommend this interpretation. ChatGPT-generated papers, as I've mentioned, are frighteningly generic. AI art generators, meanwhile, struggle in a different direction, creating images that are distressingly surreal. Our Facebook feeds have suffered under the weight of this AI 'slop'[13], becoming clogged down with bizarre pictures of legless veterans celebrating birthdays and impoverished children constructing racing cars out of plastic bottles.

Indeed, for all their impressiveness, AI-image generators are still remarkably bad at parsing basic prompts. Consider the sorts of images that were generated when Reddit users attempted to get AI to produce a picture of a wine glass filled to the brim:

Image: Reddit user EvilCade's wine beret (left), and romanticalhopeful's wine sphere (right).

To be sure, some users *were* able to get realistic results from their prompts. But the results felt chancy: the very same prompt that generated a sensible image, for instance, also generated the wine sphere pictured above.

Whatever the future holds, it's hard to deny that AI is currently very bad at many of the tasks that we assign it. How might this badness give us a story about our AI fear? Here's one thought. Often, when we automate a process, the resulting product is *qualitatively better* (along some

[13] This term has emerged to describe the low-quality AI media that is currently flooding our social networks. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/11/style/ai-search-slop.html

important dimension at least) for having been automated. Industrial knitting machines, for instance, are capable of producing a more consistent garment than all but the most skilled knitter. This is why grandma's handmade sweater looks 'lumpy' in a way that the sweater that you just bought at Zara never does.

But just as automation can make products selectively better, it can also make them selectively worse. Again, think back to Grandma's sweater. It's lumpy, sure, but it's also structurally very sound—you'll have it long after the Zara sweater has fallen apart. The difference in longevity is due in part to a difference in technique. Grandma almost certainly knit your sweater 'in the round' (as a series of long tubes) or 'to shape' (as a series of shaped panels joined together stitch by stitch).

Most commercial sweaters, in contrast, are made using a 'cut and sew' technique in which knitted fabric was produced, cut, and then sewn together. Relative to the other two techniques, this method is cheaper, simpler, and yields a product that is more uniform and fitted. But it also introduces structural vulnerabilities that are absent from the other two techniques. And so, machine-made sweaters purchase their uniformity at the expense of their structural integrity.

Automation thus provides us with products that have different trade-offs than their handmade counterparts. And these tradeoffs follow a predictable pattern: automation isn't always good at maxing out stats across the board, but it delivers a satisfactory product at lower cost. That we can make such tradeoffs is, by itself, not a bad thing: we might even benefit from being able to choose between lumpy-but-long-lasting and sleek-but-structurally unsound. But automation does something else: because it provides us with products that are *cheaper* than their non-automated counterparts, it tends to take over the market. The rise of machine-knit sweaters doesn't mean that we can now choose between durability and style; it just means that we no longer have access to durable sweaters. We'll have to satisfice with something reasonably pretty, but disposable.

Perhaps we're worried that ChatGPT is going to flood our markets with mediocre prose and mundane-yet-bizarre art, crowding out more 'artisanal' versions of these products in the process. Our valuing landscape will thus be flattened: things that could have once been 'good' or 'bad' across different dimensions might now be uniformly 'good enough'—they'll get the job done, but they'll lack any real excellence. This gets us the beginning of our forward-looking existential threat.

But of course, this threat might be overblown. As I said, we're in the first Kasparov-Deep Blue match, not the second. So our fears about the 'good enough' replacing the 'good' might come to nothing. We might even wonder whether we should really *care* about that threat—why does it matter to us whether emails are a bit more generic, or advertorials a bit more bland? Surely, that's a tradeoff we should be willing to make if it gets us out of having to actually write that stuff. To answer this challenge, we need to look at how AI threatens our *process valuing* practices.

2.3. AI and Process Valuing

AI may very well change how we value *qualitatively*, encouraging us towards satisficing rather than maximizing. This is a real threat, but it's not entirely new (automation does this generally), nor is it obviously insurmountable (AI could get better). The more serious challenge that AI poses, I want to suggest, is to our *process valuing*.

Recall that valuing something as part of a process typically requires us to eschew its replaceability: insofar as the processes that matter are paradigmatically human processes that reflect our agency, we're liable to view them (and their resulting products) as non-interchangeable. But ChatGPT's products *are* interchangeable. You can run the same prompt twenty times, and each time will generate a different result—but the differences won't amount to very much. A ChatGPT-generated paper will make the same few argumentative moves, swapping out one banal example for another. Midjourney, meanwhile, has proven itself very adept at generating endless portraits of Jesus constructed out of shrimp, but none of those portraits will have the whimsy of Arcimboldo's *Vertumnus*:

Images: Shrimp Jesus (left)[14], Arcimboldo's *Vertumnus* (right).

What explains the difference? When I look at Arcimboldo's portraits, I feel connected to him. I find myself asking: how did some Renaissance artist ever get the idea to paint a Holy Roman Emperor out of vegetables? Was the painting political? Is the cabbage symbolic? The object draws me into the process that led to its creation.

I am not similarly drawn into the process of Shrimp Jesus's creation, simply because I don't think there's much of a process there to be drawn into. At some point, somebody spent a few seconds inputting an absurd prompt into Midjourney, and the resulting image happened to be recreated *ad infinitum* by content farmers. There's no wonder to how Midjourney composed Jesus's body out of shrimp, nor can I imagine the shrimp symbolizing anything. Of course, I *can* wonder about the technical acumen that went into designing Midjourney, but there's nothing specific to Shrimp Jesus that gets me thinking about *that* process. On that front, any Midjourney output will do.

[14] This image appeared in Megan Morris, "Garbage AI Posts Like Shrimp Jesus are Destroying Facebook," *Business Insider*, March 2024.

This is not to say that we can never be 'awed' by AI—who wasn't blown away by ChatGPT the first time they used it? Rather, I'm suggesting that the *products* of AI are often not sufficiently distinct as to keep us engaged with that awe, and that they're not sufficiently connected to human agency to keep us connected to other agents.

This point should not be overstated. AI can, I think, sometimes be used in such a way that its outputs *are* genuine expressions of human agency. Artists are already embedding AI into their creative practices in rich and subtle ways (Anscomb 2025; Cross 2024)[15], and I'm sure that most readers of this article have at least experimented with allowing ChatGPT to make their prose a little more concise or forceful. AI can even help us radically *extend* our agency—we no longer need to be great painters to bring the images in our heads into the world, for instance.[16]

Still, the fact that we *can* use AI in agency-preserving or promoting ways doesn't eliminate the concern. After all, the worry is not that we *can't* use AI agentially, but that we *won't*. AI is a powerful shortcut: even if we start out with the aim of using it in an agency-promoting way, it's hard not to succumb to the temptation of letting it take over. And we might not even know *when* we've succumbed to that temptation: the transition from agency-supplementing to agency-supplanting AI use can happen gradually, and without our awareness.

The extent to which we *can* spot that transition, further, may depend on our background expertise—expertise that was often acquired prior to the proliferation of generative AI. Even if a professional philosopher can use AI in a way that leaves her philosophical voice intact, it doesn't follow that the typical PHIL 101 student will have the same success. The philosopher, after all, has years of practice: she knows what she's trying to say, and what a good argument looks like. The freshman, in contrast, hasn't had the time to acquire those skills—and so may be more likely to use AI in ways that diminish her agency.

We can now appreciate AI's *forward-looking* existential threat. The first part of the threat was established in the previous subsection: AI threatens to flood our valuing landscape with 'good enough' products, thus eroding our opportunities for aspirational valuing. This may flatten our valuing landscape: we'll be trading the *genuinely good* for the *good enough*.

Connected to this threat is, I think, a deeper worry: that AI has the ability to transform our valuing landscape from one in which we might appreciate valuable *processes* to one in which we may only appreciate valuable *products*.[17] This cuts us off from an important

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[15] As Roberts and Krueger (2022) argue, we sometimes accomplish this by treating AI *as if* it is an agent. This make-believe, they contend, can actually affirm our own agency.

[16] As a reviewer helpfully points it, even when an AI output *isn't* agency-preserving, it might still be worthwhile to engage with it. The fact that Shrimp Jesus leaves us aesthetically cold, for instance, could move us to investigate the question of what it lacks that great art possesses. Still, our ability to engage fruitfully with AI slop seems in part to depend on our ability to access a non-slop comparison class. This class might become more difficult to access as AI products become ubiquitous.

[17] AI's forward-looking threat is related to the phenomenon of 'value capture'. As C. Thi Nguyen (2024) describes the concept, we experience 'value capture' when our rich, subtle values enter a social

source of human connection: when we value things for the processes that brought us to them, we value the people who were bound up in those processes.

How radical is this second transformation? At minimum, we should worry that we'll simply have fewer opportunities for process valuing. But if we think that valuing something as part of a process requires that we have at least some understanding of that process, then the transformation may be quite radical indeed.

To illustrate, consider how you might value a beautiful piece of wooden furniture. If you're like me, and you don't know much about woodworking, then you might be able to value it qualitatively—appreciating, for instance, the way the drawers seem to glide without friction, and the way that the wooden inlays catch the light. And you'll recognize that there's an incredible process that went into designing the piece. But you'll be cut off from that process—without some background research, you won't be able to imagine how exactly the woodworker created that inlay. You'll know that there probably *is* a process to be valued, but you won't be able to value that process.

AI may cut us off from valuable processes in similar ways. If you've always used AI to compose sensitive, heartfelt messages to friends and loved ones, for instance, then you won't know the particular frustration that accompanies trying to find the right words to convey your condolences, sympathy, or love. And so, when your friend writes you a heartfelt email, you might be able to appreciate its beautiful prose, but you won't be able to fully value the effort that went into composing it—it's an effort that's foreign to you, after all.[18]

Taken together, I think that these valuing transformations are enough to explain why we are often fearful at the prospect of AI writing our books, composing our sonnets, and even generating our children's art projects. But there's more to be said. Most strikingly, this account still hasn't given us our loathing. To see why, let's turn back to Marshall and his advertorials. Advertorials aren't the sorts of things that we generally value as outputs of creative processes, and they're already the sorts of things that we're content to *satisfice* on. Who cares if they get worse? It is to this matter that I now turn.

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environment that encourages us to view them as simple and quantifiable. And so, the value we place in something like physical health can be 'captured' by our Fitbit, such that we end up caring simply about whether we're 'getting our steps'. Still, the phenomena are importantly different: while 'value capture' describes the phenomenon of value simplification, this threat picks out the phenomenon of *value disappearance*: we won't be able to value writing and art as the products of valuable processes, because they won't be the products of valuable processes.

[18] I owe this observation to Daniel Hoek.

3. AI's Backward-Looking Existential Threat

Here's a striking feature of Marshall's case. When he started using ChatGPT to generate his advertorials, the quality went down. But nobody cared. Nobody, that is, except Marshall.

The fact of the matter is that most of us don't view advertorials as the products of valuable agential processes. Nor do we care about whether they're particularly *good*. At most, we'll value them insofar as they tip us off to products we might use. Advertorials don't need to be written in Marshall's witty prose to achieve this modest goal—ChatGPT can do just fine.

ChatGPT, for Marshall, thus served as a sort of terrible black mirror. It revealed to him that the content that he was putting out into the world was not being valued by others as the product of a valuable process. He, the creator, didn't need to exist at all for the content to be good enough to perform the function it needed to perform.

AI, I want to suggest, can clue us into *valuing discord*. It reveals where exactly our valuing practices have already come radically apart from other peoples' valuing practices. When I discover that my student has no qualms about getting ChatGPT to write his paper, I learn something about how he sees his work, my course, and perhaps even *me*. And when my friend uses AI to compose what appears to be a heartfelt email to me, I discover something about how she sees our correspondence—as a means to keeping up a relationship, perhaps, but not one deserving of her labor. Such a discovery would make me feel absurd, in much the same way that an artist might feel absurd upon discovering that her life's work is hanging in a rich person's guest bathroom, or a pastry chef might absurd feel upon realizing that his decadent *éclair* was bought by someone who just wanted to take pictures of it for Instagram clout. Why put that much work into such endeavors, when the audience doesn't really care how the resulting product looks or tastes?

Indeed, we are already encountering instances of valuing discord. Take the recent study by Brian Porter and Edouard Machery (2024), which found that AI-generated poetry is rated more favorably in terms of rhythm and beauty than its human-composed counterpart. Porter and Machery propose the following explanation for this discrepancy:

> …because AI-generated poems do not have such complexity [compared to human-composed poetry], they are better at unambiguously communicating an image, a mood, an emotion, or a theme to non-expert readers of poetry, who may not have the time or interest for in-depth analysis demanded by the poetry of human poets. As a result, the more easily understood AI-generated poems are on average preferred by these readers, when in fact it is one of the hallmarks of human poetry that it does *not* lend itself to such an easy and unambiguous interpretation. (2024, 9)

I can imagine a poet feeling some sense of absurdity upon reading Porter and Machery's study. What was the point of spending all those years trying to find the *perfect* phrase to

capture the infinite complexity of human experience, when all along what people really wanted was simple imagery and a clear takeaway message?

This absurdity, locatable in the discord between the depth of our valuing and the shallowness of others'[19], gets us our *loathing*. This loathing might be directed inwards: how could I have been so stupid, we might find ourselves wondering, to have thought that other people cared about this as I do?[20] How could I have invested so much time and energy into making this *good*, when all anyone wanted was *good enough*? And so too might our loathing be directed outwards, towards the people around us who have revealed themselves to be unwilling to even *try* to share in our values, to find meaning in the processes that enrich our lives.

To be sure, there's always been disagreement about valuing. One person's treasured mug is another person's utterly expendable pen jar. One person's meaningful process is another person's monotonous drudgery. Why should it matter to Marshall that his employers and audience don't value his writing as a creative endeavor?

First, we have straightforward prudential reasons for wanting other people to share our beliefs about what processes are valuable, and about what activities are worth pursuing aspirationally. If we value something aspirationally, we recognize that it's worth getting right and doing well. In Marshall's case, this would mean getting to spend the time it takes to produce genuinely informative, well-written content. And if we value something as part of a process, we're likely to see it (and its creator) as difficult to replace. If Marshall's employers view his work as part of a valuable process, they'll be more likely to view *him* as essential to that process. So we shouldn't overlook the fact we have strong prudential reasons to want others to share our valuing practices, especially when those practices concern aspirational and process valuing.

But I think we have a deeper reason for wanting to share our valuing landscape with others. Most of us are not radical misanthropes. We interact with others, and we want them to value us as we value ourselves. And how we value ourselves is often tied up with the processes and activities that we find meaningful. Marshall sees himself as a writer, and he values himself under that guise. Insofar as he cares about what other people think of him, he wants them to see him as a writer too. To find out that his boss sees him merely as a prompt engineer is a punch in the face. To realize that nobody ever cared about the quality of his work is a punch in the gut. It's hard not to take such blows without becoming alienated from those around us.

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[19] For Feinberg, one of the ways in which someone can be absurd is when "there is a radical discrepancy between herself assessment of her situation and the actual nature of that situation" (2008, 167).

[20] And so too might such revelations provoke feelings of shame. As Krista Thomason describes it, shame responds to a tension between how we conceive of ourselves and how other people conceive of us (2018, 87). If I see myself as a beloved aunt, I'll feel ashamed to discover that my niece's latest handmade present was actually generated by DALL-E.

Conclusion

I've suggested that AI poses two different existential threats to our valuing practices. The first threat is *forward-looking*—AI has the power to move us from aspirational valuing to satisficing valuing, and to transform the sorts of objects to which we have valued as parts of processes into objects that we can value merely functionally. The second threat is *backward-looking*—AI can reveal to us that other people are already failing to appreciate the products of our labor as the products of valuable processes. This, in turn, can threaten our self-conception—who are we if we're not writers and artists? What exactly are we doing if we're not producing valuable work?

To be sure, this threat is not wholly unprecedented. Craft potters often detest commercial slip casting, 19th century painters lamented the invention of the daguerreotype, and 'Luddites' famously reacted to the arrival of cotton spinning technology with acts of violent 'machine-breaking'. And yet, even if the threat is not new, AI is still a special instance of it. A ceramics factory can produce ceramics—but it can't write a paper, compose a love letter, or write an advertorial. AI can do all of this and more. And so, it's hard not to feel that our values are under siege from all directions, and that the existential threat has us surrounded.[21]

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