

Aspen-Japan/Socrates Symposium Seminar
“Humanity, Technology, and the Future of Work”
May 31-June 2, 2024
Nara, Japan
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Seminar Description

Over three sessions, we consider the changing face of today’s workplace. Industrial dislocation, technological progress, and social norms all factor into the success of some sectors and the disintegration of others, accompanied by a widening gap in income and opportunity between those with the requisite skills and those without. As we confront these changes and their cultural, economic, and political implications, how should we think about our humanity and the society that expresses and shapes it? What practical steps can we take to make the most of our current situation, for everyone’s benefit?

Sessions

1. May 31 afternoon: Technology & the Definition of Purpose

- Aristotle, *Politics* (excerpt)
- Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, “Of Property” (excerpt)
- Rivera, “Detroit Industry Murals”
- Acemoglu, Autor, and Johnson, “Can We Have a Pro-Worker AI?” at: <https://shapingwork.mit.edu/research/can-we-have-pro-worker-ai/>.
- Hao, “Folding Beijing” (novella)

As we begin the seminar, we look at the place of work in society across time. Aristotle explains the role of household, hierarchy, and tools in building the state. John Locke links work to a divine mandate for productivity; Diego Rivera captures the spirit of the workforce in early 20th-century industrial America; Acemoglu, Autor, and Johnson identify the risks in technology-driven unemployment; and Hao imagines how work will be configured to deal with future social and demographic realities.

2. June 1 morning: Values & The Human Machine

- Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem” (excerpt)
- Pinker, “The Moral Instinct” (*New York Times* article)
- “Autonomous Weapons: An Open Letter from AI & Robotics Researchers,” at <http://futureoflife.org/open-letter-autonomous-weapons/>

- Rothblatt, *Virtually Human: The Promise—and the Peril—of Digital Immortality*, “Forward” by Ray Kurzweil, “Introduction” (excerpt)
- Juan José Arreola, “The Switchman”

What values do we bring to the nexus of purpose and work in the 21st century? Judith Jarvis Thomson and Steven Pinker ground our exploration in the ethics of basic human impulses. Martine Rothblatt, Ray Kurzweil, and the Future of Life Institute show how advances in robotics, automation, and bioengineering make a full understanding of the interaction between humans and their machines imperative. At the same time, Juan José Arreola’s magic realism presages, in a now-aging technology, the wonders and the traps that our digital networks, social media, and generative AI have made the fabric of our 21st-century lives.

3. June 2 morning: Re-telling the Story of Capital

- “The Lost 1984 Video: young Steve Jobs Introduces the Macintosh,” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2B-XwPjn9YY>, and “Apple 1984 Super Bowl Commercial Introducing Macintosh Computer,” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zfqw8nhUwA>.
- Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (excerpt)
- Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene* (excerpt)
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story” (TEDTalk)

Has our love for our technologies effectively killed our ability to empathize and work with one another? The Apple commercials that launched the Macintosh signaled that the personal computer would set us free, but Shoshana Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism has effectively flipped that thesis to the absolute freedom of the corporation. Kohei Saito re-interprets late Marx to connect human society to the environment and the ecological possibility of degrowth. In the same spirit of re-grounding, finally, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that, through story and storytelling, “we regain a kind of paradise.”

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