

Jay Richards: Creative Freedom, Not Robots, Is The Future Of Work

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Austin Egbert:

Greetings. I'm Austin Egbert, Director for Mind Matters News. This week, we listen to Dr. Jay Richards speaking at the launch of the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence in Dallas, Texas. Enjoy.

Jay Richards:

Yeah, let me give you a quote that is a representative sample of what virtually all the officially smart people are telling us. Whether you go to Oxford University, did a recent study, or the Kinsey Group, whoever you want to go to, they're telling us basically, one of two things. I'll give you the dystopian side and the utopian side. So here's the dystopian side, the depressing side of the debate - is that sometime in the next five to 20 years, about 50% of all jobs are going to go the way of the Dodo bird, wiping out massive industries, wiping out many of the people, especially the jobs that are replaced or disappeared. Those people will never be able to get jobs again. They will suffer from so-called permanent technological unemployment. Therefore, the government needs to give everybody a universal basic income to pay everyone not to work, because there aren't going to be any jobs. So that's the dystopian side.

Jay Richards:

The utopian side says this: Sometime in the next five to 20 years, about 50% of all jobs are going to be destroyed and replaced by robots and artificial intelligence. And it's going to be awesome because we're not going to have to do anything. We're not going to have to work. The robots are going to do it for us. I've summarized about 25 books that have been written in the last three years, and if you notice something, they presuppose something. They share a fundamental assumption, and it's that machines ultimately are capable of replacing us. There's a great quote from a book I spent a lot of time on in the Human Advantage called the Rise of the Robots by a guy named Martin Ford. And here's how he describes the dilemma. He said, "The shift now underway will ultimately challenge one of the most basic assumptions about technology, that machines are tools that increase the productivity of workers. Instead, machines themselves are turning into workers."

Jay Richards:

So you might be thinking, when economists hear this, they say, "This is silly to say that technology is going to permanently replace people's work." No, what technology does is if we develop technology that increases our capacity and labor, it makes some old way of doing something obsolete. And so if you think about in 1776, 95% of the population lived and worked on farms. And most of those people, I think I had ancestors on both sides that were like this, didn't have a plan B. If you were an American farmer in 1776 and you lost your farm, it's not like, "Well, I'll go back to school and I'll be an actuarial analyst," or something like that. You didn't have a plan B. Today, it's approaching 1% of the population lives and works on farms as their primary employment. So does that mean 94% of the population is unemployed? Of course not, because this is what happens economically.

Jay Richards:

So what happens is that farming has become so productive that we need very, very few actual people to work on it because their labor is so productive from the technology that we've developed. That's brought the price of food way, way down. If you look at how much we spend as a percentage of our income on food, it's at historical lows and continues to get lower. And so that means we have resources, we have money to spend on other things, and people end up transferring into other work. Now, the bad news is that lots of jobs do disappear, and so I actually agree that any job that can be automated is going to get automated. That's a really good rule of thumb. This isn't just manual labor. If you're working in a factory and you're doing something really simple and repetitive, that's going to disappear really quickly. If you're doing something in an office that's really, really repetitive, that's just simple number crunching, that could very well be replaced.

Jay Richards:

Now, that doesn't mean the job as a whole will be replaced. It will mean that maybe what 20 people were doing, one person will be able to do because they'll be able to outsource stuff. So does that mean that machines are literally going to turn into workers, as Martin Ford says? Notice that this argument, it's not so much an argument as a claim based upon a fundamental assumption. A basic truth of logic is for one thing to replace another thing it has to have all the same properties in common. If we are just machines, if we are as Marvin Minsky said, if our brains are machines made of wheat, made of meat... Not made of wheat, I'm thinking about gluten here, that's even worse, machines made of wheat, machines made of meat. Yeah, exactly, the vegan Marvin Minsky said this "Machine's made of meat." If that's true, we're just machines, we're produced by this blind Darwinian process, and we become conscious and create things.

Jay Richards:

And there's no reason to assume that machines we design to do thinking won't do that better than we can and then ultimately replace us without remainder so that everything about us can ultimately be replaced mentally and then eventually physically through robotics. Now, if you're worried about the robotic side, it's true if you're doing a repetitive thing with your hand, robots do that really well. If you're doing complicated things with your body that any three-year-old can do, we don't have robots that can do that. So a carpenter or a painter or a welder, there are between five and seven million skilled trade jobs that are not filled right now because people aren't being trained to do that. So we're not going to have a robot housekeeper anytime soon. That's not going to happen. What's going to happen is all the things that can be reduced to algorithms are going to be.

Jay Richards:

So the only question is, does that leave us with nothing to do? I think absolutely not. What it leads us to do and what it ought to lead us to do is say, "Okay, what is it that distinguishes us from machines?" As economists say, what you want to do if you're thinking, "Okay, I'm in a competitive environment. I want to figure out what my comparative advantage is, what the thing that I can do relative to my opportunity costs or my competitive advantage, the thing I can do better than the competition, and focus on that." We don't want to focus on the things that machines can do. That should be obvious. But I mean, this is actually a complaint of all the way from Adam Smith to Karl Marx about some kind of factory work is that if you're doing a very repetitive assembly line type of work, you're actually doing the work of a machine in a sense because it's simple.

Jay Richards:

And so I think that the reality is we need to look at that type of work, especially really simple assembly line work, as an artifact of the 20th century that probably will disappear. That's going to lead to massive disruption. And so I think that actually that's the issue. I think that's the thing to worry about. Not that we have permanent technological unemployment, not that the government should pay everyone. That's a terrible idea. But that the pace of change is so quick that unlike the change from the agricultural to the industrial economy took place over 150 years, we have entirely new industries come into existence and then become obsolete in five or 10 years. So that means we have to constantly be teaching ourselves and training ourselves with things.

Jay Richards:

But, ultimately, I honestly think that this debate about artificial intelligence and robotization is a philosophical debate about, what is the nature of man and what is the nature of a machine? What is it about the human person that distinguishes us from any machine or any algorithm, any program? It's a bunch of things. And this is what I talk about in the book. I first talk about, okay, what distinguishes the information economy? And then what should we focus on? My basic argument, which I won't make persuasively, is that the thing that really distinguishes us is a capacity for developing virtue. Because if you can develop virtue that means, first of all, you have first person subjective experience. You have agency. You have the capacity to choose between alternatives for a purpose. Now, what's virtue? Well, virtue is where you act by an act of the will, you freely say, "Okay, I'm just going to start showing up on time. I'm going to be punctual." And so you just do it. And first, it's difficult. You have to get up early. You have to set the alarm 50 minutes earlier than you would probably have to, to be on time.

Jay Richards:

You do that with your body and it eventually becomes a habit and then you keep focusing on the habit and it eventually works its way back into you so that you become more than you were before so that punctuality becomes a part of who you are. That capacity is a capacity that only exists for free persons, for free intelligent agents. And so we want to do is we want to cultivate the virtues that allow us to prosper and to succeed in an information economy that's highly disruptive, that grows exponentially, that's highly digital, that's ever more connected, and is ever more informational. And the chief virtue that I argue is the one that sets us apart is one that I call creative freedom. And creative freedom is not just the ability to act freely - I can choose if I want vanilla or chocolate ice cream - it's the ability to train and constrain ourselves so that we can do something meaningfully that we could not have otherwise done.

Jay Richards:

So one kind of freedom would be the little girl that doesn't know how to read music sitting down at the piano and freely playing notes. She can freely do that. But is she free to play Rachmaninoff? Is she free to play that really hard movement of Moonlight Sonata that no one plays because it's so darn hard to play? No. She doesn't have that kind of freedom. How would she do it? How would she acquire that kind of freedom? She'd sit her butt down at the bench for 10 years every day, practice her scales, practice her chords, practice the hard sequences. And then maybe after 10 years of constraining herself, she becomes free to do something to create something meaningfully that she could not have created before. That's a capacity that is uniquely human. And in so far as creative freedom is the origin of new kinds of meaningful information I think we actually ought to be more hopeful than worried that in an information economy there will be a place in which the human person is at the very center. Thank you very much.

Announcer:

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