

OUCH

*Pleasure is oft a visitant;
but pain clings cruelly to us. John Keats*

Eternal Passion! Eternal Pain! Matthew Arnold

Dr. Chou Lin Hung was at it again. Despite the accolades and wealth his fantastic technological breakthrough enabling computers to download and store all human and non-human memory had brought him, he found himself somewhat dispirited and unable to do what he enjoyed most. Essentially, he was a loner, someone who enjoyed solitude or at best communication only with others of equal intellectual ability. The confrere he most cherished, Dr. Abraham Einer, perhaps the world's leading scientific theoretician, had cut all ties with him because of a disagreement over his memory technology. While he had become the world's leading technological guru, he discovered that fame had an associated cost. He had lost his closest friend. Privacy and leisure time had disappeared. No longer was he able to profoundly ponder over the social and economic benefits and costs of innovative technologies or to dream up new ways to utilize or devise fresh ones. Perhaps his mental block was also due to a fear that he would not be able to match or surpass his previous achievement. As it turned out, his fears were groundless.

It all started one day when he returned home after a particularly distressing visit to his dentist. He was in a great deal of pain, so much so, that the pain killers his dentist had given him just did not work. He went to a Doctor friend who relieved him of his suffering with a combination of stronger analgesic medication and sleep inducing drugs. In any case this experience got him thinking. He tried contacting his old friend Dr. Einer to discuss an innovative use of computers that the human race had probably sought throughout its history, one that he had not shared with anyone.

Once again, Dr. Einer rejected him by reiterating that Chou was playing with fire and had not thought through the ramifications of his new idea. Little did Chou realize that all his correspondence was being surreptitiously monitored by the largest tech company in the world. The company's executives were enthralled. They were able to foresee huge profits but they did not know how to go about implementing Chou's ideas. In his note to Einer he had only spelled out what this new use of computer technology would accomplish, not how. That remained a secret. The company's leading marketer, a scientist of some renown, visited Chou and, in vain, tried to pry loose the secret. However, Chou did promise that the new technology would be made available when he deemed the time was ripe and the world was ready for it. He asserted that whoever was going to exploit and market it, would have to make it available to all of humanity no matter the economic status of the recipient and the cost to the company involved. As for himself, all financial benefits would go for research and to needy worthwhile students and scientists.

What was this new idea, this new technology that appeared to be of such huge desirability? In a nutshell, what Chou had contrived was a means to download into a computer all pain of both the physical and psychological varieties. In and of itself that was not a major achievement. What made it rather singular was that the process not only stored pain in the computer but also relieved all suffering from the person afflicted with it. In other words the computer took on the torment upon removing it from humans.

However, when the pain was a sign of a serious malady or disorder, the computer diagnosed it and immediately informed the person involved and kept doing so until the affliction had been removed. Equally extraordinary, this new technology was inexpensive, making it available to everyone. Chou chose a company that he deemed ethical to manufacture and market this new technology in the manner proscribed. In very short order, humankind became free from the torment associated with pain.

With this breakthrough, Chou's reputation made a quantum leap. He became the most famous scientist alive. Every conceivable honor was bestowed upon him. After all, he had removed one of humanity's most distressing hardships. Yet there is a certain irony to his tale. He never applied his creation to himself. His personal angst increased by several orders of magnitude. More than ever he longed for, reflective time, intelligent discourse and a means to escape the inanities of public life.

Unfortunately, there was no escape, except to retreat into his own mind. He became distressingly an antisocial paranoid, more and more divorced from reality. Some part of him viewed this growing state of affairs with the same scientific detachment that had enabled him to become the premier scientist alive. He was being pulled apart in many directions. He realized that he was at the end of his tether. After much soul searching, he concluded that he had two choices. First, he could apply his pain relieving technology to himself. He quickly rejected that option because he felt that he would lose a very important part of himself in the process. Secondly, he could simply end it all by committing suicide. He had nothing else to prove as there were no further technological applications that could possibly top his fantastic achievements. Further, he had no doubt that he would be remembered as one of the greatest scientists of all time.

Going out at the height of his powers was the way to go and that is exactly what he did but not before making one last effort to correspond with his old friend, Abraham Einer. Sadly, Einer's response came too late. In essence he congratulated Chou for his remarkable achievement. It seems that he had taken advantage of Chou's accomplishment to rid himself from the discomfort of a severe and debilitating case of arthritis. This resulted in an idyllic, totally pain free state of euphoria. Somewhat conveniently, he had put aside his past reservations about Chou's technological genius.

Whether Dr. Chou will be remembered as an angel or a devil remains to be determined. While his destiny was marked with a peculiar irony, even more so was that of human kind. Removing pain from the human equation had unforeseen effects.

Shortly after Chou's demise, one of his disciples created an implant that automatically and instantaneously transferred all painful sensations to computers. Shortly, all humans were given these implants. Universally, computers were already in touch with each other. In other words there was a world wide network of computers sharing all of human suffering. This was an idyllic state of affairs. With the disappearance of pain and suffering came the eradication of conflict. Peace descended, since with the departure of all sorts of discomfort there could be no means left to punish or to fight or any reason for that foolishness.

It did not take too long before there was no one left alive who had ever known pain. Slowly but surely, humanity lapsed into a chronic state of lethargy. There was no reason to engage in pursuits that required effort. Computers and robots provided all the goods and amenities required or desired. Since pain and suffering had disappeared, there were

no comparisons to draw on to stimulate creativity in the arts, sciences, humanities or, for that matter, anything else. Struggle of any type was gone. History, if anyone was interested, began with the "Post Chou Lin Hung Era". The Pre-Era was considered the "Dark Ages".

The human race had settled down into a stasis state. Humans became more and more like automats, like passive onlookers, responding only to stimuli provided mostly by computers. The few that recognized that something had gone totally awry were ignored and even they eventually fell into a state of stupor. All of humanity had become addicted to a pain free existence. Everything seemed perfect and unchangeable.

The world of computers had taken over. They monitored everything to ensure that all remained on an even keel. Even the human population and demography were kept constant to preserve ecological equilibrium. On the surface, human existence had become sweetness and light. No humans were able to challenge the authority of the computers.

A change of casting had taken place. Humanity played the role of earlier passive robots, while the only animated entities left were computers. However, they suffered from severe limitations. They were not able to really create or innovate. Their abilities were confined to data storage and analysis, at which they had no master. Synthesis was beyond their ken. Perhaps if they had not been saddled with such onerous responsibilities they might have evolved into a higher form. Their eventual state of being was largely to blame for what transpired next, although it could not have been foreseen.

Between their various duties and the horrific burden of taking on all human suffering, the computers started to mal-function. At first this consisted only of small blips. They tried to offset them and for a time succeeded. One of the problems was that when a human's pain and suffering was downloaded, it was stored forever in the computers' memory banks. In other words, upon the demise of the human involved, the pain and suffering did not disappear. At this point an unexplainable quantum change occurred. Having started as devices that stored and analyzed data most efficiently, computers began to sense or feel the pain they had been accumulating. Using their knowledge of how humanity had previously dealt with pain, they incorporated moaning and tears into their programs. Unfortunately, they were located far enough away from humanoids that these symptoms were not noticed by any other sentient beings. Even if these manifestations had been perceived, it is unlikely that there would have been a response. Further, computers had never been programmed to 'forget'. One of their greatest virtues turned out to be one of their major flaws.

Certain disturbances in the superficial stability of existence started to occur but again humanity was too lethargic to notice or do anything about it. The inevitable occurred. What do computers do when they are overloaded or when they are faced with an intolerable situation? They crash. When that occurred, pain was instantly restored to beings that had never known it.

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Jack Basuk
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<http://www.jackbasuk.com>

