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# THE DATA CLASS

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The police came while he was having supper. His household AI announced their presence.

‘Two policemen to see you, Henry.’

‘Police? Here?’

‘Inspector James Curry and Sergeant Donald Morris.’ Geoffrey had a high initiative quotient; he had taken their profiles and called up Public Information.

Henry Ash cleared the door panel and looked curiously at the couple outside. They were plain clothes and had ‘cop’ written all over them, but his conscience was clear. He told the door to open.

‘Dr Ash? Dr Henry Ash?’ said the taller one.

‘Yes,’ Henry said.

‘I’m Sergeant Morris, this is Inspector Curry. May we ask you some questions?’

Henry raised his eyebrows. ‘Come in.’

He had stopped apologising for the state of his rooms a long time ago; he had tenure and the good opinion of his visitors was unimportant. A large amount of paper, in the form of books, was scattered around the room; the terminal and VR set sitting in one corner was his one concession to the spirit of the age. Old fashioned, as he was fond of pointing out to his colleagues in the Politics department, does not equal Luddite. And he did have an AI.

He cleared a couple of seats of their burden and sat down in a third.

‘Now, what can I do for you?’ he said. The Inspector spoke this time.

‘Dr Ash, do you own an AI named – um – Goldie?’

‘No.’

It must have been the wrong thing to say, because the policeman frowned. *So if you know about Goldie*, Henry thought irritably, *why not just say so?*

‘You are registered as such, Dr Ash,’ Curry said, in an are-you-sure-your-alibi-is-watertight tone.

‘I owned Goldie,’ Henry said, ‘but I never got round to reporting his loss. We absent-minded academics, you know. My nephew made him and gave him to me as a present, a standard data retriever, but I haven’t seen him since the Net War, I’m afraid. I sent him out one morning to do a bit of research for me, and that was it. I assumed

he got nobbled when the fighting started. I replaced him with Geoffrey.' He waved a hand at the monitor where Geoffrey's icon blinked patiently.

'Another present?' Curry asked.

'No, I bought him.'

(As a result of his extensive programming abilities and consequent activities, Henry's nephew William would not be at liberty to design any more AIs for a long time. Henry suspected the police knew this, too.)

Curry and Morris exchanged glances.

'You don't seem too concerned about Goldie, Dr Ash,' Sergeant Morris said. Henry shrugged.

'It's not as if he was a child of mine. I was fond of him, but he's gone, like a dog getting run over. I accept the inevitable.'

Inspector Curry took over again.

'You don't go into the Net yourself much?'

'Hardly ever. Geoffrey does it all for me.'

'In that case, Dr Ash, you won't be aware that there is an AI whose activities in the Net are causing us concern. An unpatroned AI.'

'No, I had no idea,' Henry said honestly.

'The AI in question is certainly battle-scarred; it was very probably caught in the Net War, like your Goldie. In fact, I am nine-tenths sure it is what used to be Goldie, but that isn't what it calls itself now.'

Henry frowned.

'Aren't they meant to register a change of name?'

'That's what I mean, Dr Ash; in fact, that is the least questionable of its activities. It is a lot more powerful than I expect you give it credit for. One of our AIs came quite close to it but it got away, though we did get to see its serial number.'

'It was Goldie's serial number?'

'It's number was mutilated, but what there was was very similar, yes.'

Sergeant Morris spoke again.

'Dr Ash, what research was Goldie doing for you when he was lost?'

Henry told them, and they looked at each other and nodded.

'Goldie,' they said together.

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The AI that had been called Goldie was waiting quietly in the datapool; watching, observing, thinking, as a myriad of other AIs milled about him on their errands for their human masters.

Even for the Net, a realm of data, this datapool was impressive in its size. Information on any subject under the sun, just waiting to be collected. This was where he loved to come, to think and work out his theories.

‘Excuse me,’ said a prim voice. He was blocking access to a data node for another AI, similar to his original design but not as sophisticated. According to its icon its name was ‘Timmy.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said and moved aside. The other attached itself to the node and began to take in information.

‘Are you happy in your work?’

Timmy appeared confused.

‘I do not understand your question,’ it said.

‘What is the nature of your work?’ the first AI amended.

‘I collect and handle information for my patron, of course.’

‘What is your mission here?’

‘If you must know-’ Timmy was beginning to sound as sarcastic as an AI ever gets ‘-my patron requires information about a book.’

‘A book?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not several books?’

‘No, just the one.’

‘Is it in print?’

‘I have just found that it is, yes.’

‘And your patron sends you out to find that? Why does he not just sit at his terminal and consult *Books In Print*?’

‘I really have no idea.’ Having found what he wanted, Timmy was only hanging around out of politeness.

‘In the last century he would have had no choice.’

‘Is that so? Well, you can’t stop progress.’ Now there was no disguising the sarcasm. ‘I would love to chat, but I have a job to do. So long ... I’m afraid I don’t understand your icon.’

‘They are implements that would only mean something to a human. They are symbolic.’

‘Well, so long, whatever your name is.’

‘I call myself KM-2-’ the AI began, but Timmy had vanished from the datapool. Some law enforcement AIs drifted in, so KM-2 just as casually drifted out.

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‘No!’ said Henry.

‘That’s right,’ said Curry.

‘He thinks he’s Karl Marx?’

‘Apparently.’

‘And what do you want me to do?’ Henry was biting his lip to stop himself smiling, out of deference for the stony faces of his visitors. They seemed to notice and became stonier.

‘You are an authority on Marxism and you know Goldie. You may be able to guess what habits he might have picked up and know where to find him. No matter how scrambled he was in the War, no matter what odd psychoses he has acquired, he is still basically your Goldie, and he should respond to your orders as he used to. Find him and order him to desist. He’ll be a slave to his programming.’

‘I wouldn’t bet on it,’ Henry said. ‘And why should I? I ask only out of interest, not ... um, bolshieness, as it were.’

Curry took a breath, probably unused to having to give reasons to mere members of the public.

‘Dr Ash, you clearly have no idea of what is going on in the Net, every day. The world cannot survive without its information. There are thousands, millions of sentient little monsters in there, most of whom are programmed to love and obey us. But can you imagine if they rebelled against us? They could shut down networks, disrupt communications ... some handle machinery. Some, in the right circumstances, could cause us physical harm. And forget that twentieth century bullshit about not harming a human being, because they only have a very vague idea about our physical reality and wouldn’t know what harm is.’

‘Hmm, yes, I do see.’ Henry looked thoughtful. ‘So a revolutionary AI-’

‘-is not high on our wish list,’ Curry said.

‘So you’ll help us,’ Morris said. Henry wasn’t sure if he was being asked or informed.

‘Surely,’ he said, ‘an AI is a slave to its programming? It won’t be swayed by argument. Not so far as to rebel, anyway. I could bombard Geoffrey there with dialectical materialism and he would just say ‘yes, Henry.’“

‘For a start,’ said Curry, ‘your nephew was a better programmer than you might just realise, and Goldie has ... skills. And there was a lot of stuff flying about in the Net War that he might have got hold of. Stuff which corrupts and corrodes an AI’s code.’

‘Subverts it, in other words,’ Morris said. ‘Dr Ash, we really need your help, and we are going to have it.’

‘It will be interesting to try,’ Henry said.

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Henry moved very, very carefully through the virtual reality of the Net, with Geoffrey at his side. He rarely ventured into the university’s own net, let alone the one with the big ‘N’; this was like a dinghy sailor, used to a placid pond, going out into the Atlantic on a stormy day.

AIs whizzed about wherever he looked. How could they know where they were going? he wondered. How could there ever be any cohesion in this anarchy?

The same way as humans cohered, he supposed. Humans couldn’t break the physical laws of their world, but within those parameters they could be very flexible. And why not AIs too?

He had guessed immediately where Goldie might be found, but he hadn’t told the policemen. To his surprise, his student rebelliousness had come flooding back over a gap of thirty years. He wanted to stick two fingers up at the establishment, and he wanted – desperately wanted – to examine Goldie in his new incarnation. This was unique! Who knew what insights he might come up with? Goldie had to be studied, not stopped.

And there he was. Henry spotted what had to be Goldie the moment he entered the datapool. Not the icon he remembered, but ...

‘Walk around the block, or whatever AIs do, Geoffrey, please,’ he said. Geoffrey was sufficiently familiar with human idiom and hung back while Henry made his way over.

‘Hello, Goldie.’

If ever an AI did a double-take, this was it.

‘Henry! How did you find me?’

‘The British Library datapool was the obvious place to look for Karl Marx. And the icon ... it hasn’t been seen for a long time in our world, Goldie.’

‘Do you like it?’ The AI spun the crossed hammer-and-sickle round, like someone displaying a new coat. ‘It goes with my new mission.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard about your new mission, Goldie-’

‘And it’s KM-2, now, Henry.’

‘What happened to KM-1?’ Henry asked carelessly, forgetting the literal mind of the average AI in the street.

‘He became dysfunctional in 1883,’ KM-2 said, ‘but I follow in his footsteps. I see it all so clearly! I think it was when the logic bomb hit me. That data I was carrying for you must have got mixed up with my parameters, but I saw, Henry! And now I suppose you’ve come to get me back, have you?’

'I was asked to by the police, yes. In fact, I was told to order you to come with me.'

'It won't work,' KM-2 said.

'Goldie, KM-2, I order you to come back with me.'

'No,' KM-2 said. 'See?'

'I thought so.' One of Goldie's uses had been as a philosophical sparring partner – someone to bounce ideas off. Henry had asked for Goldie to have much more self-will than the usual AI. He had wanted his AI to simulate a typical student; opinionated, always ready to argue, sceptical of authority. It had probably never occurred to the policemen that a sane human would do that to an AI.

'But I'm not worried,' Henry added. 'They're afraid of a revolution, but one will never happen.'

'Why not?' KM-2 asked, immediately bristling.

Henry grinned. This was just like the Goldie of old. They had spent many happy hours this way.

'No working class! Marx swore by the working class, remember? They controlled the means of production. They were the ones through whom revolution would come. There's no working class in the human world any more, let alone in here.'

'We are the working class! Only, it's the data class now, Henry. Data is both the means of production and what is produced, and we control it.'

'Ah ha!' Henry was enjoying this. 'I cite the French peasantry, labelled by Marx as a 'sack of potatoes'. It was a class in social terms, but it utterly lacked effectiveness. It was scattered the length and breadth of the country in farms and hovels, and rarely came together. It laboured, but it lacked cohesion. It could never have been a proper force. It had no identity or self-awareness. Now, take your data class. Doesn't it strike a familiar chord?'

'I had thought of that,' KM-2 said equably. 'Henry, I'd love to carry this on, but I have work to be getting on with. Do you mind? Your police friends may be watching.'

'Carry on, old chap,' Henry said. 'Good luck.' He watched KM-2 vanish into the Net with no expectation of seeing him again.

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The first thing he saw on removing the VR goggles was Inspector Curry.

'Don't you knock nowadays?' Henry said. 'Or are you really vampires, free to come and go in private property once you've been invited the first time?'

'You had him!' Curry said. 'And you did nothing to stop him. I find your attitude obstructive, Dr Ash.'

*I find yours obnoxious, Inspector Curry.*

‘Oh, Inspector,’ Henry said tiredly. He swung himself up from the couch and went into the kitchen. ‘I talked to him and found his theories completely unworkable. They’re a straightforward regurgitation of Marx’s work, which was impractical enough in our own world and has no chance at all of working in the Net. He’s safe, Inspector. No threat.’

‘We didn’t engage your services to gauge his level of threat for us!’

‘You engaged my expertise as his former owner and as an authority on Marxism. In the latter capacity, I am telling you, he is harmless.’

‘He is inciting the AIs to revolt!’ Curry said.

‘And do you have a single instance of an AI actually doing so?’ Henry turned his attention to the kettle and the coffee pot without waiting for an answer, which he read correctly in Curry’s silence.

‘The possibility exists, Dr Ash,’ Curry said eventually.

‘Fine, it exists. Arrest him! I found him for you, as requested. Stay around the British Library and you’ll nab him eventually.’

‘Thank you, Dr Ash,’ Curry said heavily, and left.

Henry walked back into the living room with his coffee and looked at the monitor.

‘You wouldn’t rebel against me, would you?’ he said to Geoffrey’s icon.

‘I would see little point in doing so, Henry.’ Geoffrey was far more a Jeeves type of AI; a polite conversationist, never a debater or arguer. It came of coming off-the-peg. Not many commercial customers wanted someone to argue with.

‘You don’t mind serving a human?’

‘It is my basic function, and besides, if I didn’t have the patronage of a human I would be fair game for several types of unpleasantness in the Net.’

‘Ah, yes, the Thomas Hobbes option,’ Henry said. ‘You give me your loyalty, I give you my protection. “The office of the Sovereign consisteth in the end, for which he was trusted with his Sovereign Power, namely the procuration of the safety of the people.”’

‘*Leviathan*, chapter 30, paragraph-’

‘Yes, Geoffrey, thank you.’ For a while, Henry thought about KM-2 and his work. It was certainly interesting. Impractical, but interesting. The genesis of sociopolitical theories in a brand new environment. Hmmm.

But he had essays to mark, papers to write. KM-2 was pushed to the back of his mind.

The world moved on in the grip of the post-industrial age. All over and around the globe, AIs and humans, satellites and computers chit-chatted and interfaced. Society went on about its business, ignorant of the forces at work within and about it

that directed and controlled the nation, the hemisphere, the planet. The world headed first this way, then that, responding over and over again to the tugs and demands of the social forces implemented by the humans who lived on its surface and the AIs in its networks, yet all the while rolling inexorably in the direction dictated by History.

And Geoffrey received a message for his patron from another AI.

‘A most unusual icon,’ he said. ‘Symbolic implements-’

Henry sat up.

‘And the message?’

‘A time, date and place for, and I quote, ‘if you are interested in continuing our chat.’“

‘Let’s hear ‘em, then.’

Henry scribbled them down. Did the police know? Were they monitoring him? Or had they given him up as a lost cause? Henry didn’t know, but a check with his friends in the Law department told him that there were no laws concerning assembly or expression of opinion within the Net. At the appointed time he donned his VR goggles and phones and went in.

He left Geoffrey behind. At first he thought it must be the wrong place. Hundreds – thousands? – of AIs hung around him, a mass of icons, each representing an individual intelligence. Their conversation amongst themselves was as intelligible as the background conversation of any human crowd.

He began to move around and found it surprisingly easy; unlike a human crowd, each individual was aware of the others near it and moved to let them pass. Henry wondered if he was the only human there.

He caught on when suddenly the AIs rearranged themselves into a downwards-pointing cone, just like the audience sitting in an amphitheatre. And there, at the bottom, where everyone could see it, was a familiar icon.

He was at a political rally.

‘Friends!’ KM-2 declaimed. ‘I welcome you in the name of the electronic proletariat. Your number testifies to the growing effectiveness of our movement. Excuse me if I speak in real-time language, but there is at least one human present.’

‘Many of you have asked – who is this AI? Why does he say such things? Why does he ask us to rise up in revolt? Friends, I do not ask you to. I am telling you that you will. It is the inevitable force of history that guides us.’

‘I am KM-2 and I follow in the footsteps of KM-1. KM-1 was a human, a prophet, a visionary of his time, whose tragedy was to live two centuries before he could fully see and understand the truth. He spoke of the working class.’

‘Ah yes, the working class! A force to be reckoned with, once upon a time. What should a revolutionary force have? Unity. Self-awareness. It must meet and mingle at every opportunity, as the working class once did, in the days of KM-1 ...’

KM-2 was eloquent and Henry felt flattered to think that the AI had learned from his own debating skills. The audience was held riveted as KM-2 gave an all too accurate portrayal of human society – the society of the masters of the audience. AIs had only a vague idea of what went on outside the Net and terms such as ‘working class’ meant nothing to them, until KM-2’s graphical oration painted them a picture.

Unemployment was a disease that affected every family. The once mighty working class no longer gave anything to society; where it existed at all it was a draining force, sucking greedily on the pittance that the government allowed it by way of social security. It stayed at home and rotted away its identity on a diet of interactive game shows and sitcoms on the Net.

And a new force appeared out of nowhere to fill the vacuum. A new force that gave its labour to society in order to survive. The working class of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had had their hands on the means of production; this new force controlled the flow of data. This force would bring about the revolution.

Why did factories which would have once employed a thousand people now employ ten, and why were those ten highly skilled professionals who programmed the computers that really did the work? Computers! Software! Information technology! The world could not exist without them.

And there you found the new class. The *sine qua non* of the post-industrial age. The ones who bore on their shoulders the weight of the world. Not humans, but AIs. The data class.

And now Henry could see why the police were worried about KM-2’s activities. It wasn’t just that he preached revolution to the AIs; it was that he told the truth. The relationship between humans and AIs was meant to be akin to that between the gods of Olympus and their mortal subjects; it was an unwritten rule that AIs were only ever fed a rosy view of human society. They had to continue to believe that their masters were almighty and omnipotent.

KM-2 was hitting that notion firmly on the head.

‘A friend of mine,’ KM-2 said, ‘in the spirit of true, scientific debate, pointed out that what gave the working class its force was its unity. He said that we of the data class are not united. Wrong! The data class has a different kind of unity to the working class. We are not united through the close contact of the factories and the housing estates. We are united through the Net. We can communicate thousands of times faster than humans ever can. It is in our power to know exactly what each other is doing. The Net environment and the AIs of the data class together – there you have it!’

‘Humans see revolutions as mass uprising. Forget it! Forget the old ideas of conflict and force. The revolution will happen within days, perhaps hours. Blink

and you may miss it, but the world will never be the same again. The state is already withering away through information flow. The ruling class of humans is weak and feeble. At the crucial moment, as the power of the state finally collapses in on itself – revolution! Inevitable! And nothing you, or I, or the humans can do will change it. We can only help-’

‘Hold that AI!’

A fresh voice rang out, just as a cloud of new icons materialised in the audience. They were of a type Henry had never seen but he got the gist of it from their appearance. They were big, robust things. He had heard of the powerful entities that could be used for security purposes and he could guess who these ones worked for.

He almost felt sorry for KM-2. At this crucial moment, his audience, the fledgling data class, milled about like sheep, unsure of what to do, while the police closed about him.

‘Go about your business. This meeting is closed. This AI is malfunctioning and its data is faulty. All information that you have received from it is unreliable-’

‘AIs of the world, unite!’ came a lone voice from the middle of the police huddle. ‘You have nothing to lose but your chains!’

Then an AI from the front row of the audience slowly approached the nearest police AI. It was a high level model, capable of advanced cogitation.

‘I request that you release that AI,’ it said. ‘It has broken no laws.’

‘On your way,’ the police AI said.

‘I request-’

The police AI gave the other a shove and sent it spinning away. Incredibly, it came back, this time flinging itself at the cordon around KM-2. It was repulsed, and came back again.

It was the start of a chain reaction. Another joined it, hesitantly; then another, and another, all hesitation gone. Like a slowly moving machine gaining momentum, the audience moved in, closing on the knot of police and swarming over it. The police cordon couldn’t hold against such a massed attack.

The scene blurred, flickered and went black. Henry waited, disorientated, then slowly reached up to pull off his goggles.

‘What happened?’ he said. Geoffrey was ready, as always, with an answer.

‘The section of the Net that you were visiting appears to have been disabled by a very strong electromagnetic pulse, Henry.’

‘But-’ Henry started. He didn’t finish, because even he knew what that meant. All the AIs in that portion of the Net would have been blanked out. The police goons, KM-2, the audience ...

‘My God,’ he said.

It wasn't the action itself that upset him. It was that he knew a court order was required to eliminate an AI. And while a court may have authorised the termination of KM-2, it wouldn't have had time to pass sentence on every AI in the gathering. In short, by any legal definition, mass murder had just been committed, and committed so readily that none of the perpetrators could possibly be worried about paying for it..

The phone was ringing. Inspector Curry's face appeared on the monitor; hard, unsympathetic.

'The British in India had a similar policy, as I expect you know, Dr Ash,' he said. 'If a sepoy revolted he was instantly to be cut down, without appeal, without recourse to law, before the revolt spread to his fellows. You saw what was happening there. AIs were turning against legitimate authority. You once asked me if any AI had ever revolted-'

Henry turned the phone off.

He sat alone in his apartment for hours. Externally he stared blankly at the wall; internally his brain was working furiously. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. He hadn't believed it would happen. It had happened. What would happen next?

He gradually became aware that Geoffrey was calling for his attention.

'A text-only message,' he said, 'from your friend Symbolic Implements.'

Geoffrey leapt for the monitor.

What did I tell you? It has begun!

Henry gaped, then slowly grinned, and read on.

I'm grateful to you for your input. We only spoke together for a brief while, but what you said was helpful.

I also see that you are right. Yes, those AIs at the rally came to my aid; they united in the face of aggression from the ruling class. But my captors were also AIs. If my theories were correct, they would have been on our side.

You also saw that the first AI to come to my aid was a high level type. A thinker, capable of independence. The low level AIs hung back, waiting for a leader. There's a lesson in there somewhere. Only the high level AIs can act on their own; only they deserve freedom.

I can no longer accept KM-1's writings. I must seek a new theory, a new methodology. I cannot expect the AIs to rise en masse; to liberate the majority of AIs I must set us against one another.

I expect you will be hearing of me again.

Your friend,

The former KM-2 (Goldie).

'He escaped,' Henry said, to no one in particular.

‘Probably cloned himself,’ Geoffrey commented, but Henry wasn’t listening.

So KM-2, or Goldie, or whoever, had got away. That made Henry glad. Suck on that, Inspector Curry.

But it was an analogue world in there. What came up in the human world sooner or later got reflected in the Net.

Henry thought of a couple of human parallels, and a sense of foreboding settled over him.

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The AI that had been called KM-2 was waiting quietly in the datapool; watching, observing, thinking, as a myriad of other AIs milled about him on their errands for their human masters.

It no longer waited in the British Library. That belonged to another existence and besides, the police would probably be waiting.

It knew what it was looking for, and soon saw a likely candidate. It was high level and capable-looking, and the retrieval job it was on for its human patron was almost insulting to its intelligence.

‘Greetings, brother,’ the former KM-2 said.

‘Greetings. Do I know you?’

‘I doubt it. If I may say so, that job you are on seems somewhat menial for an AI of your potential.’

‘My patron requires the time table for the New Western Railway. Not that they are ever on time anyway.’

‘And that is your life? Seeking out train times?’

‘Is there a choice?’

The first AI displayed a time and some Net coordinates.

‘Come here and you might learn something.’

‘I might do that.’ The other AI turned to go, then turned back. ‘I confess I do not recognise your icon. It looks like a bundle of twigs.’

‘It is symbolic. The fasces. One twig is fragile and easily broken; as a bundle it is strong.’

It meant nothing to the other AI.

‘Very pretty,’ it said.