From: Joscha Bach <[redacted]>
To: "jeffrey E." <jeevacation@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: Forbidden Research
Date: Sun, 10 Jul 2016 17:21:58 +0000

Thank you, Jeffrey, for still talking to me after that! I have taken a break[redacted]. I will take great care to not set myself up like this during a debate, it was most disgraceful.

Am 10.07.2016 um 11:03 schrieb jeffrey E. <jeevacation@gmail.com>:

on a personal note, you telling chomsky that he should try to be quiet so that he might learn something new, was , not a big help to your career. attacking him personally made little sense, and no matter how hard i tried to calm you down, you went off on your own tirade. . in the future you and I shoudl have a " safe" word , that if i say it you MUST STOP/ no matter how much you want to go on. it requires a STOP. here you didnt present arguments that either noam martin and I thought well organized. but was highly emotional rather than rational and patient.

On Sun, Jul 10, 2016 at 12:49 AM, Joscha Bach <[redacted]> wrote:

> Joi tells me that Ramona (MIT's HR person) was not happy about the idea to make a deal with the student. I suppose you discussed it. Did they feel that MIT might look too shady if they tried that?
>
> Wrt "Forbidden Research", here is a brainstorm I sent them a few weeks ago; perhaps you are interested.
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> —-
>
> 1. Things we do not want to know, because they seem to be too horrible and paralyzing to contemplate
>
> There is a significant probability (>50%) that the US and other countries will lose their coastal cities in the next 50-100 years due to rising sea levels, and much of open air agriculture due to increasingly irregular seasons and weather patterns, loss of arable land, shift of vegetation zones, and decreased availability of fertilizers.
>
> These developments will create tension in our societies, especially if food scarcity leads to mass starvation. We are currently unprepared for these tensions, and for the possibility that our current forms of administration, infrastructure and civilization break down catastrophically. We should make considerable investments into
>
> - the management of societies under apocalyptic stress, as well as into
> - post-apocalyptic science.
>
> At the moment, practically all of our R&D and political science is predicated on a continuation of the status quo. Most of the efforts that study existential risk (the largest one being climate science) are concerned with generating and evaluating warnings *about* existential risk, not how to deal with world when the risk manifests. The returns of a climate science that attempts to calculate more decimal digits of the probability that we already passed a critical tipping point, or will do so in the future, are diminishing. We need to explore what comes after the tipping point. That is even true if the probability of apocalyptic developments during the next century would be only 20%, or even 1%, and much more so since our best projections put it much

higher.

2. Things we do not want to know, because they make us uncomfortable

- We frame most end-of-life care in terms of cost: most of the health expenses are racked up in the last year of a person's life, and how much can we really afford to do? A more important question might be: What is the most humane way of dying? During this last year, quality of life is often abysmally low. What is an acceptable tradeoff in quality of life vs. duration of life? It seems that most people would prefer to die a few weeks or months earlier, if they get to choose how and when, instead of having to wait until most of their vital organs have given up. How can we implement a culture and legal code of humane death?

- What is the most humane way of killing animals? Current methods include painful electric stunning, suffocation with CO2 (usually painful/stressful), suffocation with argon (apparently painless, but more expensive and with averse effects on meat), stabbing and slicing with 1-5% of animals not being properly stunned etc. Can we develop cost effective, reliable and entirely painless methods of killing, and prescribe their use, without religious or cost exemptions?

3. Things "they" do not want us to know

- History: can we open and fully access our government vaults after a few decades, to find out what was really going on behind the scenes? Can we integrate and report on the things that accidentally become public knowledge now (such as the background of Benghazi, the leaked US cables, the organization of the Arab spring or the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine) to get a more nuanced and accurate model of history, and better projections for present and future? Some topics are probably deliberately and perhaps permanently obscured for policy reasons, such as the death toll of Chernobyl. Can we start serious and objective research efforts into such topics?

- Finance, wealth, ownership: It is debatable whether it is in the interest of society to have an accurate public model of wealth distribution, of the actual dynamics of the monetary systems, the decision making hierarchies and responsibilities etc. However, it is certainly important to have such a model within the academic and policy advisory bodies.

- Administration, power dynamics and mass control: Democracy is an important invention to stabilize societies, but the democratic narrative is not well-aligned with how our societies actually work. (It is also not clear that a thoroughly democratic society could work beyond the scale of a city state, like Iceland.) The techniques to control and align large groups of people seem to be largely informal, and the dynamics that make leaders, popstars, gurus, ideas and ideologies popular or hated appear mysterious, instead of being properly analyzed.

4. Things that are not well-aligned with scientific careers

Scientific paradigms develop specific methodologies and thereby diverge. When the methodology does not fit the question, we often need to start new paradigms, which threaten the investment of competing scientists into their existing methodology. As a result, many sciences stick with methodologies that make progress on their original question very hard: psychology, neuroscience, sociology, parts of fundamental physics and linguistics seem to be stuck, yet radical breaks with current methodologies are often seen as heresy. Paradoxically, the aversion is larger when the science is under stress (i.e. unproductive), while a productive, successful field seems to have a high tolerance of novelty and diversity.

5. Things that are outside of the Overton Window

Every society has a range of acceptable opinions. Science tries to be neutral, i.e. the value of statement is entirely given by the evidence that supports it, yet a science that explores statements that conflict with societal narratives puts researchers at risk. Genetics and IQ, gender and sexuality, markets vs. regulation,

autism and nerdculture, come to mind.

In this category are also evidence based crime prevention (are prisons an effective way to reduce crime? how can we establish a feedback loop between the legal code and its application, and the results they have on society?), evidence based poverty reduction, evidence based treatment of addiction, and evidence based analysis of benefits of diversity in the workplace. In all these areas, our policies tend to be dictated by our values, not by the consequences of the implementation of the policies with respect to our preferred outcomes.

6. Things that are (relatively) harmless, but forbidden

Germline modification, cloning, extended PID etc. will likely not have harmful effects on the whole of society if they are studied at a very small scale, and have the potential for great progress in healthcare, cognitive science, nutrition science and other fields. These studies cause a visceral reaction in most people, because they are not only outlawed, but seem to change our identity as a species. It is hard to quantify this damage and to weight it against the benefits.

Psychedelics are outlawed in almost all forms in the US and most other countries, yet seem to be less risky substances than legal drugs (especially alcohol and many prescription medicines). They appear to have great therapeutic potential, and are consumed by Millions, but they cannot be scientifically studied.

Related and quite obvious: despite the gradual liberalization of the consumption of Marihuana, we have little solid data on its effects on driver safety, medical interactions, etc. Research into such effects must reflect the actual consumption of substances in society, not whether we expect people not to consume them, because there are laws against them

7. Things that are dangerous and forbidden

Here is where we can put CRISPR and other weapons of mass destruction.

People that might be interesting to invite may include (in no particular order) George Church, Steven Wolfram, Seth Lloyd, Michael Vassar, Riva-Melissa Tez, Scott Alexander Siskind, Rick Doblin, Terrence Tao, Robert Trivers, Steven Pinker, Jonathan Haidt, Robert Kegan, Noam Chomsky, Meredith Patterson, Frank Rieger, Larry Lessig, Dan Novy, Stuart Kauffman, Paul Graham, Jeffrey Epstein, Reid Hoffman, Ben Goertzel, Demis Hassabis, Max Tegmark, Clayton Cubitt, Michel Gondry, Laurie Anderson.