

The Sorcerer's Apprentice and the Loss of Agency

by [Carl Nelson](#) (August 2024)



Robot in Love (Ruffo Caselli, 1978)

A problem of technology is that each time you employ it, you give up a bit of your agency.

As a child, I loved “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” portion of Walt Disney’s wonderful movie, *Fantasia*. Actually, I loved all of *Fantasia*. (Still do. They just don’t make them like this anymore.) In the ten minute segment, Mickey Mouse plays the Sorcerer’s Apprentice (to the music of Paul Dukas as played by the Philadelphia Orchestra). By donning his master’s magic hat, Mickey assumes the Sorcerer’s power and commands a nearby broom to perform his tasks, which involve hauling buckets of water lifted from a well, up a long flight of stairs, to fill the Sorcerer’s caldron. The broom performs so well to the music, that Mickey falls asleep while watching the broom at work. He awakes to find the caldron overflowing. He tries to stop the broom without avail. Finally he tries chopping up the broom with an axe, only to find the broom pieces find a life of their own and the multitude of them begin hauling ever more water to an increased tempo of the music. As the water rises to flood stage, it’s a catastrophe—until the Sorcerer returns and rights matters with a wave of his arms.

The Problem of Agency

A problem of technology is that each time you employ it, you give up a bit of your agency. This might not seem apparent immediately. For example, I was chatting with my brother, who worked for Boeing. I had made the comment that I couldn’t imagine working in a cubicle for a large company because I wanted to be free to do whatever interested me. He felt just the opposite, and replied, that by being part of something so large, he was able to work on projects and do things, “I could never have done on my own.” Certainly this is true. But there is also truth in what his identical twin brother, also an Electrical Engineer, had to say about working for many other corporations, including Boeing. That their encroachments on your time could easily take over your life, if you allowed it and didn’t fight like hell to avoid it. Maintaining his ‘off’ time was very difficult while needing to appear an

enthusiastic “team player.” He battled this throughout his career, finally escaping by boat to sail the South Seas in retirement.

The same was true in the very competitive business of copier sales where my wife and I worked. You could make far more money than you needed. But they didn't want representatives who sought merely to make a comfortable living so as to spend their best moments with their families. They wanted high achievers who would work 14 hour days, and then go out drinking with “the team.” Do this, or they would give the territory to someone who would. You had to perform well enough so that they wouldn't do this—because they couldn't (find someone more productive). We solved the problem by double-teaming. We had one and a half persons (I worked part time) performing the position of one. And the ‘one.’ my wife, was very good at her job.

Just about every piece of technology you pick up offers the same conundrum Mickey, the Sorcerer's Apprentice, found himself in. A mesmerized broom, which at first made his job easier and seemed to expand his agency—eventually took over his life near catastrophically.

As another example much more analogous to Mickey's experience, the new home thermostat I once purchased which was a new digital, would allow all sorts of programming. On the face of it I could easily delegate when the heat would come on, go off, turn up or down, take vacations, and much more I'm sure. But just try turning it off! There is no off. You must program some setting, or program a temperature well below ambient. You could not kill it.

I came home one night, stumbled in the darkened entryway, and pressed my hand against the device by accident. I activated some sub-program, and I could not simply turn it off. It would not wait for me to get the manual out and troubleshoot it that next morning. It was already somewhere and doing something. I

was left with as much control as Mickey had over that broom he tried to halt by axing it into splinters.

Back in the day, when the home thermostat was just a circular device, it could simply be turned to the temperature desired—or off, if that was wanted. I had near full agency. Digitally, I found myself in the position of having almost none. And unfortunately, in my real world predicament, I had no wizard to wave his arms and solve matters with a sorcerer's injunction. I currently suffer a like fate with programmed devices throughout my new Subaru, from the seat position, to locking and unlocking the doors, to opening and closing the trunk. None of these respond to my own volition (hands-on).

The Free Market

The free market system performs not unlike a water carrying broom. Pop on the Sorcerer's hat, (your special value-creating skill set) and the monetary return will purchase help and materials. And the more help and materials you have (capital) the more money you (possibly) stand to make. There is risk involved, but the free market broom, overall, just goes crazy. Likewise, (in its first one hundred and fifty odd years of adoption), the free market operating on incentives has produced a spike in global wealth unheralded throughout history. Innovation and entrepreneurship have opened the sea chest to a wealth of riches. We live more prosperous lives and with a leisure as never before. We have devices to handle near everything, with newer, upgraded ones being developed daily. But there is one thing which the free market does which seems to have quietly undermined culture, tradition and human life itself – and that is its conversion of everything to metrics. It is money which turns the gears, which in turn grinds whatever it touches into money. (To bring up another story, consider the myth of King Midas.)

This is because, in free market terms, everything you see has a valuation. You might value your mother above all others but, to a certain concerned commodities buyer, she might be worth only about \$576.00

(Explanation: 99% of the mass of the human body consists of six elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. They are worth about \$576. All the other elements taken together are worth only about \$9 more.) –Google

You might take offense and argue, “My mother is worth much more than that!”

And there is a good chance you could outbid them.

Of course, if you piecemealed your mother’s organs, and she were a healthy, sought donor, you might get vastly more—on the hoof, as it were:

Imagine a scary auction where they sell parts from a newly dead body. Livers, which clean out harmful—substances, are sold for \$157,000. Kidneys, which remove waste from our body, go for \$200,000. A pair of lungs, which help us breathe and get rid of most of the fat and calories we lose, are – priced at \$272,000. The intestines, which are tricky to replace and help absorb food, are worth a whopping \$800,000. The final item is the heart, priced at \$1.6 million. It’s (heart failure) the most common reason people die worldwide. ([Medium](#))

You might exclaim, “Well my mother is worth even more to me than that!”

To which the market replies, “How much more?”

“Beyond valuation!” You might say.

But do you have the resources to protect a person 24/7 who might represent a million dollar windfall to a criminal—especially if you were a Chinese Uyghur?

A valuation has taken place. Your mother is converted to metrics so that in order to save your mother from the clutches of a higher bidder, you must have more money. You must have more resources at your disposal. And since, as they say, it takes money to make money – you are now cocooned into the system. Before you were using the free market, to fund a better life for yourself and your mother; now the free market is feeding upon you. In a sense the free market has husbanded you like a barnyard animal, which is fed and sheltered, and cared for so as to make the best return on investment. If this seems a bit incendiary, let's consider something less fraught, more humble, and a bit to everyone's liking...

The Ritz Cracker Story

If we combine these two threads of thought—the monetization of life and its further encroachment on all else, allowing ourselves to see how they have naturally intertwined – we might note one example of how these two trends have affected our food supply. A good example would be the Ritz Cracker:

In an [essay](#) by Joseph (Jake) Klein, “The Story of the Ritz Cracker Is the Story of Capitalism,” recently published in a FEE (Foundation for Economic Freedom) online posting, he writes: “The Ritz Cracker perfectly exemplifies how capitalism has enriched our lives.” As Klein explains it: “Making luxury available to the masses” was one of the world-changing effects of capitalism:

Before the advent of capitalism, a man's social status was fixed from the beginning to the end of his life; he

inherited it from his ancestors, and it never changed. ... As for manufacturing, the primitive processing industries of those days existed almost exclusively for the benefit of the wealthy. Most of the people (ninety percent or more of the European population) worked the land and did not come in contact with the city-oriented processing industries ... However, as the rural population expanded, there developed a surplus of people on the land ... The numbers of these "outcasts" continued to grow, and still no one knew what to do with them...

Out of this serious social situation emerged the beginnings of modern capitalism ... Innovators did not produce expensive goods suitable only for the upper classes; they produced cheaper products for everyone's needs. And this was the origin of capitalism as it operates today. It was the beginning of mass production, the fundamental principle of capitalistic industry. Whereas the old processing industries serving the rich people in the cities had existed almost exclusively for the demands of the upper classes, the new capitalist industries began to produce things that could be purchased by the general population. It was mass production to satisfy the needs of the masses.

And there is a LOT more money to be made in "serving the masses."

I love Ritz Crackers. So, apparently does Klein and many other people over generations. The Ritz Cracker was first popularized by Nabisco in its campaign to wrest the market from Hi-Ho's. Created in 1939, the original cracker has by now morphed into 48 different Ritz products sold by Mondelez International, corporately valued at 100 billion dollars, which carries Nabisco's brand and products.

Originally, crackers were known as "pilot bread" or "ship

biscuits” and were created to withstand long sea voyages without spoiling. In Klein’s story, the forces of Capitalism work to offer the masses a delicate cracker formerly only available to the wealthy because of spoilage and shelf life problems which has caused its nature to change from the original “water cracker” of sailors—composed of just flour, water and salt—to the Ritz Cracker of today which is composed of: Unbleached Enriched Flour (Wheat Flour, Niacin, Reduced Iron, Thiamine Mononitrate (Vitamin B1), Riboflavin (Vitamin B2), Folic Acid), Soybean and/or Canola Oil, Palm Oil, Sugar, Salt, Leavening (Calcium Phosphate, Baking Soda), High Fructose Corn Syrup, Soy Lethicin, Natural Flavor. Contains: Wheat, Soy.

Bon Appetit!

Obviously, something has happened along the way. “Improvements” to the simple “ship biscuit” have gone much the way of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice’s broom. Technology has taken after it with an axe!

According to Chris van Tulleken in his [book](#), *Ultra Processed People*, the “ultra processing” of food has taken place for three reasons:

- To decrease perishability and thereby to increase shelf-life. (Taking food from normal spoilage to “embalmed,” that is, to something approximating the immortal nature of a Twinkie.)
- To increase the ease of transportation (which also involves packaging), allowing huge economies of scale as products could then be sold worldwide. With our Ritz Cracker, initially, “each city only had one or two cracker bakeries; they used labor-intensive production methods, and only sold their goods to stores up to a few miles away. At those stores, crackers were sold loose in

barrels, where customers would scoop them into bags. However, moisture regularly sank to the bottom of barrels, leaving a soggy mess full of insects and rodents." ... But, "Thanks to the rise of railroads, crackers (which had a longer shelf-life than bread) could be sold nationwide." (-Klein)

Through mergers and the development of wax paper sleeves to keep the product fresher, longer, and dry... "Within two years of Nabisco's merger, Americans were buying ten million packages of crackers per month, earning Nabisco \$3 million in annual profits on sales of \$35 million. This profit enabled the CEO to further build his company by attracting the best possible staff. He actively sought to make Nabisco's bakeries better places to work, offering benefits and stock options." (-Klein)

- And third, to decrease the cost of ingredients. Certainly if you sell billions of crackers, your cost of ingredients per cracker will decrease due to economies of scale. But what if you could use the bothersome waste by-products of other industries to substitute for these ingredients? Your expenses decrease to dimes on the dollar!

In pre-WWII Germany, industrial chemists found a way to produce carbon monoxide and hydrogen from lignite (poor quality coal). These were the building blocks for "a near limitless range of useful molecules." From an updated procedure birthed from this was created 600,000 tons of fuel per year from coal in the early 1940s, leaving a by-product called paraffin. When war time Germany was able to meet only half of its needs for animal fat, a method was pioneered of creating edible fat ('Speisefett') from paraffin. Initially it was "white, tasteless and waxy" but, by "mixing the fat with diacetyl (flavoring), water, salt and a bit of beta-carotene for colour," the "complete transformation of German coal into

'coal butter' –the first totally synthetic food–was created. (–Tulleken) (Our Sorcerer's Apprentice had successfully split his first water-carrying broom with a technological axe.)

All of which came with a big caveat, as “British Intelligence uncovered data that the Nazis had not publicized: the fact, for instance, that some studies had shown that chronic ingestion of the synthetic fat caused severe kidney problems and decalcification of bone in animals. Dogs, apparently, refused to eat it.” (–Tulleken)

Tulleken's warning: “The transformation of coal into butter reveals the unavoidable problems of creating synthetic foods. There are inherent dangers in consuming complex mixtures of novel molecules as a source of calories–substances we have never encountered before may have unpredictable effects on our physiology.”

But all of the above are why, along with the other two reasons for ultra processing noted above, that the Ritz Cracker has an ingredient list of components so different from that of the seafarers water cracker of centuries past. It's less expensive! (Plus, the fact that by using artificial food materials and flavorings, the ultra processed food can be made much more tasty, even addictive, and can even be flavored when spiked with sugar to create something like a taste barcode marking a brand loyalty in the individual consumer–which can span a lifetime. Feed them this stuff when they're kids!)

And here our story of the Ritz Cracker, merges with the evolution of our food supply in general to join the Ultra Processed Foods which have overtaken our current eating habits. My continuing story moves along, by gleaning information found in Tulleken's book.

As a sidebar, I would note that I jumped to enthusiastically endorse Van Tulleken's book, *Ultra Processed People*, until reading the final third and pulling back my endorsement

somewhat. As is often the case with many of the non-fiction books I read, the most interesting, even arresting information is generally within the first third of the book and, for an even better book, the first two thirds. These are the portions of the book where the author is taken, shocked even, by something in the real world which they've noticed, then investigated, and sought to detail in as cogent manner possible for a reader. However, in the latter portion of the book they characteristically seek to dovetail this new information and insight they have acquired with their longstanding sense of how a person should behave. (One must maintain one's sense of self.) This is revealed in the unleashing of "solutions"; that is, what should be done.

I would recommend that readers entertain just the first sections of non-fiction works but I have second thoughts. The final section of these books offers an insight as to the prejudices the author has brought (perhaps unknowingly) to the material all along. Reading the final third gives the reader a scale with which to judge the reliability of the initial sections. The world of information nowadays has been revealed as a situation more like that of Soviet Russia than we had known—where you could only believe half of whatever you heard. And the trick was to know which half that was.

The final third of these books supplies reader assistance in this matter. For example, I already knew that the book is a best seller by a major publishing house, and that the author works for the NHS and is deeply embedded within the research circles of their most tony institutions. So, in my experience, various Progressive attitudes must necessarily have been genuflected to, in order to acquire his status. In the latter portion he quotes writers from the *Guardian*, and presses his case against ultra-processed food and various governmental measures which could be undertaken, by appealing to commodities farming as contributing to the CO2/Global Warming "crisis."

If the author is such a credentialed scientist as to still be rolling the Global Warming ball of bull—like a true dung beetle—this, of course, makes me cast a less credulous view of what he has written in the initial portions of his book. Nevertheless, the initial portions make a very intriguing case, which also come across as very sound (and one must salvage one's information somewhere, and operate upon some basis). If we were to eliminate persons with “clay feet” from our communities, there would be very few to speak with.

But why is it important whether our nutrition comes from real food, or created food? Look at the ingredients list on the side of most food products. The nutrition is stated right there.

Nevertheless, obtaining nourishment is a much more complex business, Tulleken notes. For example, “Supplements do not benefit us. These nutritional elements must be taken as real food.” (Kill off an entire industry in two sentences? Hey, dear readers, this is just for starters.)

Natural food is incredibly complex as are our biological drives which use and select for them. The human diet of real foods represents an incredibly complex web of interconnectivity. An early twentieth century experiment with nutritionally deficient infants showed that when babies are presented with many varieties of food, they will select and eat those which meet their nutritional demands. And when they have met these nutritional demands they will stop their eating. How does a newly born infant know all this? Well, did you know that you have taste receptors not only in the mouth—but throughout the body, including your testes? (Unless you only ‘identify’ as male.) It would appear there are a lot more organs and parts of our bodies which offer opinions on which foods we should be eating than just your mother, the FDA, or those ads on TV.

Unfortunately, the low per unit cost of UPFoods, their

enhanced shelf-life and ease of transportation, and their engineered consumer preference have caused them to push out the real food offerings on grocery store shelves. There are literally large urban areas where real food has been pushed near fully off the store shelves—where fast food outlets and quick shops supply most of the food opportunities for the residents. These are termed, “food deserts.” And the implications for the public health are not good.

The rise of obesity in the States correlates historically with the increased consumption of UPFoods. A comparison of beach photos taken in the 1970s with those taken recently displays the change well. And while obesity is associated with a number of co-morbidities, it is also just the most public display of a number of chronic conditions whose emergence is likewise associated with the explosion in UPF consumption, such as the rise in chronic inflammatory disorders like Crone’s Disease and Type 2 Diabetes, disruption of the gut biome (dysbiosis), and the prevalence of “leaky gut” (a proposed action of emulsifiers).

Emulsifiers are compounds which are like soaps; they dissolve the oil/ water interface and are used by food processors to prevent a lot of rich “gloopy” UPF products from separating unappetizingly. However, cell membranes are constructed of molecules with both a hydrophilic and a hydrophobic side, which are aligned so as to keep the outside, outside and the inside, inside. It isn’t hard to imagine how emulsifiers in UPFoods might raise havoc with these carefully realized cellular boundaries—especially those in the gut linings.

The persons who work in the food industry are folks just like you or me. (You might be one!) Very few of them would want to make people ill or contribute to their morbidity. Very few would like to deny their fellow citizens access to real food. They might want all good things. They might even pitch for good things. However, the companies and industries they work for are compelled by one thing, increasing revenues. Companies

might even insist that their store stock more real food and make it more available. However, if it is the cheaper foods which are purchased, the stores selling these which make more money are the businesses which will survive. And so the free market places a valuation upon everything—even our morality (The Golden Rule versus Keeping Our Job so as To Feed Our Family). So what their employees have gained in terms of income and security offered by a established industry—they have lost in terms of agency, both over their morals and their health. (After all, they live in this world also, and are 'nudged' into consuming the same products.) And what's more, like the broom Mickey splinters with his axe to put out of commission, UPF products which produce morbidity, actually provide even more opportunity for market growth as their splintered portions begin to haul water also.

Examples of new business opportunities in the UPF field are low-fat foods, created as a dietary aid to help fight the weight gain which the primary UPFoods induce, and sugar substitutes which actually have the reverse effect of causing weight gain. And in perhaps the most diabolical move of this animated free market Sorcerer's broom yet, examine the actions of Nestle as it splinters even more into revenue collecting spin offs.

While aware of its role in "comerciogenic" malnutrition (infant formula) and diet related disease, Nestle recognizes that herein lies another as yet untapped avenue of profit. To tap this revenue Nestle explored the weight loss market by buying out Jenny Craig, and producing a range of UPF products called "Lean Cuisine." Just as pharmaceutical companies found there is great money to be made fighting the morbidities they have created (offering a drug to ameliorate the side effects of the initially prescribed medicine), Nestle is also investing in gastrointestinal health. Nestle has been interested "in drugs to treat diet-related disease" as a partner in Nutrition Health Partners which "focuses on

gastrointestinal health, and may in the future expand into the metabolic disease and brain health areas. In 2011 Nestle' also bought Prometheus Laboratories, which specializes in diagnostics and licensed specialty pharmaceuticals in gastroenterology. Prometheus Laboratories may already be helping to diagnose and treat some of the health problems caused by the food system of which they are a part." (Pg. 285, Tulleken)

Decimal valuations are being place on our other community wealth up and down the board, just as they have on our health.

For example, movement is afoot within the Biden Administration, so that "on November 17th, the U.S. government will pass a rule that allows for America's protected lands, including parks and wildlife refuges, to be listed on the N.Y. Stock Exchange. Natural Asset Companies (NACS) will be owned, managed, and traded by companies like BlackRock, Vanguard, and even China." (see Elizabeth Nickson's [article](#), "Wall Street's Planned Theft of America's Lands and Waters: Everything will be monetized and measured and traded, even you.")

What does this mean? "Each NAC will hold "management authority" over the land. When we are issued carbon allowances, owners of said lands will be able to claim tax deductions and will be able to sell carbon allowances to businesses, families and townships. In the simplest of terms, that's where the money will be made. We peons will be renting air from the richest people on earth." (-Nickson) As a practical matter, you may stand to make more money by going out of business than by continuing—in somewhat like arrangement where in the past, farmer's were paid an allotment for allowing their fields to lie fallow.

Water is also being restricted to small farmers and sold to the larger Big-Ag outfits.

Perhaps you'll tell your elected representative what you think

about this?

Well, how much money do you have? Because they have been likewise monetized.

I'm reminded of some insight Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene imparted during an interview I read regarding what practical latitude your congressional representative has. She described the position of a newly elected congressperson, who must begin their fundraising for their next election immediately after winning the latter. Like Mickey's broom run amok, they find themselves within a dilemma they haven't control over.

They can spend a large portion of their time on the phone soliciting contributions from small donors throughout their district. This is both terribly demoralizing, and takes time away from the legislative business for which they were elected to pursue. Or, they can allow benevolent corporate interests to arrange fundraising activities for them, with the guarantee of raising good sums of money. (Steal the Wizard's hat. Animate the broom! Good idea!) All the candidate must do is to show up at the prescribed time and place, say a few words, schmooze a bit, take a bite of the rubber chicken—and leave. The latter is an option hard to refuse—very much like the Godfather's.

Of course, the tradeoff is a loss of agency. The congressperson has now been 'monetized.' They have both a valuation and a position within the intestine of the snake. To retain their position, they must generate a sufficient return. Rather than serving their constituents, they've landed themselves a job within the legislative industry feeding special interests. They have little agency with which to serve their constituents.

The fate of Mickey's broom seems an unquenchable metaphor.

As regards how industry can be splintered by a hostile

environment—like our erstwhile broom—and yet continue on to unlock even greater profits—this is the author, Chris Van Tulleken's favorite example:

My personal favorite example of a company causing a problem to which they also sell a solution is Philip Morris, the largest tobacco company in the world. In July 2021, Philip Morris agreed to buy Vectura Group for £1.1 billion—a company that, at the time, made most of its £200 million revenue from a portfolio of products to treat smoking-related diseases. (Pg 286, Tulleken)

Why all of this concern about loss of agency, if we are wealthier and more comfortable?

Well, when as individuals we lose our agency over our lives, it's not as if this agency is lost at sea. The agency we lose has been transferred. Some other actor now controls my actions. For example, the engineers who designed my digital thermostat have determined (in abstentia) what my home temperature will be upon my failure to utilize their programs as I would see fit. Likewise, your boss(es) will tell you when you must be at work, when you can leave, what you can say and not say while at work, and possibly when away. My doctor might say whether or not he will treat me based on whether or not I follow the protocol as designed by his employer, who is a businessperson who gets kickbacks from pharma. Agency is not lost ... it's collected. And currently it is being collected in a massive way.

I am reminded of my experience as a medical student on the ward. It wasn't that hard for a patient to get into restraints. (In this particular episode, the patient's restraints were due to a seizure.) Everyone jumped in to help out.

But no one jumped in later to release him from his restraint. He would have languished for some time, calm and lucid, yet tied to his bed—but for the extern working over me who was a very sharp, willful student who wasn't afraid to take on the risk, on behalf of the patient, of discontinuing the restraints.

Currently, Big Data is absorbing information daily about your purchases, your location, your affiliations, your health matters, your messaging ... the list goes on and on. (I doubt I need tell you this.) And once it is collected, it is not returned. Once collected, it is converted into 'nudges' and corridors of crafted narrative choices—neither of which is one you might prefer if you had the requisite foresight (rather like electoral candidates), but which lead you to either of their favored ends.

Currently, this loss of agency is being driven exponentially larger by a zillion continually splintering brooms; creating more and more of the free market activity which parses our lives in decimals.

You know all those great questions about life you debated as a youth? What a waste of time, eh? This would certainly be a good reason for the youth of today to be gloomy. As future free agents, they are launched into a life already suffering from a great loss of freedoms. Their minds are manacled by premade choices before even free to think.

Governmental regulation of corporate activities is the general triage suggested. However, having the government regulate business is rather like having that gumshoe detective investigate the wealthy femme fatale we've all ogled in the old celluloid narratives. Every instinct tends towards collusion with a noir ending (while lots of popcorn gets eaten).

Oh, and if you think euthanasia is a way out, consider Canada.

Apparently, because of difficulties in obtaining end of life pharmaceuticals (Europe which has banned executions, also banned their production and export), the euthanizing authorities now use a paralytic in order that a 'peaceful' death occurs. Then the patient is given a drug which causes a slow drowning. It's like being waterboarded while paralyzed for hours, days, weeks ... until death.

Pertinent section starts at 1:00.

There is literally no limit to the cruelty of systems (schemes) once given *carte blanche*.

Sorcerer! Wizard! Where are you?

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Carl Nelson's latest book of poetry titled, *Strays, Misfits, Renegades, and Maverick Poems (with additional Verses on Monetizations)*, has just been published. To have a look at this and more of his work please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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