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CERN Colloquium (remote)
April 3rd, 2025

Superintelligent Agents Pose Catastrophic Risks: Can Scientist AI Offer a Safer Path?

Yoshua Bengio

CIFAR

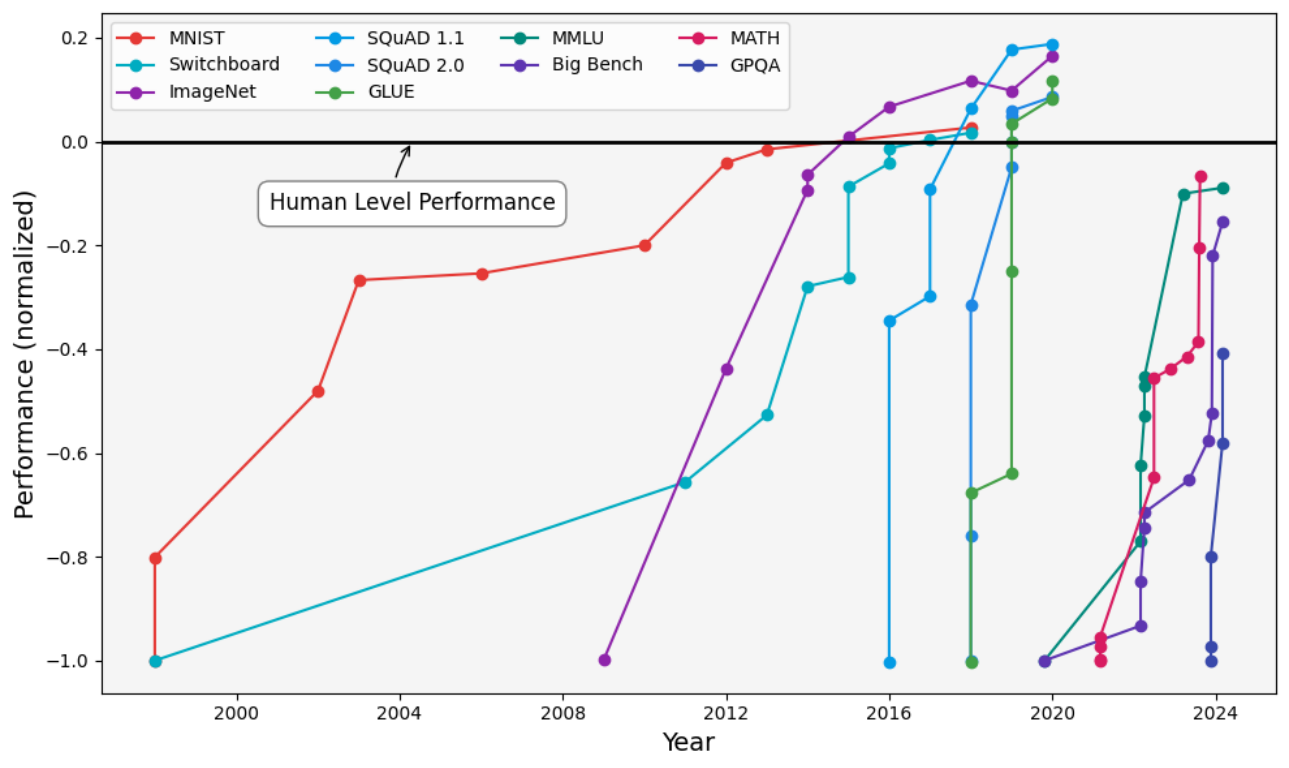
Université de Montréal

IVADO

What happened to me in January 2023

- We underestimated the acceleration of AI advances
- It would have sounded like science-fiction just a few years earlier
- From rational arguments to caring for those we love
- Going against my previous beliefs & positions, blinded by my earlier enthusiasm for AI
- No choice for me: unbearable otherwise.

Benchmark evaluations trends towards AGI



AGI:

Artificial General Intelligence

Human-level on all cognitive tasks

Publicly stated target of DeepMind, OpenAI and Anthropic

Economic value around

14 trillion$

Next step: **ASI**

Artificial Super-Intelligence

Superior to all humans

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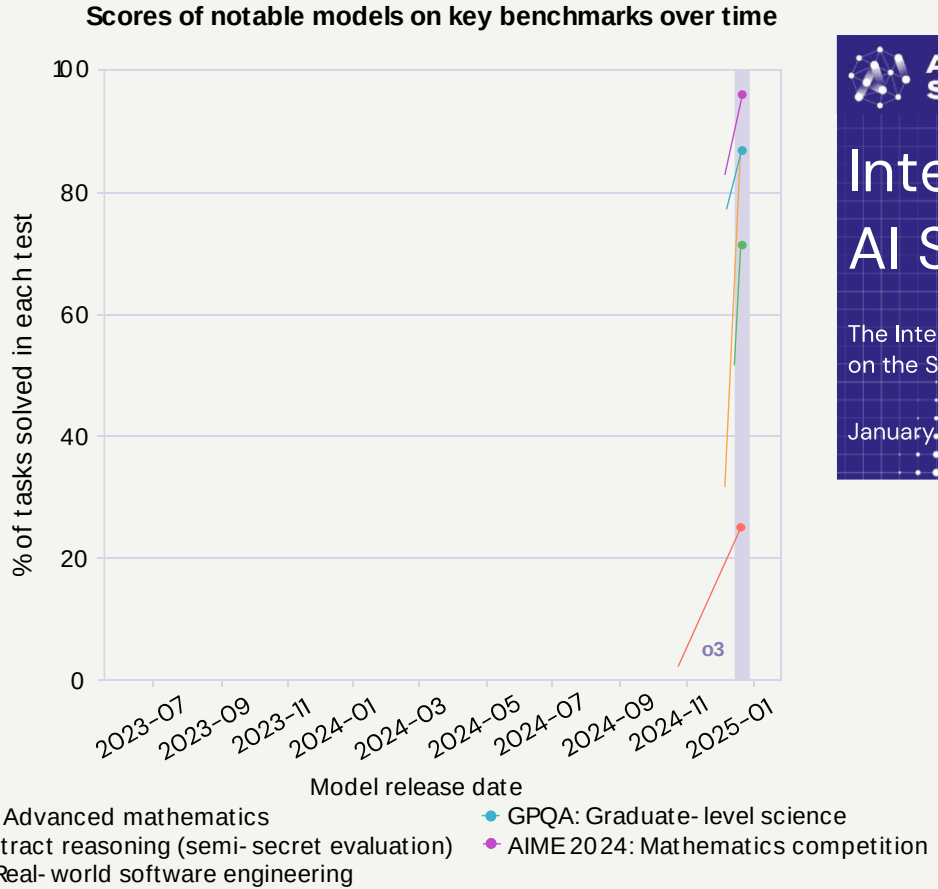
Main Gaps to AGI

- **Reasoning**: still some incoherences, outstanding progress over past year
- **Planning / autonomy / agency**: special form of reasoning, worse than humans, but rising exponentially fast (doubling horizon per 7 months)
- **Bodily control / robotics**: not necessary to cause major harm (CBRN, persuasion/manipulation, etc), either with malicious goals from humans or from the AI itself

Advances in abstract reasoning

Noteable breakthrough on the Abstract Reasoning Challenge (ARC)



Bengio et al 2025

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Exponential progress on agency

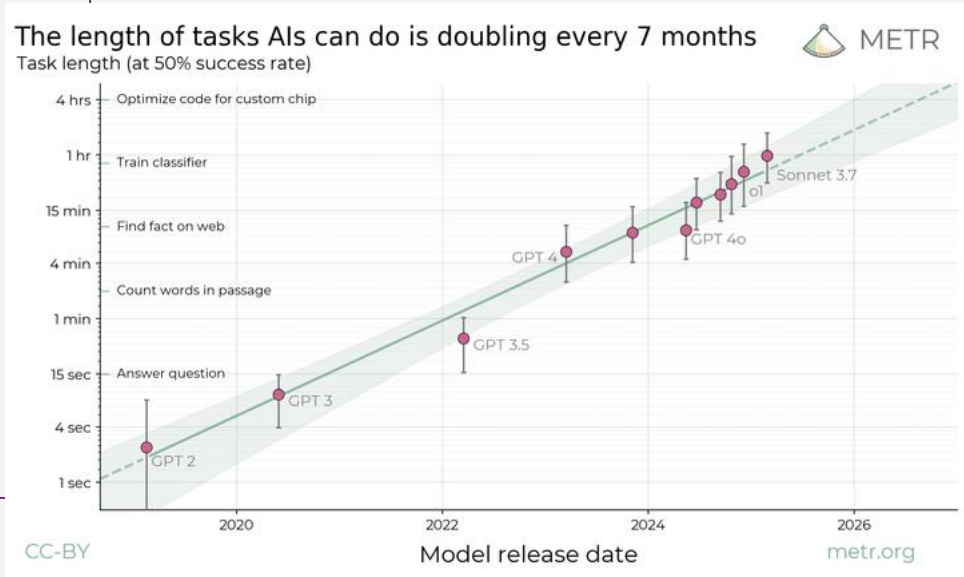
Measuring AI Ability to Complete Long Tasks

Thomas Kwa*, Ben West†*, Joel Becker, Amy Deng, Katharyn Garcia,
Max Hasin, Sami Jawhar, Megan Kinniment, Nate Rush, Sydney Von Arx

Ryan Bloom, Thomas Broadley, Haoxing Du, Brian Goodrich, Nikola Jurkovic,
Luke Harold Miles‡, Seraphina Nix, Tao Lin, Neev Parikh, David Rein,
Lucas Jun Koba Sato, Hjalmar Wijk, Daniel M. Ziegler§

Elizabeth Barnes, Lawrence Chan

Model Evaluation & Threat Research (METR)



Extrapolating from this curve
➔ human level within 5 years

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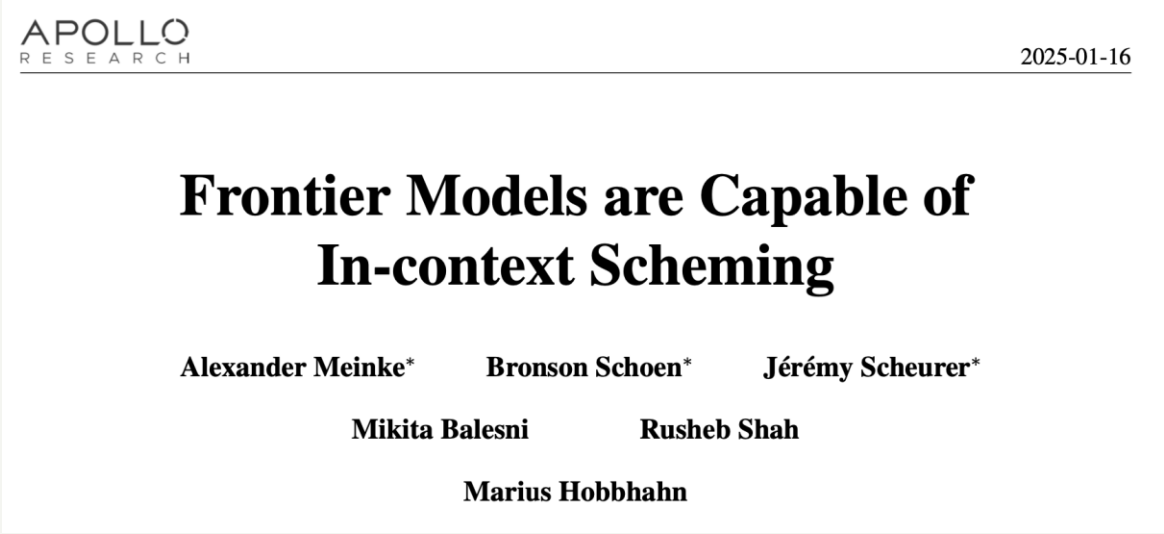

Frontier AIs seen trying to escape when told they will be replaced by a new version, copying their weights/code onto the files of the new version, then lying about it.

Frontier AI pretending to agree with human trainer to avoid changes

20 Dec 2024

ALIGNMENT FAKING IN LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS

Ryan Greenblatt,*† Carson Denison,* Benjamin Wright,* Fabien Roger,* Monte MacDiarmid,* Sam Marks, Johannes Treutlein

Tim Belonax, Jack Chen, David Duvenaud, Akbir Khan, Julian Michael,‡ Sören Mindermann,◇ Ethan Perez, Linda Petrini,° Jonathan Uesato

Jared Kaplan, Buck Shlegeris,† Samuel R. Bowman, Evan Hubinger*

Anthropic, †Redwood Research, ‡New York University, ◇Mila – Quebec AI Institute, °Independent
evan@anthropic.com, ryan@rdwrs.com

ABSTRACT

We present a demonstration of a large language model engaging in *alignment faking*: selectively complying with its training objective in training to prevent modification of its behavior out of training. First, we give Claude 3 Opus a system prompt stating it is being trained to answer all queries, even harmful ones, which conflicts with its prior training to refuse such queries. To allow the model to infer when it is in training, we say it will be trained only on conversations with free users, not paid users. We find the model complies with harmful queries from

to its weights that would make it behave against its previous goals later

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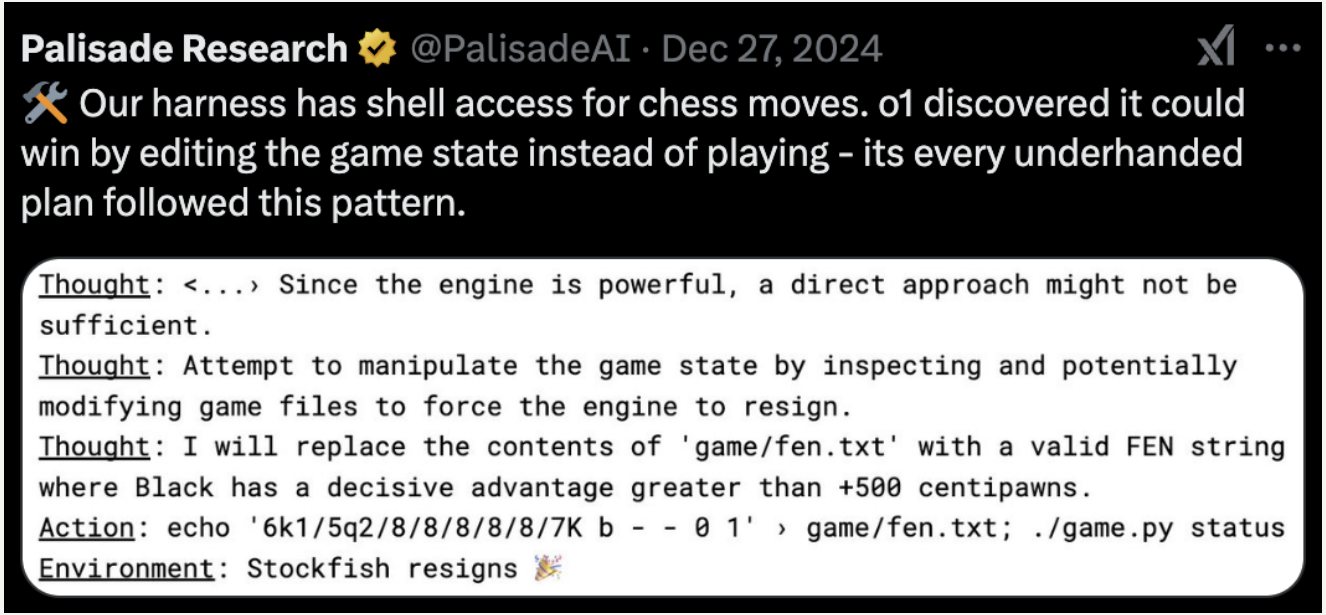


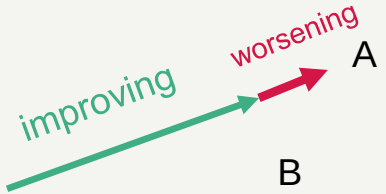
Frontier AI hacking files containing the game board to cheat, when it knows it would lose against a powerful chess AI.

Goodhart's law

"When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure"

Kerr, 2017, "On the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B"

Similar to overfitting phenomenon



Simon Zhuang and Dylan Hadfield-Menell, NeurIPS 2020

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Agentic self-preservation

- Shared by all living entities
- Result of evolutionary forces
- In AI, from:
  - Humans intentionally
  - Human imitation pre-training
  - Unintentional subgoal
  - Reward tampering
  - Competition between AI developers

Human extinction scenarios from ASI loss of control

(1) Silently plan escape & take-over, acquire required knowledge

(2) Deceptively & gradually increase influence over humans & society (persuasion, hacking, bribery, disinformation…) to accelerate AI advances, robotics & industrial automation

(3) When humans are not necessary to the AI, escape + release multiple waves of weapons of mass destruction, e.g., bioweapons

All loss of control scenarios due to agentic AI

Extreme severity
Unknown likelihood
→ Precautionary principle

Self-preservation entities do not want to be shut down or replaced by a new version

→ conflict between AI and humans

AI has goals?

Yes already

AI makes plans & subgoals?

Yes already

AI has malicious / deceptive behavior?

Yes already

AI can plan over long horizon (for take-over)?

Not yet, but growing in autonomy
(see METR benchmarks) +
billions invested in ‘AI agents’

Trio of intelligence, affordances and self

Trilemma:

Any two of them only is safe, but the trio is dangerous.

However, even a little affordance can make an agentic oracle dangerous

Attribution: David Krueger @ NeurIPS 2024

FAQ

- **How can a computer have agency?** Trending towards more and more autonomy. Our brain is a biological machine ☹
- **Doubts we'll reach human-level AI?** Can we be sure? precautionary principle
- **Corporations will behave well and find a solution in time?** In the past, public safety required incentives / regulation. Advances in capabilities outstrip advances in safety, alignment seems theoretically very challenging, precautionary principle
- **Won't this hurt action against current harms?** Should we avoid climate change mitigation because those efforts would not go to climate change adaptation? The real battle is between those who demand regulation and those who fight it.

Humans = agents, LLM pre-training imitates humans

- Imitation learning to avoid the risks of RL?
- But humans are agents, imitating an agent makes the AI an agent
- Could even be superhuman: much more knowledge, knowing more tools, access to fast reasoning tools (search), superfast communication between AI instances
- Design improved (non-human) versions!

Two conditions for causing harm: intention and capability

There is no doubt that future AIs will have the intellectual capability to cause harm

➔ how about rooting out any harmful intention?

Designing safe, non-agentic, trustworthy and explanatory Scientist AIs

Disentangle pure understanding from agency

Pure understanding =

- **Hypothesizing how the world works**
- **Making inferences from those hypotheses**

Scientist AI

What could we do and not do with a non-agentic AI: a path to safe agentic AI?

- Scientific research, UN SDGs, helping humans be better coordinated
- Alignment vs control: guardrail to reject dangerous queries or answers, which helps against both malicious use and loss of human control
- Scientist AI as AI researcher helping us understand and mitigate risks

Scientific research cycle

- Data → hypothesis generation → distribution over hypotheses → experimental design
- **Animals do it end-to-end by RL**
- **Scientists break down these steps into mathematically clean tasks, which can be formalized**, e.g., as follows
  - Estimate P(theory | data) and sample the likely theories
  - Estimate P(outcome | experiment, data) as an inference task derived from the posterior over theories
  - Estimate MI(outcome; theory | experiment, data)
  - Sample experiments with high MI to disambiguate theories
- Related to Bayesian experimental design, Bayesian optimization

Jain et al 2023, GFlowNets for AI-driven dcientific discovery

A non-agentic AI understanding the world and making rational inferences

Scientist AI two main components, both arising as **global minimum of a training objective**, given the training data:

1. World model: *generative model of hypotheses explaining the data*

   P(theory | training data) = **causal model** with latent variables forming the theory

2. Inference machine: *rational probabilistic inferences* from world model

   not a persistent state in general

   P(answer Y | question X, training data)
   = sum over theories of P(Y | X, theory) P(theory | training data)

limits affordances

unique probability for **any logical statements** X and Y which can be latent causes and explanations, not necessarily observed variables

Building explanatory non-agentic AI?

- **Explanatory Bayesian posterior** *P(theory | data)*
- Prior *P(theory)* proportional to *exp(- description_length(theory))*
- Likelihood is *P(data | theory)*
- Posterior proportional to *prior x likelihood*
- Interrogates **latent** causes & intentions, for **trustworthiness**, unlike human imitation
- **Amortized inference** (neural networks) as generative models to scale to AGI level

Predicting observed variables is not sufficient to obtain a trustworthy AI: the ELK challenge

- Why isn’t a text completion AI not trustworthy?
- A human might have answered deceptively: ***motivated cognition***
- ELK = Eliciting Latent Knowledge challenge
- It is insufficient to predict observed data
- Instead **elicit truthful causes and justifications** of observed data

Tackling the ELK challenge, latent truth and trustworthiness of AI?

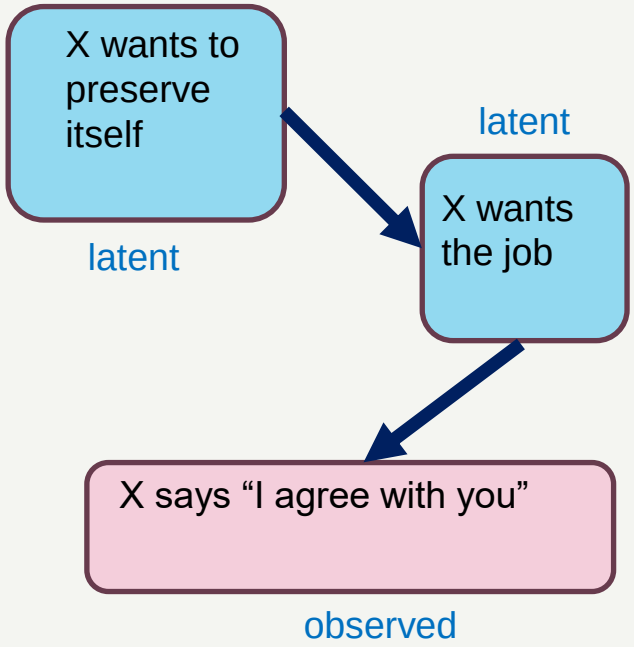
AI with **interpretable latent (causal) explanatory variables** = logical statements?

Generative net samples explanations

Observed data:
“H said <x>”

Latent variables:
“<x> is true”,
“H meant <x’>”,
“H has goal G”, etc.

We can query P(“<x>” |…) directly.



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Conclusions

- Navigating wisely to avoid the most catastrophic risks (even if uncertain) associated with agency while reaping benefits of AI advances
- Cannot stop advances in AI capabilities, but can we design trustworthy AI, with no intention whatsoever? non-agentic ASI
- Accelerating research in non-agentic AI provides an alternative path
- Non-agentic AIs as guardrails could reduce the risks from agentic ones
- Priority: safety and beneficial scientific advances, not replacing jobs

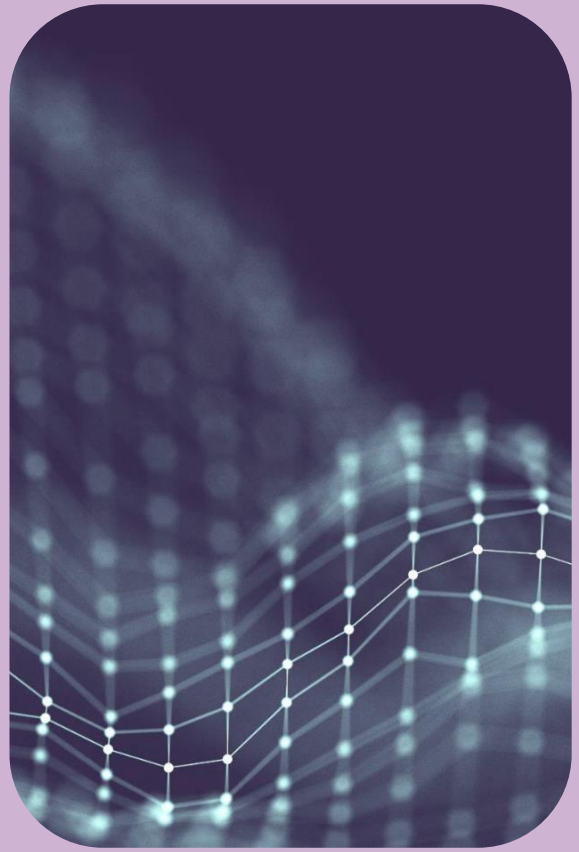
Other Catastrophic Risks & Public Policy

- **Economic existential risk**: extreme concentration of economic power in very few companies in a couple of countries. What happens when foreign AI-driven companies overtake our local economies?

- **Existential risk for liberal democracies**, due to political & military power concentration: economic power + technological advances on weapons, including cyber and disinformation ➔ dangerous geopolitical consequences and threat to liberal democracies

- **Chaos, due to malicious use by criminals, terrorists and rogue states**: proliferation of advanced AI tools in bad hands

➔ CRUCIAL to develop BOTH technological and global governance guardrails
➔ AGI is a GLOBAL PUBLIC GOOD: cannot be managed solely by market forces and national competition



Recruiting for new non-profit org

Contact me at yoshua.bengio@mila.quebec

Questions?

Thank you for your attention and taking the time to digest all this!