Untitled

by Mary Ann

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In modern digital societies, algorithms are becoming a defining influence on the choices, behavior, and even perceptions of reality among individuals. In the morning, Sai dreams about the music that he is picked to take part in, he eats the food Tilly suggests, he visits the places that Tilly mentions to him, and he falls in love with the people that Tilly points him to. This does not bother him. That is that sort of nice numbness that Ken Liu is attempting to warn us against in The Perfect Match. Liu posits that as people relinquish their free will to algorithm-based technologies, they risk not only the loss of their privacy but also the destruction of their autonomy and identity, an argument that he strengthens by employing a technique of rhetoric known as the use of irony. Finally, Liu argues that despite promising their efficiency and comfort, calculations eradicate the fundamental human ability to think independently and act of their own will.

Liu builds out this critique by applying the strategic irony to reveal the illusion of autonomy in an algorithmically controlled life. The main character, Sai, seems to lead a perfect life. Yet, Liu takes his time to reveal the fact that this smooth flow is not happiness but a highly elaborated jailhouse. It is this irony that comes up when Sai initially calls into question his concern regarding Tilly as Jenny practicing her pseudo-intellectual anti-technology rant, only to recognize later that Tilly is not just telling her what she wants but what to think as well (Liu 32). This turnabout indicates the situational irony when Sai thinks that he is being intellectually dominated when, in fact, he is actually being intellectually dominated. This would be the textbook case of what Ruggieri calls an unnecessary assumption: Sai assumes that, since the

suggestions made by Tilly have always been true to it, it is right, which is like confusing algorithmic correctness with true self-knowledge. They are not. The second myth that we ought to be careful of, as Ruggieri notes, is the assumption that things should be the way they are (Ruggieri 105). This is what sort of blunder Sai has made wholesale to perplex manufactured contentment in Centillion with flourishing.

Liu also criticizes algorithmic control in terms of the normalization of mindless conformity, where people without any thought adopt dominant technological systems. The entire social life of Sai is placed within the ecosystem of Centillion: Sai's work, his love life, his stores, and his temper after a breakup. When Jenny inquires about this, Sai is not interested, just irritated. He muses that Centillion is not a large, frightening government, but rather an independent company, the motto of which also happens to be "Make things better!" (Liu 133). This reaction is part of what Ruggiero refers to as mindless conformity, in which individuals conform to the group due to their laziness or fear of offending others (Ruggiero 107). Sai has not reasoned himself into thinking Centillion; he has merely imbibed the business opinion around him. His neighbor Jenny, who wraps her cameras and issues a phone cover, appears paranoid and antisocial since the social norm has shifted far up towards keeping a comprehensive surveillance on that the social norm now seems insane to resist.

Liu further shows that when rational agency is suppressed, it is likened to compromising human flourishing by overriding the autonomous decision-making process with a system of optimization control. The notion of eudaimonia as human flourishing through the virtuous and rational activities is the key concept that helps grasp the critique of Liu. In the article entitled The Aim of Man, Aristotle assumes that pleasure or comfort is not the greatest

good of human beings, but the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue and exercise of the principle of reason (Aristotle 14). A good life is active; according to Aristotle, one must make choices, deliberate, fail, and learn. A man whose judgments are determined by an algorithm is not prospering; he belongs to the domain of Aristotle, which is nearer to the vegetable than to rational human beings. Liu makes this point dramatically when Sai tries to remember his girlfriend's name at the beginning of the story and simply cannot (Liu 8); he had outsourced the memory to Tilly. A man who forgets the name of the individual he is going to fall in love with has already started self-dissolution.

Liu further extends his critique by illustrating how algorithmic control reduces individuals to predictable and interchangeable patterns of behavior, thereby eroding human spontaneity and individuality. In her article Total Domination, Hannah Arendt provides the perspective that can be viewed that closely complements Liu's narrative. Arendt argues that totalitarian systems function by reducing human beings to "a bundle of reactions" that "can be exchanged at random for any other" (Arendt 88). The eventual intention of this domination is to destroy spontaneity- the individuality of every person, which is what makes them unique. Centillion is not a concentration camp, but Liu makes a structural comparison, especially in the story's ending. When Rinn, Centillion's founder, tells Sai that "without Tilly, you can't do your job, you can't remember your life, you can't even call your mother" (Liu 285), he is describing the exact condition Arendt identifies. The inner life of a person is so controlled in this state that he does not exist anymore; he exists in this system that controls him. Arendt writes that this process produces "inanimate men" who "can no longer be psychologically understood" (Arendt 91) as human. At the end of the story, Sai is not exactly there but is close to being there.

Moreover, Liu reinforces his central argument by demonstrating how algorithmic systems actively shape and manipulate human choices while maintaining the illusion of personal autonomy. The continuity of the story to the contemporary world is not just symbolic--it is literal. Researchers like Shoshana Zuboff have explored what she describes as surveillance capitalism: the mass-scale amassing of human behavioral information by multinational corporations such as Google and Facebook to make predictions and act upon them to generate money. This system, according to Zuboff, is a novel model of power. It is not based on force but rather operates through the manipulation of choice, which is often invisible. That is exactly how Tilly works. Users believe they are making independent decisions, but in reality, their environment has been carefully shaped to guide those decisions. Similarly, the concept of "filter bubbles" demonstrates how algorithmic control of information creates intellectual isolation, reinforcing Liu's depiction of Centillion's influence over perception (Dahlgren 23). This is reflected in Jenny's warning to Sai that "everything you know now comes filtered through Centillion" (Liu 150). This isolation is further magnified over time. People become, as Jenny says, "more docile and grow more wool for Centillion to shave off" (Liu 154). This is not a hypothetical piece of fiction; it adheres to the known framework of the contemporary attention economy.

Liu further emphasizes the dangers of uncritical acceptance by showing how restricted perspectives prevent individuals from making independent moral judgments. Mary Midgley, in "Trying Out One's New Sword on a Chance Wayfarer," also offers an argument that can be applied to a different but related context. Midgley is critiquing moral isolationism, i.e., the thought that we are not in a position to judge practices out of our own cultural or social situation. She then expounds on the view that moral judgment is a necessity. She writes,

"Without opinions of this sort, we would have no framework of comparison for our own policy, no chance of profiting by other people's insights or mistakes" (Midgley 6). This is the role played by Jenny in the story by Liu. The outsider is she, being Chinese-born and having grown up suspicious of surveillance, who is the only person Sai cannot see (Liu 145). By making Jenny propose that the only way technology can be critically assessed within a certain environment is to look at an external environment, this is precisely what Liu would claim that this is exactly what Midgley is referring to. Sai's inability to judge Centillion is not simply a personal weakness. It has come as an inevitable consequence of residing completely inside a regime that regulates the information that is accessible to it.

Liu's argument is developed through a nuanced and balanced portrayal of technology, particularly through the technique of moral ambiguity and the idea that technological systems can simultaneously enhance efficiency and threaten human autonomy. Notably, Liu does not argue that technology is evil in nature. He entrusts some of the most persuasive lines in the narrative to Rinn. Rinn argues that Centillion prevents serious crimes, such as child exploitation, exposes drug cartels, and even helps topple dictators (Liu 273). These are real advantages. However, the story's argument is more nuanced. According to Liu, autonomy can never be substituted for efficiency and convenience. It is not a fully human life to live an optimized life that is prescribed to one by an external algorithm, however well thought out. When Sai finally turns Tilly off and sits quietly with Jenny, he realizes that "he was on his own. And it was exhilarating" (Liu 204). This moment aligns with Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, in which genuine human flourishing arises from the exercise of independent rational choice rather than externally guided optimization (Aristotle). This moment also provides emotional proof of Liu's central idea. The emotion Sai has is not

merely relief or pleasure. It is the overwhelming feeling of life in his own world, first.

This experience reflects Aristotle's concept of human flourishing (eudaimonia), grounded in rational and self-directed activity. The last picture of the story, the camera being ready to caution red in the darkness after Tilly is allegedly switched off, gives rise to the impression that no resolution is offered. The machinery is inefficient in letting go of those upon whom it relies. This is the most disturbing implication by Liu. This story gives the impression that surveillance capitalism is not only threatening the autonomy of humans, but that it might also be virtually impossible to evade once one has been completely integrated. Rinn's statement, "the only choice is to adapt" (Liu 298), is chilling because it may reflect reality. Sai is unable to carry out simple tasks without Tilly. He is not able to remember his own past. He cannot recall his own past. In a meaningful sense, the digital copies of his life have replaced the original experiences.

The Perfect Match ultimately raises a serious concern about the nature of human life itself under algorithmic control. It describes what Aristotle was most afraid of: a comfortable, efficient, and even nice life that is, essentially, empty. The ability to choose wisely for oneself is unobtrusively lost in such a life in favor of convenience. Liu believes that this exchange is not a hypothetical one--it already occurs. The majority of individuals, such as Sai, are already integrated into systems that influence their decisions and beliefs. The narrative challenges the reader to answer a thorny question: can one reclaim autonomy, and at what price? In this way, Liu's story is not merely relevant to contemporary society; it functions as a direct reflection of it, exposing the quiet normalization of algorithmic dependence in modern life.