

"Look, I don't know whether Jesus was a man, a god, an alien, or a magic mushroom dream. I don't care. The world needs fixing, and I don't intend to wait around for extraterrestrial beings to come down and take care of everything. Are we agreed?"

Some of them had heard him talk like this before, many times. Others were bemused, wondering whether he wanted to be a hero, a god, or something else entirely. Most were skeptical about his motives, methods, and prospects. But they couldn't fault his logic; earth needed saving. Humanity needed saving. So in the end, they all agreed.

It took them a long time to build it. Actually, it was a work in progress all throughout their lives. If they'd been any more ambitious, the project would have been doomed to failure, outliving everyone who was committed to it without producing worthwhile results. But they kept their focus narrow, and narrowed it further as they went. They weren't trying to build a machine that would know everything and do everything. They didn't have equations for predicting the behavior of large groups of people over time. But they built what was most urgently needed. Even then, it took many of the best thinkers of their generation, giving all that they had.

The Intelligent Extrapolating Social Unity System, despite its grand name, didn't try to unite the world or create a utopia. Not directly, at least. It simply watched for problems, and helped its human operators work out what to do about them. Specifically, it monitored the rat race, everyone working to get ahead, and it predicted when and where this would lead to problems. Because when everyone tries to get ahead of everyone else, by default, everyone loses. Like a bucket of crabs, preventing each other from getting out.

Some of the trends were easy to spot. Inflation was an obvious one. Businesses raise prices, workers demand higher wages, and the result is that everyone moves into a higher tax bracket, and employers look for cheap labor elsewhere. Some traps were less obvious. But over and over again, IESUS would spot the places where people would invest their time and resources simply in competing against each other.

Sometimes the problem was too big for a small group to change. Sometimes it was too small to become a priority. Sometimes there were mistakes. IESUS warned about the risk of collapsing housing bubbles and stock market bubbles so often that on the occasions it actually happened, everyone was taken by surprise. But year by year, as they fed in more and more demographics, social studies, financial reports, and softer data like news items and social media feeds, gradually the predictions became more reliable.

Even with reasonably solid predictions, it was hard to make changes. Fortunately, IESUS could help out there, predicting the effects of different actions. And although self-interest and shortsightedness are relentless foes, ruling the entire world, nonetheless they are blind. They pay no attention when someone makes an incursion into their domains. So, if you're smart enough, you can feed the right ideas to the right leaders and influencers, and push back a little against the tide. And IESUS, by this time, was smarter than anyone else on earth. It could see opportunities for politicians to get things done while winning votes. Its prediction algorithms could be used to shape business regulations and traffic regulations and

social programs that would bring small improvements, making a difference without provoking significant opposition. As its database of human interactions grew, it could identify the right messages to send - maybe not the wording, but the messages - to make a difference in how people think. Maybe just a few percentage points of difference, or even less. But enough that over time, the rat race gradually slowed down.

All this time, IESUS was never in direct control of anything. It merely presented predictions and simulations - endless streams of them, constantly updating for new data and projecting hypotheticals for its operators. The work of making changes was always left to human beings. Some of its offshoots took a more direct role. When a program based on IESUS' mass prediction algorithms started directing traffic lights, anticipating the behavior of every known car at once to better optimise the system, it was quickly nicknamed Moses, because of its tendency to change a sea of red lights to green in front of you as you approached. Algorithms for reasoning about human interactions found a home in spam filtering and were nicknamed Mohammed, the last messenger (though not so much among Muslims). Ultimately, though, the big decisions were simply offered as helpful advice.

Many years later, when a craft approached Earth in a blaze of light that filled the sky, and was first contacted by a Moon outpost, there was no cataclysm, no-one being evacuated from a dying world, no consuming fire. The visitor came, and spent some time behind closed doors with the people who were quietly optimising the planet, and then went on a goodwill tour, sharing samples of advanced medical technology, and promising to visit again. And then left. And IESUS continued to plan for prosperity and peace, for a thousand years, until the world had developed a greater system that could be trusted to be its ruler.