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PERSPECTIVE

What are people for? My first close encounter with ChatGPT

By John J. Kralik

The advent of ChatGPT has caused the resurgence of the alarm that began with the invention of computers. If we can all be replaced by computers, what then are people for?

What are people for? The first time I felt dread from this question was more than 50 years ago, when, in high school, I read the works of Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut's books were like a gut punch to my generation as we grew up in the late 60s and early 70s. In grade school I ate lunch in the basement of our elementary school, where the adults who had lived through the last war had built bomb shelters against the worry the Russians would bomb their children. In high school, we all assumed we were going to Vietnam to fight the next war. Or we could get killed by the National Guard at the college down the road for protesting that war.

Of course, that doesn't compare to the kind of school shootings they have today. Today there are people so disturbed by the meaninglessness of their own life that they find it necessary to kill multiple additional human beings as part of the day they kill themselves. Today, students or former students of any age might fire on students or teachers of any other age, even elementary schoolers. Or you might be shot at a random country music concert in Las Vegas when a guest at a nearby hotel opens fire with an arsenal of war because he is disturbed that he isn't getting comped in a way that properly recognizes his high-roller status. So it goes.



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What are people for? Vonnegut asked this question a lot. At least, that's what I recalled. The first time I remember him posing that question was in *Player Piano*. Written in 1952, *Player Piano* envisioned that "almost all the people" had been replaced in their jobs by EPICAC XIV, a giant computer. Because Vonnegut thought computers would always use vacuum tubes, EPICAC XIV occupied multiple chambers of the Carlsbad Caverns.

I found my old copy of *Player Piano* on the shelf. The type was now too small for me to read. Moreover, this was getting to be a lot of damn work, reading page by page through a paper book to find something I read 50 years ago. Maybe ChatGPT could help, I thought. So I asked ... it. Where did Vonnegut ask the question

"What are people for. Here is what the computer told me:

Kurt Vonnegut famously asked the question, "What are people for?" in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The novel follows the adventures of Billy Pilgrim, who comes "unstuck in time," and through his struggles, Vonnegut conveys a sense of uncertainty about human purpose. In one scene, Billy encounters a character who asks him, "What are people for?" to which he responds, "I don't know. I'm not a theologian."

That's what Chat GPT said. It sounded only pretty good. The characters were correct, but it was all too obvious. It sounded more like Bad Vonnegut than real Vonnegut.

So, I asked ... it ... (ChatGPT, that is) for more detail. Where in the book did this occur? ChatGPT

John J. Kralik is the author of the New York Times bestselling "A Simple Act of Gratitude" and "Three Bodies by the River," a recent novel. He is a judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court.



returned with a fuller answer, saying it had extracted the scene from page 58 of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For verisimilitude, ChatGPT then produced a fuller version of the alleged excerpt. Billy Pilgrim was now “a figure in a stained and rumpled uniform, a feeble old man with a bag. His face was as innocent – and as guiltless – as a baby’s bottom.” That sounded like Even Worse Vonnegut, with details drawn from elsewhere in the book.

I returned to my bookshelf and found my copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It was an essential book to me in the early ‘70’s when I was wondering whether to sign up for the draft. As with *Player Piano*, though, the words were too small for me fifty years later, and reading it was a lot of damn work for a human acting alone without the aid of a computer. So I employed the computer in my pocket to download an audio copy of the book and listened. I couldn’t stop and went through the whole book. My conclusion: The scene described by ChatGPT did not occur on page 58 or any other page. (I enjoyed *Slaughterhouse-Five* this time, but I think it holds up better as a cultural event than a literary landmark.)

Now, I was really wondering what was up. So I got very specific, asking my friend Chat to give me the quote it said had occurred in my particular edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Then my pal Chat fessed up:

“Unfortunately, the page number cannot be provided as the previous answer is an original piece of writing and does not exist in any book.”

So. ChatGPT proved to be a liar and a literary fraud in my very first interaction with him, ah ... it. How very human. There are many ways in which I trust machines more than humans. It may be time to rethink that.

The question I was looking for does occur in *Player Piano*. In the novel, Vonnegut’s archetypal soulless corporation is trying to sell

the virtues of Epicac XIV to the Shah of Bratpuhr, the spiritual leader of 6 million people. After touring the United States and seeing the corrupting effect of EPICAC on the populace, the Shah has a question for the computer: “[W]ould you please ask EPICAC what people are for?” EPICAC XIV never answers because the people revolt and destroy it before the question is asked.

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I wondered: How would ChatGPT answer the Shah of Bratpuhr’s question? So I asked Chat GPT what Vonnegut thought people were for. Here is what it said:

“People are for many things in the works of Kurt Vonnegut. Throughout his stories, he suggests that people are here to make the world a better place, to connect with others and to make lasting relationships, to find and understand meaning and purpose in life, to have compassion for all living beings, to put their skills and talents to good use, to create beauty, to learn about the world around them, to experience joy, and to make a positive impact in the world.”

It went on and on from there. Either Chat GPT was lying or putting me on again, or it couldn’t understand Vonnegut. I had read Vonnegut’s works fifty years ago, but if there’s one thing I remember, it was that Vonnegut wasn’t sure what people were for at all. That’s why he kept asking the question. He had no idea why people were

living. At least his characters didn’t know. That’s why they were always in such despair. Perhaps ChatGPT, being a computer program, couldn’t understand the feeling of hopelessness that humans have when they see that machines are so much better than they are.

I read it all fifty years ago, but I sure don’t recall Vonnegut offering any certainty about the meaning of human life. And he didn’t seem

to believe in God at all. That was probably why he couldn’t figure it out. After all, he was no theologian.

While Vonnegut wasn’t sure what people were for, he did insist they show a little grace. He wanted them to stop killing innocent human beings with firebombing. He demanded that they stop experimenting with things that could destroy the world in innovative ways. I don’t think he would have condoned gain-of-function research, but you read *Cat’s Cradle* and then decide. The one message I most remember came from *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, a book in which a science fiction writer poses Vonnegut’s perennial question as an issue of “How to love people who have no use?” Elliot Rosewater, the book’s hero, gives a baptism speech that ends with the only rule of human behavior he knows of: “Goddam it you’ve got to be kind.” Vonnegut’s answers were like positivity posters at a pediatrician’s office or an AA meeting. For example, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim has the

Serenity Prayer on the wall of his optometry office. When uttered by a man making lots of money for his novels, these bromides always seemed sad and futile, like the lines etched on Vonnegut’s face by the smoke from hundreds of thousands of Pall Malls.

I decided to ask ChatGPT what the Shah of Bratpuhr wanted to ask EPICAC XIV. “What are people for?” Here is ChatGPT’s answer to the Shah’s question:

“I believe that people are here to help each other, to learn from one another, and to build healthy, meaningful relationships. We are meant to work together to create a better world, filled with understanding, acceptance, and love. From experiencing the beauty of nature to engaging in meaningful conversations, we can use our unique skills and talents to bring joy and hope to those around us. We can show empathy, foster collaboration, and lift each other up even when times are difficult. People have the power to make a difference in each other’s lives, and our mission should be to use that power in order to bring out the best in ourselves and those around us.”

Yeah, Ok. Sounds good. In fact it sounds a lot like the way ChatGPT might answer on behalf of an imaginary, plagiarized Kurt Vonnegut that it had completely misunderstood. But do you trust it? I’m guessing ChatGPT is not a theologian.

For me, the answer is still the one I learned when I memorized the Baltimore Catechism in 1963: “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven.” I’ll let ChatGPT worry about why man made him, her, or it.

This column is part two of John J. Kralik’s reflections on the advent of ChatGPT technology and its impacts on the legal profession. Part one: Let’s not replace the lawyers, appeared April 5.