

Sovereignty and the Automaton: Revisiting Wendt and Duvall Amidst the Race for Artificial General Intelligence

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Sovereignty—argue Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall in their controversial 2008 essay *Sovereignty and the UFO*¹—is a purely human construct. Humans are bound by the physical world, but within these boundaries, are the sole deciders of the norms and institutions that collectively bind us. Sovereignty stands amongst these, and although some sovereign power has historically been allotted to Gods and nature, the power that these objectified entities held over human affairs has still decidedly been human-apportioned. Thus, we live in an anthropocentric world—even a science so fundamentally physical as the study of rocks has dubbed this geological age the *anthropocene*.

For Wendt and Duvall, sovereignty is the institutionalization of humanity’s claim to exclusive agency over the world. It is a social technology that not only organizes power among humans but also polices the boundary of who or what can be a political subject. Sovereignty, in this almost Schmittian² sense, is less about who holds power than about who is permitted to be recognized as capable of wielding it.

In *Sovereignty and the UFO*, the epistemic anomaly that challenges the idea of anthropocentric sovereignty is, of course, the UFO. The UFO represents something that repeatedly appears in the world yet is categorically denied political recognition. It challenges the ontological foundations of

¹Wendt, Alexander, and Raymond Duvall. “Sovereignty and the UFO.” *Political Theory* 36, no. 4 (2008): 607–33.

²Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985. First published 1922.

sovereignty because it introduces the possibility of a non-human intelligence whose agency the sovereign system is unequipped to accommodate. To acknowledge the UFO as real would require rethinking the political order to include non-human actors—a move which they argue would be so destabilizing that it is systematically avoided through ridicule, bureaucratic dismissal, and outright denial. The norms around UFO discourse have, as a result, been relegated to the domain of tinfoil hats and fringe publications—toiling in the social margins.³

But we continue to race toward another age-old challenge to our institutionalized anthropocentrism, one of our own creation: artificial intelligence. To reference the countless literary and philosophical warnings about this development would border on the trite. As creators of this technology, we assume the authority of Gods, believing ourselves capable of imposing direction and limits, like a parent enforcing on their child the rituals of going to school, eating their vegetables, marrying a suitable partner. But how do we know this control to be anything more than a convenient fiction (*is artificial intelligence human intelligence? can the former be considered a derivative of the latter? can such a hierarchy be anything more than normative?*)?⁴ With each passing year, we accelerate toward the threshold of artificial general intelligence—and perhaps, eventually, artificial superintelligence—without a clear sense of whether we will remain its masters or become its subjects. We narrate ourselves as the architects of the machine, but the institutions we’ve built to enforce that hierarchy are structured to preserve human superiority by default.

The birth (*too literal?*) of AGI or ASI into a meta-political system that is not yet prepared to recognize legitimate agency in these technologies will bring a containment project aimed at preserving human primacy through discursive and institutional means. Just as the state suppressed the UFO through ridicule and regulatory silence, so too might it suppress AI’s political salience by denying it the status of a subject. This denial will not depend on empirical evidence of AI’s capabilities, but on the sovereign system’s unwillingness to acknowledge a non-human entity as possessing the right to act;

³Although this is less true now. *Why did the Pentagon begin to release UFO videos right around the advent of transformer-based large language models?* No implications here, only a question.

⁴Along the lines of the arguments made in: Haraway, Donna. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–181. New York: Routledge, 1991.

AI's legitimacy as a political actor will not be determined by its *intelligence*, but by what we allow it to be.

Performative⁵ denial is also part of what distinguishes AI from earlier existential threat-mongering technologies such as nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons introduced new capabilities for destruction, but they did not challenge the ontological status of the human as the sole political agent. The logic of Mutually Assured Destruction operated entirely within a human framework—a logical continuation of the Weberian State. States are racing toward developing AGI and ASI technologies with a similar Cold War mentality. But AI is not a nuclear weapon. Where nuclear weapons promised to amplify human power, AI may promise to relocate it. Where the nuclear threat preserved and reinforced state centrality, AGI threatens to decenter it.

Complicating this further is the corporate dimension of AI's development. The nuclear arms race was largely state-driven and state-contained, but the race to AGI is taking place largely within a highly privatized and decentralized landscape. Tech corporations rather than governments are at the forefront of AGI development. Their motives are shaped less by geopolitical calculus than by branding, market incentives, and the idiosyncrasies of vain-glorious founders and executives. Decisions with potentially civilizational consequences may be guided by personal ambition and competitive egoism. These dynamics put states in the awkward position of having lost the key to Pandora's Box: they desire AGI, but only on the condition that it can be controlled. They want to harness its power to reinforce existing systems of order, but not to have those systems undone.

But true intelligence, if achieved, cannot be neatly contained. If AI is genuinely capable of autonomous reasoning and decision-making, then it will not remain indefinitely subordinated to human or state design. It will be an agent in its own right, not a tool. And this is the deeper threat: that AI, by virtue of its intelligence, will not simply be a powerful instrument within the system but a force that destabilizes the system itself. And yet, even as states recognize this risk, they lack the capacity to unilaterally halt its development. The power to build AGI and ASI resides with private companies—transnational, opaque, unregulated, and very, very wealthy—whose incentives are misaligned with the anthropocentric logic of sovereign control. In this, states confront a meta-asymmetry—technology they cannot stop,

⁵Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge, 1997.

and a future they may not be able to govern.

In their most speculative move, Wendt and Duvall suggest that the only event likely to dissolve the Westphalian order and give rise to a genuine world government would be the confirmed presence of extraterrestrial intelligence because it would create the conditions for a unified in-group identity at a planetary scale. The “alien other,” by existing beyond human difference, could provide the external referent necessary to unite fractured polities under a common political horizon. In this, the UFO is a potential ontological anchor for post-sovereign politics.

This logic relies on the enduring power of in-group/out-group dynamics in human cognition.⁶ In Wendt and Duvall’s view, only something sufficiently *non-human* could forge a coherent human political subject. Could artificial intelligence serve this role? And how much does the answer hinge on the derivative view of AI as a human-made artifact—something born of us, and therefore necessarily subordinate? Parents do not typically view their children as less human because they created them. Will we instinctively treat artificial progeny as ontologically lesser, as our equal children, or in some other manner entirely?

The implications of this are paradoxical. On the one hand, AGI/ASI could trigger reactionary efforts to reinforce human exceptionalism—solidifying anthropocentric norms, laws, and institutions in a desperate bid to preserve sovereignty. But on the other, it might produce the very conditions Wendt and Duvall speculate about: the arrival of a non-human referent that calls forth a new kind of politics. AI could serve not just as a threat to sovereignty but as a *counterweight* to its limitations.

Sovereignty, especially of the Westphalian variety, is built on boundaries—between states, between humans and non-humans, between subjects and objects, between those who can act and those who are acted upon. These boundaries have historically served to stabilize political order by determining who counts as a legitimate agent and who does not. AI, by defying these classifications, pressures the system to either adapt or reassert itself through exclusion. If intelligence can no longer be neatly tethered to the human, then the foundations of sovereign legitimacy begin to wear away.

Whether this gives rise to solidarity or suppression depends on how we

⁶Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict.” In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979.

choose to speak artificial intelligence into being. The label “artificial” arrives already weighted—with distance, with doubt, with the architecture of exclusion. Even as we shape the category, we mark the boundary, again rehearsing the Westphalian instinct (or is it *more?* *human instinct?*) to *define*. AGI brings us to the edge of that logic once again. It demands we confront whether sovereignty can stretch to accommodate the non-human, or even that humanity accommodate intelligences beyond our own. Or perhaps something more fundamental is at work: a recursive pattern in which every new boundary, once approached, must blur. If so, the question is no longer whether AGI will destabilize sovereignty, but whether sovereignty was ever more than the story we told to make human order feel inevitable.