

Forager and Farmer

Robin Hanson’s Schema of Human Values: Chronology, Evidence,
Reception, and Implications for AI Futures

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Abstract

For more than fifteen years, the economist Robin Hanson has developed a sweeping account of human values built on a single contrast: between the egalitarian, leisured, permissive habits of our hunter-gatherer (“forager”) ancestors and the hierarchical, hardworking, self-controlled habits demanded by agriculture (“farmer”). On his blog *Overcoming Bias* and in the books *The Age of Em* (2016) and *The Elephant in the Brain* (2018), Hanson argues that humans are forager animals on whom farming was imposed by culture, religion, and fear; that industrial wealth has relaxed those pressures and is pushing us back toward forager values; and that this “reversion” is a temporary luxury of an evolutionarily unusual “dreamtime” that competition—especially the competition of a future crowded with cheap artificial minds—will eventually undo. This report assembles the schema into a single reference. It (i) introduces the core claims and conceptual diagrams; (ii) catalogs Hanson’s relevant writings chronologically, from the 2009 “dreamtime” essay to his 2026 large-language-model-assisted quantifications; (iii) maps the evidence base he draws on, from Christopher Boehm’s reverse-dominance hierarchy to construal-level psychology; (iv) surveys the idea’s reception, including empirical, conceptual, and political criticism and Hanson’s rebuttals; and (v) analyzes every component thesis and mental model, culminating in what the schema predicts for AI and AGI futures. Throughout, Hanson’s explicit claims are distinguished from inference, and the evidentiary status of each supporting source is flagged.

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1 Introduction

Robin Hanson is an economist at George Mason University, a former physicist and artificial-intelligence researcher, and the author of an unusually generative blog, *Overcoming Bias*. Among the many frameworks he has proposed, one has proven especially durable and far-reaching: the **forager**-versus-**farmer** schema. It is at once a theory of prehistory, a theory of contemporary political and moral disagreement, and a theory of the long-run future. This report treats it as a single intellectual object and tries to do it justice—cataloging where Hanson said what, what evidence he leaned on, how others responded, and what the whole structure implies.

1.1 The thesis in brief

The argument runs as follows. For roughly two million years humans lived as mobile foragers in small, fiercely egalitarian bands. Then, about ten thousand years ago, agriculture arrived and demanded behaviors that foragers would have found unnatural: deference to authority, sustained drudgery, sexual restraint, saving, and submission to social rank. Because these behaviors did not come naturally, farming societies had to *install* them—through religion, moralizing gods, shame, fear, and cultivated self-control. The genetic substrate stayed largely forager; the farmer overlay was cultural. Ten millennia sufficed for “big cultural adaptations to farming, but not enough for full genetic adaptation” (Hanson, 2010a).

Industrialization changed the incentive again. As people grew rich and safe, the fear and scarcity that had enforced farmer discipline relaxed, and human nature began to drift back toward its forager default. Hence, in Hanson’s reading, the broad sweep of modern cultural change—declining religion, rising egalitarianism and democracy, sexual liberation, more leisure and travel and art, less war, weaker work ethic, lower fertility—is not “moral progress” in any cosmic sense but a *reversion*: “We live a farmer lifestyle when poor, but prefer to buy a forager lifestyle when rich” (Hanson, 2010i). Yet this reversion is precarious. We can afford forager values only because we are unusually wealthy and face unusually slack selection pressure—a condition Hanson calls the “dreamtime.” Should competition return, so will farmer-like (or even harsher) values. That is the bridge from a theory of the past to a theory of the AI-shaped future.

1.2 Key claims

The schema can be decomposed into the following load-bearing claims, each examined later in this report:

1. **Two value syndromes.** Human values cluster into a **forager** syndrome (egalitar-

ian, anti-domination, leisured, sexually permissive, present-oriented, sharing) and a **farmer** syndrome (hierarchical, hardworking, self-controlled, sexually restrained, future-oriented, ethnocentric) (Hanson, 2010i).

2. **Forager nature is the default.** We are genetically adapted to foraging; the forager syndrome is what feels natural when constraints are removed (Hanson, 2010a).
3. **Foragers resist domination.** Forager bands enforce equality through what Christopher Boehm called a “reverse dominance hierarchy”—the many coordinating to suppress would-be dominators (Hanson, 2010d; Boehm, 1999).
4. **Farming installed new values culturally.** Because farming behaviors were unnatural, they were enforced by religion, moralizing gods, shame, and fear of death (Hanson, 2010b, 2012).
5. **Self-control is culture-control.** What we experience as willpower is largely the internalization of social norms; farming selected for it, partly self-domesticating our species (Hanson, 2010g, 2011).
6. **Wealth → forager.** Rising wealth and safety relax farmer pressures, so values drift back toward forager defaults (Hanson, 2010i, 2025).
7. **Stress → farmer.** Conversely, poverty, fear, and threat push people back toward farmer values; the prediction is symmetric (Hanson, 2010b, 2012).
8. **Near/far bridge.** Forager values are “far-mode” (abstract, idealistic) values and farmer values are “near-mode” (concrete, practical) values; wealth pushes minds into far mode (Hanson, 2010e, 2013).
9. **Political mapping.** The modern left approximates the forager pole and the right the farmer pole—a mapping Hanson offers with explicit caveats (Hanson, 2017; Cowen, 2017).
10. **The dreamtime.** Our wealth lets us indulge “wildly false beliefs and non-adaptive values”; this era is evolutionarily anomalous and temporary (Hanson, 2009).
11. **Maladaptive drift.** Many cherished modern forager values—sub-replacement fertility above all—are maladaptive, sustained only by weak selection (Hanson, 2024a, 2025).
12. **Competition restores farmer values.** If competition returns—paradigmatically in a future economy of cheap, fast-copied minds—selection will favor austere, work-focused, farmer-like values again (Hanson, 2010c, 2016b).

1.3 The core schemas

Four pictures organize the whole argument.

The value matrix. Table 1 lays the two syndromes side by side along the dimensions Hanson uses. The descriptors are drawn from his foundational “Two Types of People” post (Hanson, 2010i), where they appear as parallel prose portraits of a “Type A” (forager) and “Type B” (farmer) person.

Table 1: The two value syndromes, by dimension (after Hanson, 2010i).

Dimension	Forager (“Type A”)	Farmer (“Type B”)
Authority	egalitarian; anti-domination; consensus, equal voice	hierarchy; accept authority and rank; “learn your place”
Work & leisure	fewer hours; more leisure, play, arts	work harder and longer; self-sacrifice, grit
Self-control	spontaneous; present-oriented	high self-control; future-oriented; saving
Sex & family	permissive; tolerant of divorce, abortion, homosexuality; fewer children	restrained; faithful; strong family; more children
Property	weak; sharing, redistribution	strong property in goods and spouses
Mobility	mobile; love travel, nature, novelty	rooted; move less; value order, cleanliness
Religion	weaker, vaguer spirituality	powerful, morally outraged gods
Violence & war	less comfortable with war and cruelty	“better warriors”; less bothered by war
Group & identity	include everyone; deal with conflict informally	honor, shame; identify with co-ethnics; fear outsiders

The switch. Figure 1 renders the central dynamic: the same human nature slides between the two poles depending on felt circumstances. Wealth and safety push it toward the forager pole; poverty, fear, and stress push it toward the farmer pole.

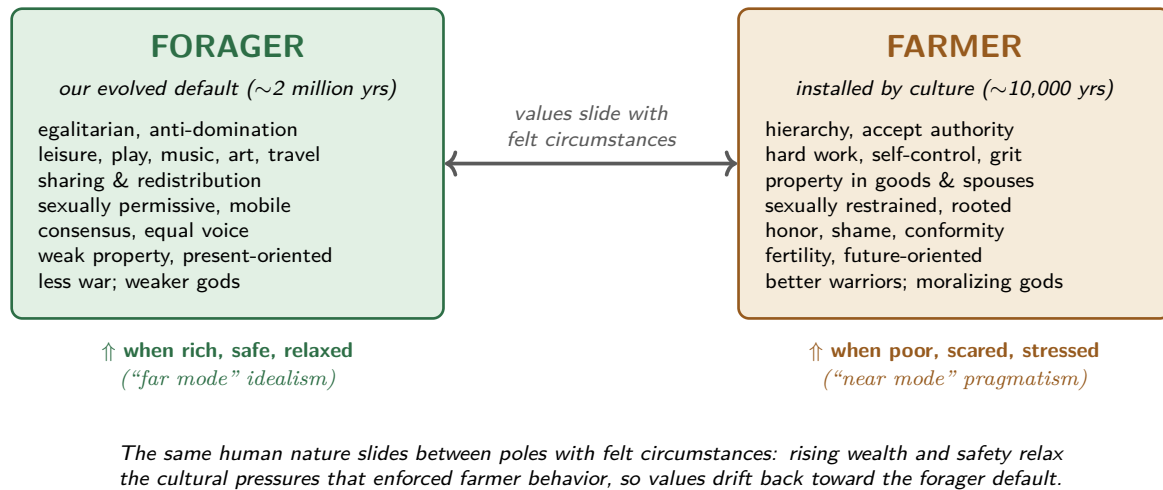


Figure 1: Forager and farmer as two poles of one nature, with the wealth/stress switch.

The arc. Figure 2 plots the schema as a historical arc: high forager-value expression in the forager era, a deep trough during the farming era as culture installs farmer values, a sharp rebound in the industrial “dreamtime,” and a forked, uncertain projection into an AI-shaped future. It is a conceptual schematic of Hanson’s argument, not a measurement.

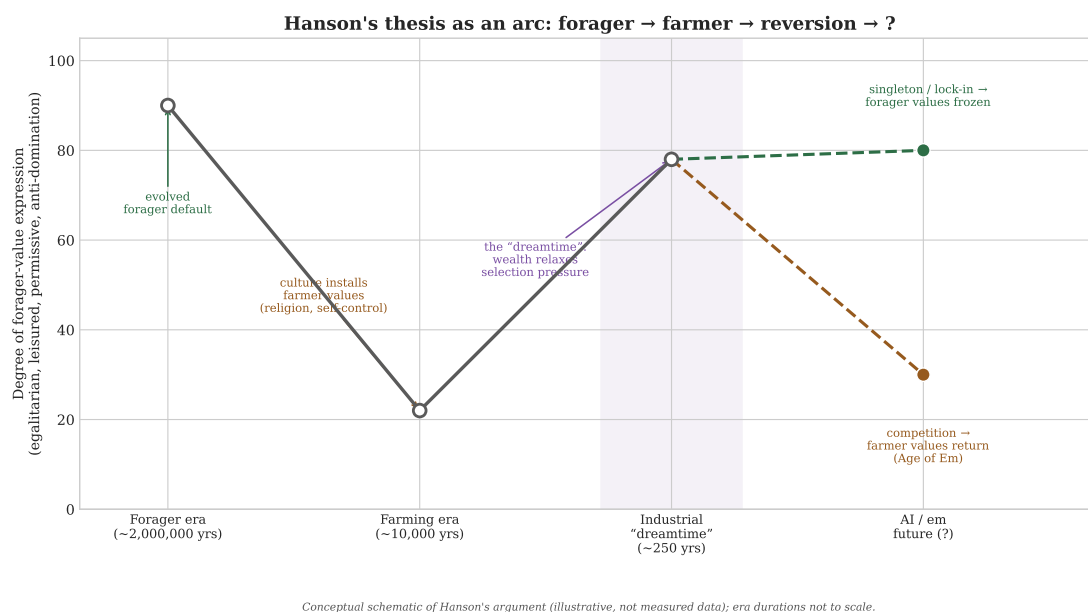


Figure 2: Hanson’s thesis as an arc across human eras (conceptual schematic).

The bridge. Finally, Figure 3 shows how Hanson links the schema to his other major framework, the near/far (construal-level) distinction: forager values live in “far” mode (abstract, idealistic, safe) and farmer values in “near” mode (concrete, practical). This is what makes the schema a theory of present-day psychology and not merely of prehistory.

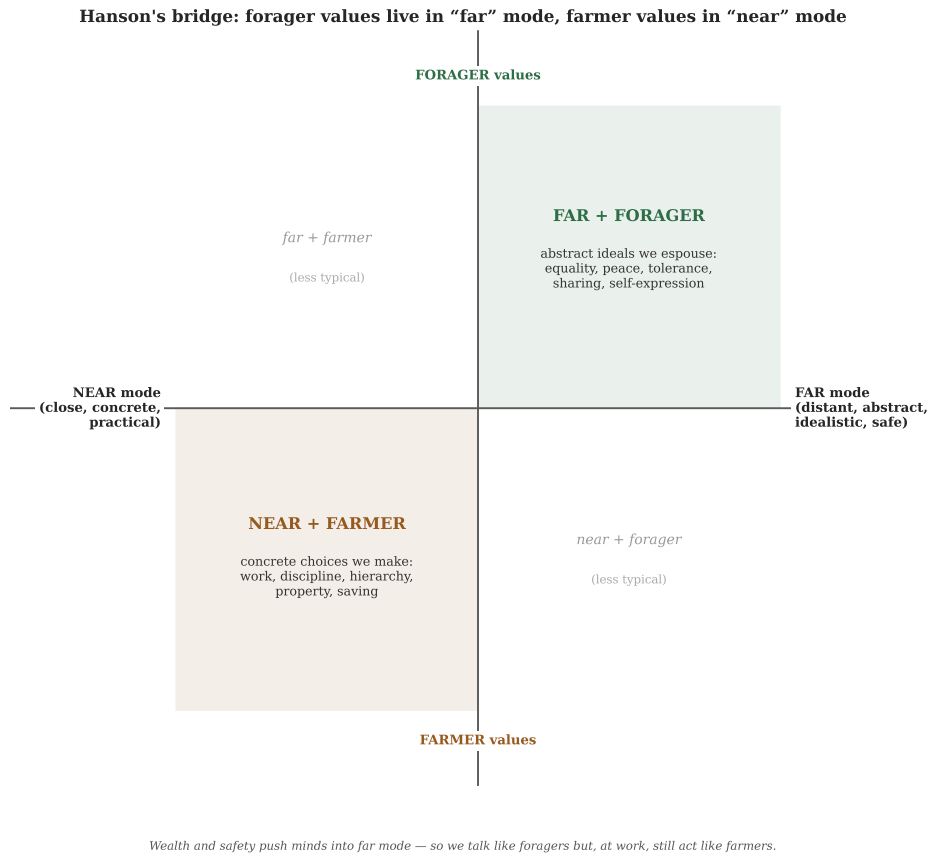


Figure 3: The near/far bridge: forager values as “far-mode” values.

1.4 A note on sources and method

The primary sources for this report are Hanson’s own writings, which were located and date-verified against original *Overcoming Bias* permalinks (which encode the publication date) and current Substack bylines; the chronology in section 2 reflects that verification. The secondary literature and reception sources were likewise checked against their originals. Three cautions are observed throughout. First, Hanson’s explicit claims are distinguished from this report’s synthesis and from other authors’ framings. Second, the schema is, in Hanson’s own words, “more a morality tale than a documentary” (Hanson, 2012); its sharp binary is a deliberate simplification, and Hanson hedges more than a casual reader might assume. Third, a few popular attributions are corrected—for example, the 2010 EconLog post often linked to this debate is by Arnold Kling, not Bryan Caplan (Kling, 2010)—and where Hanson is *not* the source of a commonly associated idea (e.g. the “beer enabled farming” hypothesis), that is noted rather than asserted.

2 A Chronology of Hanson’s Writings

Hanson did not publish the schema as a single treatise; he built it incrementally across dozens of blog posts and two books. Figure 4 shows the temporal and thematic shape of that output: a dense “framing burst” in 2010, periodic consolidations, and a striking 2024–2026 revival in which he returned to the thesis with large-language-model-assisted quantification. Table 2 catalogs the key pieces; the subsections that follow discuss the most important ones.

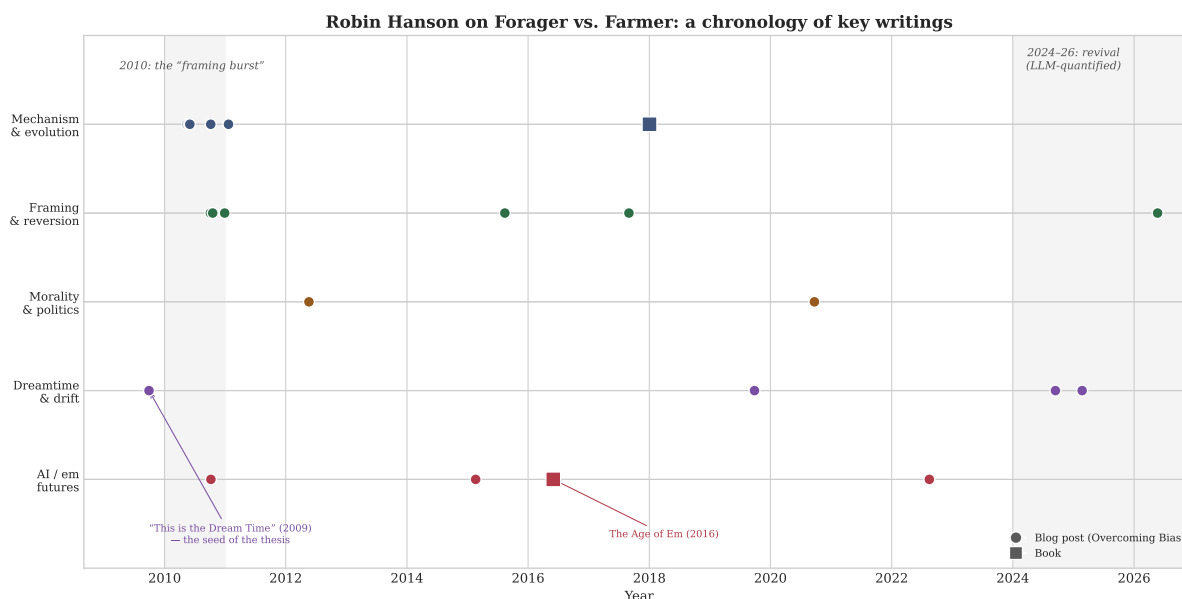


Figure 4: A chronology of Hanson’s key forager-vs-farmer writings, by theme. Each point is one piece; full titles and contributions are in table 2.

Table 2: Hanson’s forager-vs-farmer corpus (verified dates).

Date	Piece	Theme	What it added
2009-09	This is the Dream Time	Dreamtime	Wealth lets us hold “non-adaptive values”; our era is anomalous and temporary.
2010-05	Self-Control is Culture-Control	Mechanism	Farming’s enabler was sensitivity to culture; “self-control” is internalized norms.
2010-05	Hail Christopher Boehm	Mechanism	Adopts Boehm’s “reverse dominance hierarchy” as the forager-egalitarian engine.
2010-06	Near-Far Summary	Mechanism	Sets out construal-level theory, later fused with the schema.
2010-06	Self-Control Is Slavery	Mechanism	Industrial discipline as internalized submission foragers would reject.

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Date	Piece	Theme	What it added
2010-10	Fear Made Farmers	Mechanism	Religion, moralizing gods, and fear of death enforced unnatural farmer behavior.
2010-10	Two Types of People	Framing	The foundational “Type A vs. B” portraits; the wealth→forager line.
2010-10	Forage vs Farm Future	AI / em	First projection forward: competition may favor repurposed farmer virtues.
2010-10	Divide: Forager v Farmer	Framing	Cultural vs. genetic adaptation; ten millennia too short for the latter.
2010-10	Response to Roissy	Framing	Defends the thesis; clarifies “promiscuity” and sides with Pinker on violence.
2010-11	Why Are Rich Stingy?	Framing	Confronts a counterexample: some farmer attitudes help <i>generate</i> wealth.
2010-12	Rome As Semi-Foragers	Framing	Prosperous Rome drifted forager-ward in drink and mating.
2011-01	Dumb Farmers	Mechanism	Self-domestication; brain-size decline, now reversing with wealth.
2012-02	Keynes’ Forager Future	Dreamtime	Reads Keynes’s leisure utopia as a forager projection.
2012-05	Forager, Farmer Morals	Morality	Forager vs. farmer “sins”; ties to Haidt’s moral foundations.
2013-02	Beware Far Values	Mechanism	Far-mode (forager) ideals should not be trusted as our “true” values.
2014-07	Will Rituals Return?	Dreamtime	Rituals declined with wealth; could return if wealth falls.
2015-02	Ian Morris on Foragers... Ems	AI / em	Engages Morris; reversion vs. a new “fossil-fuel” values regime.
2015-08	Specific vs. General Foragers & Farmers	Framing	Distills the “general” forager/farmer worldviews; their adaptiveness.
2016-06	<i>The Age of Em</i> (book)	AI / em	Applies the schema to a Malthusian economy of brain emulations.
2017-08	Forager v Farmer, Elaborated	Framing	The mature restatement: variable thresholds for the “talky collective.”
2018-01	<i>The Elephant in the Brain</i> (book)	Mechanism	Forager-style egalitarian norms as the baseline for hidden motives.
2019-09	Dreamtime Social Games	Dreamtime	Safe rich worlds drift status toward likability over effectiveness.
2020-09	The World Forager Elite	Morality	Global elite consensus mirrors forager band decision-making.
2022-08	MacAskill on Value Lock-In	AI / em	Rebuts permanent value lock-in: immortal organizations still drift.

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Date	Piece	Theme	What it added
2024-09	Dreamtime Drift	Dreamtime	Revisits the 2009 essay; concedes exiting the dreamtime may be painful.
2024-10	Culture Drift Predicts Decadence	Dreamtime	Weak cultural selection → maladaptive drift; fertility as proof.
2025-02	Our Big Oops	Dreamtime	“We’ve broken our superpower”: reversion as accidental maladaptation.
2026-05	Staying Like Foragers	Framing	LLM-scored trends: ~89% of last century’s changes toward forager.
2026-05	Toward-Forager Predictions	Framing	Lists future trends that would confirm continued forager drift.

2.1 Antecedents and mechanism (2009–2010)

The deepest root is “This is the Dream Time” (2009), which does not yet mention foragers and farmers but supplies the engine of the later argument: because we are unprecedentedly rich and fast-changing, “our lives are far more dominated by consequential delusions: wildly false beliefs and non-adaptive values that matter” (Hanson, 2009). Wealth is a buffer that lets maladaptive behavior persist, and our descendants—poorer, nearer subsistence—will find our values as alien as we find a forager’s.

Through 2010 Hanson assembled the mechanism. “Self-Control is Culture-Control” and “Self-Control Is Slavery” argue that the decisive change enabling farming was heightened sensitivity to culture, so that what we call willpower is really the internalization of social sanction (Hanson, 2010g,h). “Hail Christopher Boehm” adopts the anthropological keystone: Boehm’s “reverse dominance hierarchy,” in which forager bands keep themselves egalitarian by collectively suppressing anyone who tries to dominate (Hanson, 2010d). “Near-Far Summary” lays out construal-level theory, which Hanson will soon fuse with the schema (Hanson, 2010e). And “Fear Made Farmers” supplies the enforcement story: “Farming required huge behavior changes, mostly unnatural to foragers. A key enabler seems to have been increased self-control to follow social norms,” backed by “the fear that norm violations could lead to great harm, even death”—fear that “should work better on poor folk for whom death is a more immediate threat” (Hanson, 2010b).

2.2 The 2010 framing burst

In a remarkable two-week stretch in October 2010, Hanson laid down the schema’s public face. “Two Types of People” offers parallel portraits of a flexible, egalitarian, leisured, sexually permissive “Type A” and a disciplined, hierarchical, hardworking, faithful “Type

B,” then reveals that “type A vs. B are actually foragers vs. farmers,” that “a lot of today’s political disputes come down to a conflict between farmer and forager ways, with forager ways slowly and steadily winning out since the industrial revolution,” and that we “buy a forager lifestyle when rich” (Hanson, 2010i). “Divide: Forager v Farmer” supplies the genetics-vs-culture qualification—ten thousand years was “enough time for big cultural adaptations to farming, but not enough for full genetic adaptation,” so “forager ways feel more naturally right when one is rich and safe” (Hanson, 2010a).

Two posts in this burst already complicate the picture in instructive ways. “Why Are Rich Stingy?” concedes a genuine counterexample—richer people and nations are sometimes *less* redistributive, not more—and reconciles it by allowing that some competitive, hierarchical “farmer” attitudes are needed to generate wealth in the first place (Hanson, 2010j). “Response to Roissy” answers an early critic, conceding that everyone free-rides on inherited institutions while defending the directional claim and siding “with Pinker and most anthropologists” on forager violence (Hanson, 2010f). Already in 2010, then, “Forage vs Farm Future” had pointed the schema at the deep future—the subject of section 5.

2.3 Consolidation (2011–2017)

“Dumb Farmers” (2011) adds the self-domestication thesis—“In essence, we domesticated ourselves”—noting that domesticated animals have smaller brains and that human brain size, having shrunk under farming, is rising again with industrial wealth: “yet another way we are returning to forager ways” (Hanson, 2011). “Forager, Farmer Morals” (2012) is the key morality post: forager sins are interpersonal (“bragging, not sharing, being violent against associates”), whereas farmer sins are failures of self-discipline (“being lazy, wanting overly fancy foods, taking drugs”), so “farming culture introduced religion and stronger social pressures . . . to keep farmers from relapsing into foragers”—and liberals, like foragers, invoke fewer of Jonathan Haidt’s moral foundations than conservatives (Hanson, 2012).

The period’s two engagements with Ian Morris (2015) sharpen Hanson’s distinctive claim (see section 4), and “Specific vs. General Foragers & Farmers” (2015) distills the underlying worldviews: the general forager holds that “the world is rich . . . rearrange it so people feel good inside,” the general farmer that “the world is a harsh place and hard to change . . . figure out how to change ourselves” (Hanson, 2015b). The mature synthesis is “Forager v Farmer, Elaborated” (2017), which recasts the left–right divide as differing *thresholds* for relying on a safe, egalitarian “talky collective” versus a Machiavellian resource hierarchy, with safety and wealth lowering the threshold (Hanson, 2017); Tyler Cowen amplified it at *Marginal Revolution* (Cowen, 2017).

2.4 Application and maturation (2019–2025)

After *The Age of Em*, Hanson increasingly used the schema as a lens. “The World Forager Elite” (2020) reads global elite consensus formation—on nuclear power, on pandemic policy—as forager band decision-making writ large, gossip producing a consensus that authorities everywhere feel pressed to obey (Hanson, 2020). “MacAskill on Value Lock-In” (2022) rebuts the idea that AI could freeze values forever, arguing that even immortal organizations drift (Hanson, 2022). Then, in a 2024–2025 cluster, Hanson recast the dreamtime as a theory of decadence: “Culture Drift Predicts Decadence” and “Our Big Oops” argue that weak modern cultural selection lets values “drift” into maladaptation, with sub-replacement fertility the clearest proof, and that “Humanity has accidentally done a big hard oops. We’ve broken our superpower, i.e. cultural evolution by natural selection” (Hanson, 2024a, 2025). “Dreamtime Drift” (2024) revisits the 2009 essay and concedes a point that matters for the AI argument: he had underrated “how hard and painful it might be to raise selection pressures, to return to adaptive behavior” (Hanson, 2024b).

2.5 Recent quantification (2026)

Within days of this writing, Hanson published two posts that quantify the thesis with LLM assistance. “Staying Like Foragers” (2026) reports asking models to score one hundred Western cultural changes in each of several centuries as toward-forager, toward-farmer, or neither, and finds that for the last century roughly 89% of classifiable trends point toward forager values (Hanson, 2026a). “Toward-Forager Predictions” (2026) then lists specific future trends—more business regulation, looser drug and sexual norms, the sacralization of nature, more redistribution, charisma-based status; less militarism, institutional authority, and marriage—that would confirm continued drift, while noting the models give only about two-thirds odds these continue globally (Hanson, 2026b). These posts also drew the sharpest methodological criticism of the schema (section 4).

2.6 The books and the working paper

Three longer-form works anchor the corpus. The working paper “Forager Facts” (Youngberg & Hanson, 2010) is the empirical backbone, using the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample to characterize the most forager-like societies; notably, the authors themselves concede that surviving foragers in marginal lands are “clearly not representative” of ancestral conditions (Youngberg and Hanson, 2010)—a candid caveat critics later pressed. *The Age of Em* (2016b) applies the schema to a future of brain emulations (section 5). *The Elephant in the Brain* (Simler and Hanson, 2018), with Kevin Simler, is not a forager-farmer book per se but rests its account of hidden motives on forager-style egalitarian

norm-enforcement as the evolutionary baseline.

3 The Evidence Base

The schema is a synthesis, and its persuasiveness depends on the sources beneath it. Table 3 summarizes the major ones and—crucially—how each relates to Hanson: whether he *cites* it, whether it *underlies* his argument, or whether it is *background* (sometimes deployed by critics). The subsections then take the load-bearing sources in turn.

Table 3: The evidence base and its relation to Hanson’s argument.

Source	Contribution	Relation to Hanson
Boehm, <i>Hierarchy in the Forest</i> (1999)	Reverse dominance hierarchy; egalitarian foragers	Cited; foundational
Clark, <i>A Farewell to Alms</i> (2007)	Selection for “bourgeois” traits in the farming era	Engaged; underlying
Morris, <i>Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels</i> (2015)	Values track energy-capture mode	Cited; key contrast
Trope & Liberman, construal-level theory (2010)	Far = abstract/idealistic; near = concrete	Cited; load-bearing
Youngberg & Hanson, “Forager Facts” (2010)	Cross-cultural data on forager norms	Hanson’s own
Sahlins, <i>Stone Age Economics</i> (1972)	“Original affluent society”; forager leisure	Background; contested
Lee; Marlowe; Hill & Hurtado (ethnography)	Primary data on egalitarianism, sharing, mobility	Underlying base
Henrich, <i>Secret of Our Success</i> (2016)	Cultural evolution installs psychology	Cited; background
Wrangham, <i>The Goodness Paradox</i> (2019)	Human self-domestication	Parallels Hanson
Pinker (2011); Keeley (1996); Chagnon	Forager/tribal violence rates	Background; used by critics

3.1 Boehm: the reverse dominance hierarchy

Christopher Boehm’s *Hierarchy in the Forest* (1999) is the single most foundational source. Boehm argued that forager egalitarianism is not the absence of a power drive but its active suppression: “the weak combine forces to actively dominate the strong,” policing would-be dominators with ridicule, ostracism, exile, and, in the limit, execution. This “reverse dominance hierarchy” is exactly what Hanson needs to claim that foragers “can’t be dominated” and that anti-bragging, pro-sharing, anti-authority instincts are the human

default; he devoted an appreciative post to it (Hanson, 2010d) and invokes it directly in his mature restatement (Hanson, 2017). Boehm’s later *Moral Origins* (2012) extends the account to the evolution of conscience and shame—useful background for Hanson’s claim that farming *added* morality.

3.2 Clark: selection in the farming era

Gregory Clark’s *A Farewell to Alms* (2007) supplies the second move—that farming did not merely repress forager instincts but actively *selected* for a new psychology. Studying England from 1200 to 1800, Clark argued that the rich out-reproduced the poor, so that downward social mobility diffused “bourgeois” traits (patience, diligence, thrift, low violence) through the population, plausibly by both cultural and genetic transmission. Hanson engages Clark on living standards and worker discipline, and Clark’s selection story underlies the farmer-values posts. One caution: Hanson stays agnostic between genetic and cultural selection, so Clark is best read as the evidentiary *engine* for “farming changed values,” not as a claim Hanson endorses in its strong genetic form.

3.3 Morris: values by energy regime—the key contrast

Ian Morris’s *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (2015) is the closest published parallel to Hanson’s schema, and the contrast between them is the most illuminating in the literature. Morris argues that each *energy-capture mode* rewards a characteristic value profile: foragers reject political and wealth hierarchy but tolerate violence and certain gender inequalities; farmers accept steep hierarchy and patriarchy; and fossil-fuel societies prize political and gender equality while tolerating wealth inequality. The decisive difference: Morris treats modern liberal-egalitarian values as a genuinely *new* (fossil-fuel) adaptation, whereas Hanson reads them as a *reversion* to latent forager values. In “Ian Morris on Foragers, Farmers, Industry, & Ems” Hanson accepts the era-values link but objects that there have been too few industrial generations for Darwinian or cultural *selection* to explain modern values; the better account is the same humans revealing a “common internal condition” as wealth relaxes the farmer overlay (Hanson, 2015a). Construal-level theory is what lets Hanson make that “reversion” move precise.

3.4 Trope and Liberman: the near/far bridge

Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman’s construal-level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010) holds that psychological distance—in time, space, social distance, or hypotheticality—shifts mental representation from concrete and feasibility-focused (near) to abstract, schematic, and value-driven (far), and that people weight core values more heavily in far mode. Hanson built an entire apparatus on this, naming Trope and Liberman directly

(Hanson, 2010e), and mapped forager values onto far mode and farmer values onto near mode. This is the cognitive bridge that converts “ancient forager values” into a present-day, individually toggled disposition: wealth and safety push minds into far mode, where forager ideals flourish—which is why, on Hanson’s account, we espouse forager ideals abstractly while often acting more like farmers in concrete decisions (Hanson, 2013).

3.5 The forager evidence—and its contested status

Beneath all of this sits the ethnographic and archaeological record of actual hunter-gatherers: Richard B. Lee on the Ju/’hoansi (!Kung), Frank Marlowe on the Hadza, Kim Hill and A. Magdalena Hurtado on the Ache, and Marshall Sahlins’s influential “original affluent society” thesis (Lee, 1979; Marlowe, 2010; Hill and Hurtado, 1996; Sahlins, 1972). Hanson’s own contribution, the “Forager Facts” working paper, draws on the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample to characterize forager norms quantitatively (Youngberg and Hanson, 2010). Two cautions belong here, because they anticipate the criticism in section 4. First, the leisure claim is contested: when Lee’s own !Kung data are corrected to include food processing and tool maintenance, weekly effort rises toward forty hours, undercutting the “affluence through leisure” reading of Sahlins. Second, “foragers” are heterogeneous; the egalitarian Hadza and the slave-holding, rank-stratified foragers of the Pacific Northwest both wear the label. Hanson’s “Forager Facts” restricts attention to nomadic foragers precisely to manage this, but concedes the survivors are unrepresentative.

3.6 Self-domestication and cultural evolution

Hanson’s self-domestication claim—“we domesticated ourselves” (Hanson, 2011)—is independently and more fully argued by Richard Wrangham in *The Goodness Paradox* (2019), which holds that humans selected themselves for reduced reactive aggression via the same coalition-against-bullies mechanism Boehm described. Joseph Henrich’s *The Secret of Our Success* (2016), which Hanson cites, supplies the machinery—prestige-biased cultural learning—by which farming-era institutions and religion could install non-instinctive “farmer” psychology; Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson’s gene-culture coevolution (Boyd and Richerson, 2005) is the formal substrate shared by Clark, Henrich, Morris, and Hanson alike.

3.7 The violence sources

Finally, a cluster of work on prehistoric violence—Steven Pinker’s *Better Angels* (2011), Lawrence Keeley’s *War Before Civilization* (1996), and Napoleon Chagnon’s Yanomamö ethnography (Chagnon, 1968)—is relevant chiefly because it is wielded *against* the “peaceful forager” picture. As section 4 discusses, this is largely an attack on a strawman:

Boehm’s and Hanson’s foragers are anti-*domination*, not non-violent—forager egalitarianism is itself partly enforced by the threat of lethal coalition violence—so the high tribal-violence numbers complicate the “noble savage” but do not defeat the anti-dominance claim.

4 Reception: Criticism and Counter-Criticism

The schema is heavily discussed in the rationalist and effective-altruist blogosphere and lightly in academia; there is no large body of dedicated academic rebuttal aimed at Hanson by name. Most empirical criticism targets the *underlying anthropology* rather than Hanson’s synthesis. Table 4 organizes the major responses by stance.

Table 4: Reception of the forager-vs-farmer schema, by stance.

Source	Stance	Thrust
Cowen, <i>Marginal Revolution</i> (2017)	Supportive	Amplifies the left/right mapping.
Alexander, “Book Review: Age of Em” (2016)	Engaged extension	Worries competition strips forager-style leisure.
Laine, <i>No Set Gauge</i> (2020)	Supportive	Uses the schema to read Morris.
WrongBot, “Forager Anthropology” (2010)	Empirical	Forager-violence data oversample sedentary groups.
Karnofsky, <i>Cold Takes</i> (2021)	Empirical	Even nomadic foragers more violent than modern states.
Graeber & Wengrow (2018)	Empirical	Foragers were often seasonally hierarchical.
Power (2018)	Empirical counter	Nomadic foragers <i>were</i> robustly (gender-)egalitarian.
CapnHollis, “Predicting History” (2026)	Methodological	The LLM-scored trends are unfalsifiable / circular.
Bisin, <i>JEL</i> (2017)	Conceptual	Energy→values causation unproven (vs. Morris).
Kling, <i>EconLog</i> (2010)	Conceptual	Modern shift is bourgeois revaluation, not reversion.
Caplan, <i>EconLog</i> (2016)	Political	Income vs. ideology is not one-dimensional.
Morris (2015)	Rival theory	Modern values are a new regime, not reversion.

4.1 Supportive and engaged commentary

The schema’s most visible boosters are within Hanson’s intellectual circle. Tyler Cowen excerpted the 2017 restatement approvingly, quoting Hanson’s own hedges (Cowen, 2017). Scott Alexander treated forager/farmer as one of the “concepts that recur again and again across Robin’s thought,” and—rather than dispute it—used it to voice a worry that

em-era competition would strip away the leisure and “mind-wandering” he associates with forager value (Alexander, 2016b); his “Meditations on Moloch” (Alexander, 2014) is the canonical rationalist statement of the same selection-erodes-values logic. On LessWrong, ESRogs extended the “values track circumstances” frame to forecast future moral change (ESRogs, 2018), and Rudolf Laine used the schema to read Morris (Laine, 2020).

4.2 Empirical criticism: were foragers egalitarian, affluent, and peaceful?

The most substantial criticism attacks the forager picture itself. On *violence*, the LessWrong post “Forager Anthropology” argued that the alarming “20–60% of males died violently” figures rest on sedentary horticulturalists (Yanomamö, Jivaro), not mobile foragers (WrongBot, 2010); Holden Karnofsky’s careful *Cold Takes* treatment concludes that violence probably *rose* at the nomadic-to-sedentary transition, and that even the cleanest nomadic-forager cases were less violent than the broader dataset but still far more violent than modern Western Europe (Karnofsky, 2021). On *affluence*, the “original affluent society” has been revised downward once food processing is counted. On *egalitarianism*, David Graeber and David Wengrow argued that many forager societies were self-consciously experimental and seasonally hierarchical, with some (the Pacific Northwest) maintaining hereditary rank and chattel slavery (Graeber and Wengrow, 2018; Wengrow and Graeber, 2018). Tellingly, the anthropology cuts both ways: Camilla Power replied to Graeber and Wengrow that early *nomadic* foragers were robustly gender-egalitarian (Power, 2018), which partly defends Hanson’s premise.

The decisive interpretive point, made in section 3, is that much of this fire hits a strawman. Hanson’s foragers (following Boehm) are anti-*domination*, not pacifist; forager equality is *enforced* by coalition violence. Hanson himself sided “with Pinker” on forager violence as early as 2010 (Hanson, 2010f). The violence data therefore wound the “noble savage” caricature more than the anti-dominance thesis—though the heterogeneity-of-foragers and contested-affluence points remain genuine pressures on the clean binary.

4.3 Conceptual and methodological criticism

A second line questions the logic rather than the data. The sharpest direct attack is recent: “Predicting History” (2026) charges that Hanson’s LLM-scored trend analysis smuggles in hidden judgment calls—what counts as a trend, which direction is “forager,” which data to exclude—and is therefore unfalsifiable and circular (“an echo chamber with a PhD,” since the models learned from the same cultural record being analyzed) (CapnHollis, 2026). At the level of causation, Alberto Bisin’s *Journal of Economic Literature* review of Morris praises the framework but holds it “falls short of being convincing about the causal nature”

linking production modes to values (Bisin, 2017)—an objection that applies equally to Hanson’s wealth→values mechanism. And Arnold Kling, drawing on Deirdre McCloskey, argued that the decisive modern change was a *revaluation of bourgeois virtues* about two centuries ago—“an important shift of values *within* the farmer era, but not a return to forager values” (Kling, 2010)—challenging the “reversion” framing at its root.

4.4 Political criticism

Because the schema maps left to forager and right to farmer, it draws political fire from both directions. From the right, the pseudonymous blogger “Roissy” argued that modern liberals free-ride on institutions built by farmer-ancestors and that the supposedly natural forager promiscuity ignores jealousy—prompting Hanson’s point-by-point “Response to Roissy” (Hanson, 2010f). More analytically, Bryan Caplan objected that the income–ideology relationship is not one-dimensional: richer people are more socially liberal but more economically conservative, so “forager reversion” depends on a definitional choice about which axis counts (Caplan, 2016). Hanson’s standing reply is that he makes *no* claim that either side’s instincts are on average more helpful (Hanson, 2017; Cowen, 2017).

4.5 The Hanson–Morris exchange

The richest substantive exchange is with Ian Morris, and it clarifies what is distinctive in Hanson. Both posit era-specific, environment-adapted values and both foresee a coming fourth (machine) regime. They differ on *mechanism*: Morris attributes modern values to cultural *selection* “adapted in great detail” to the fossil-fuel era, a genuinely new regime; Hanson replies that selection is far too weak over a dozen industrial generations, so modern values are better read as the *same humans reverting* to latent forager dispositions as the farmer overlay relaxes (Hanson, 2015a). Peter McCluskey’s review sides with neither wholeheartedly, faulting Morris’s mechanism (McCluskey, 2015). The public exchange runs Hanson-reviewing-Morris; there is no published Morris reply to Hanson by name.

4.6 Hanson’s counter-criticism and built-in hedges

Hanson pre-empts much of this. He repeatedly stresses that the binary is “more a morality tale than a documentary” (Hanson, 2012); that the left/right mapping “isn’t very useful for predicting individual behavior outside of politics” and that it is “not obvious . . . whether . . . the left or the right” is more helpful (Hanson, 2017); that forager enforcement could “escalate from scolding to shunning to exile to death” (conceding forager violence); and, in “Specific vs. General,” that real liberals and conservatives are “substantially different from” the pure types because “most people do not actually generalize very far” (Hanson, 2015b). The candid caveat in “Forager Facts” about unrepresentative surviving foragers

(Youngberg and Hanson, 2010) is, ironically, the single most quotable concession a critic could want. The schema is thus better understood as a deliberately sharp heuristic than as a falsifiable scientific model—a framing that is both its strength (generativity) and, per its critics, its weakness (unfalsifiability).

5 Analysis: Theses, Mental Models, and AI Futures

This section reassembles the schema into its component theses and mental models, then follows the argument to its most consequential destination: what it predicts about a world transformed by artificial intelligence.

5.1 The evolved substrate

The foundation is an asymmetry of domination. Foragers, mobile and propertyless, could not easily be ruled: a would-be tyrant faced Boehm’s reverse dominance hierarchy, the band’s capacity to coordinate against him (Hanson, 2010d). Farmers, tied to land and storable surplus, could be: flight was costly, hierarchy feasible, and so kings, classes, slavery, and patriarchy became viable. The forager syndrome—egalitarianism, anti-bragging, sharing, informal conflict resolution, suspicion of authority—is on this account not an ethical achievement but the behavioral signature of a species that evolved where no one could be dominated.

5.2 Installing farmer values

Farming demanded the opposite, and—because those behaviors were unnatural—they had to be installed rather than assumed. Hanson’s mechanism is cultural: heightened sensitivity to norms, so that “self-control” is really “culture-control” (Hanson, 2010g); powerful moralizing gods and fear of death to enforce compliance, working “better on poor folk for whom death is a more immediate threat” (Hanson, 2010b); and an explicit expansion of morality, since “farmers have more morality—more and stronger rules, to fight against stronger natural inclinations” (Hanson, 2012). Over the long Malthusian farming era this overlay was partly bred in (Clark) and partly a self-domestication of the species, complete with the brain-size reduction seen in domesticated animals (Hanson, 2011; Wrangham, 2019).

5.3 The reversion dynamic

The engine of the modern story is symmetric. Wealth and safety relax the farmer pressures, so values drift back toward forager defaults: “becoming more forager-like is plausibly giving us more travel, leisure, democracy, and promiscuity, and less war, dominance,

self-control, work, religion, and fertility” (Hanson, 2025). Conversely, poverty, fear, and threat push people back toward farmer values—so “if our descendants get poor again, they’ll probably need stronger social norms again” (Hanson, 2012). An important nuance: the reversion is incomplete and domain-specific. The major exceptions, Hanson notes, are “school and workplace domination and ranking,” which are “required to generate industry-level wealth” (Hanson, 2010i)—so that in our economic roles we are, if anything, *more* disciplined than farmers, while reverting to forager ways in leisure.

5.4 The near/far bridge

Construal-level theory turns this into a theory of everyday psychology (fig. 3). In far mode—abstract, distant, hypothetical, and characteristically engaged when we feel safe and unconstrained—we reach for our idealistic, forager values: equality, peace, tolerance, self-expression. In near mode—concrete, immediate, where real costs bite—we behave more like farmers. Wealth, by buffering us from immediate consequence, keeps us in far mode more of the time (Hanson, 2010e, 2009). The schema thus predicts a systematic gap between the forager ideals people *profess* and the more farmer-like choices they *make*—and warns us to “beware far values” as guides to what we truly want (Hanson, 2013).

5.5 The general worldviews and the political mapping

Stripped to essentials, the forager worldview says the world is rich and pliable—rearrange it so people feel good inside—while the farmer worldview says the world is harsh and fixed—change yourself to survive (Hanson, 2015b). Mapped onto contemporary politics, the left approximates the forager pole (large-scale cooperation is feasible; treat everyone equally; expect gains from change) and the right the farmer pole (presume competition; condition aid on desert; fear that change damages what works), with views drifting leftward as societies grow richer (Hanson, 2017; Cowen, 2017). This dovetails with Haidt: forager-like liberals invoke fewer moral foundations than farmer-like conservatives (Hanson, 2012). The mapping is offered as a heuristic, hedged as above.

5.6 The dreamtime and maladaptive drift

The reversion has a sting. On Hanson’s telling, the wealth that permits forager values also permits *maladaptive* ones, because it slackens the selection that would otherwise punish them. This is the “dreamtime”: an evolutionarily anomalous interval in which we can afford “wildly false beliefs and non-adaptive values” (Hanson, 2009). By 2024–2025 he had sharpened this into a theory of decadence—weak modern cultural selection lets values “drift” off the rails, and the clearest proof is sub-replacement fertility, since whatever subpopulation keeps reproducing will, over centuries, inherit the future (Hanson, 2024a,

2025). The dreamtime ends when growth slows and competition returns, restoring “a clear-headed relation between behavior and reality.”

5.7 Implications for AI and AGI futures

This is where the schema becomes a forecast. The general principle is that *economic competition selects values*: whichever values are adaptive under the prevailing competitive regime come to dominate, regardless of which we prefer. Hanson stated this—and applied it to machine minds—as early as 2010: “in the long run, if our interactions remain competitive, we shouldn’t expect forager behavior to be anything like the most adaptive” for our descendants, and “farmer-style stoicism, self-sacrifice, and self-control, detached as needed from farmer specifics like love of land or sexual monogamy, might well be more effective at creating acceptance of em-efficient lifestyles” (Hanson, 2010c).

The Age of Em (Hanson, 2016b) works this out in detail. In a future where human minds can be cheaply copied as software (“ems”), the labor supply explodes and wages fall to near the hardware cost of running a brain—a return to Malthusian subsistence. Hanson predicts that this renewed competition pushes em culture back toward *farmer-like* values: more work, self-control, honor, religion, patriotism, and acceptance of hierarchy; less leisure, self-expression, novelty, and democracy. (He is careful that ems take farmer *functions*—stoicism, norm-following—while shedding farmer *specifics* like attachment to land, and acquiring genuinely novel attitudes, for example toward copying and the death of short-lived “spur” copies.) The em world is, in effect, the dreamtime running in reverse.

Figure 5 lays out the resulting fork. The crucial premise is *competition*. If the AI future is competitive and multipolar—many cheap, fast-reproducing minds bidding wages toward subsistence—then farmer-like (or harsher) values return, and the abundance-utopia assumption (that AGI wealth means a permanent forager-value paradise) is wrong: forager values are what *slack selection* permits, not what abundance stably produces. If instead the future is a *singleton*—one dominant power or a coordinated world order—then there is no differential selection among values, and present forager values could be locked in indefinitely.

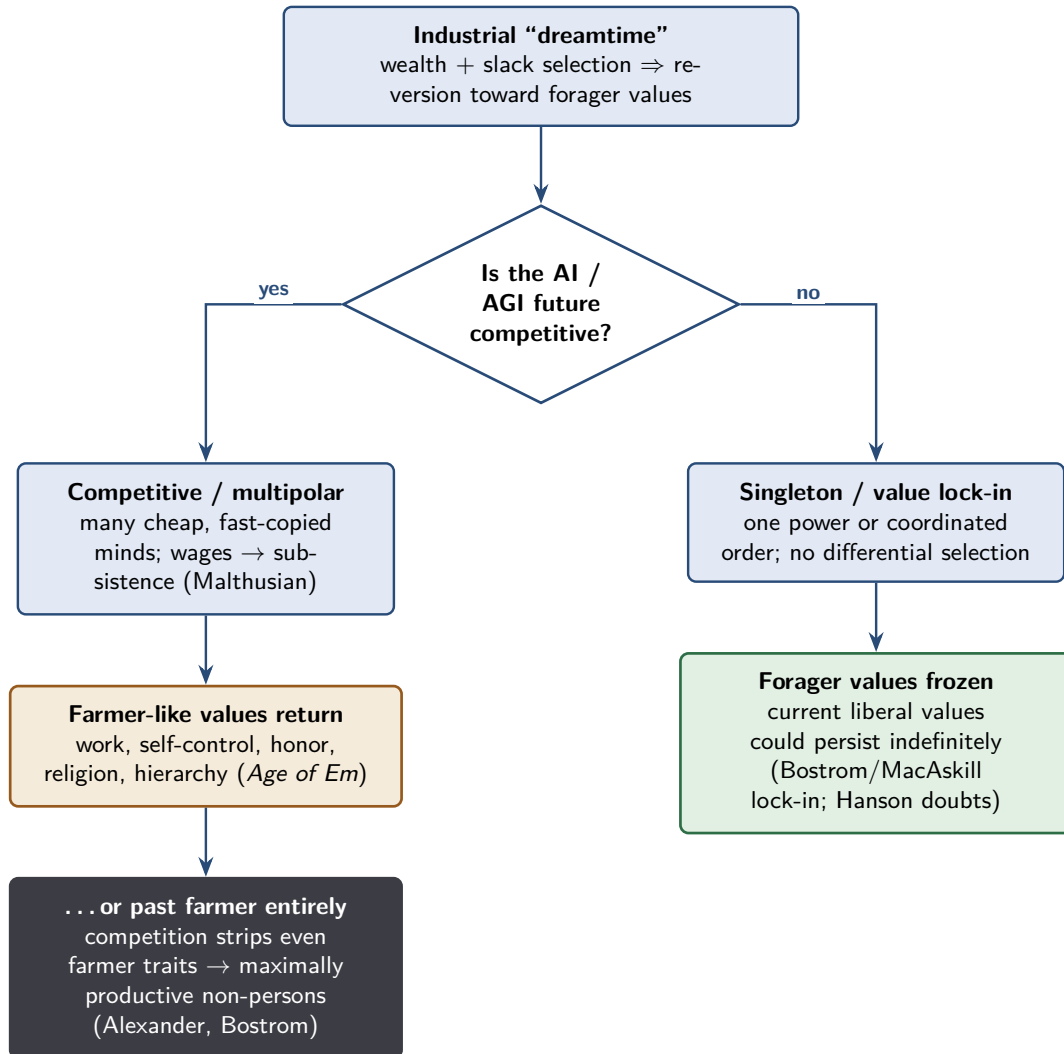


Figure 5: What the schema predicts for post-AGI values, conditional on whether competition persists.

The lock-in branch is exactly the scenario Nick Bostrom and William MacAskill emphasize: advanced AI could let whoever holds power “lock in their values indefinitely” (Bostrom, 2014; MacAskill, 2022). Hanson is a determined skeptic; in “MacAskill on Value Lock-In” he argues that even immortal organizations reliably drift and decay, so durable value-freezing is far harder than it looks—and notes the irony that a central power created to *prevent* lock-in might itself cause it by suppressing the competitive diversity that drives value change (Hanson, 2022). The disagreement traces back to the Hanson–Yudkowsky “AI-Foom” debate (Hanson and Yudkowsky, 2013): Hanson’s whole picture assumes a competitive, broadly distributed transition (his analogy is the agricultural and industrial revolutions), whereas a fast, local intelligence explosion would produce the very singleton that could freeze values.

A third possibility cuts against Hanson’s relative optimism. Scott Alexander and Bostrom

argue that competition need not *stop* at recognizable farmer values: it could strip away leisure, mind-wandering, even consciousness, leaving “maximally productive non-persons”—Bostrom’s “Disneyland with no children” (Alexander, 2016b,a; Bostrom, 2014). Hanson’s reply is itself an application of the schema: he charges that this worry over-weights “the usual forager value of leisure over work,” treating a parochial dreamtime preference as a universal standard, and that productive ems would retain whatever human features actually aid productivity (Hanson, 2016a). Whether the floor under competition is “diligent farmer” or “inhuman optimizer” is, on this telling, the live question—and the schema reframes our intuitive horror at the former as exactly the maladaptive forager value the future is likely to discard.

5.8 Mental models in one line each

The schema’s enduring appeal is a set of compact heuristics:

- **Cultural farmers, genetic foragers.** Culture installed farmer behavior on a forager-tilted brain; relax the culture and the brain shows through.
- **Wealth makes foragers; stress makes farmers.** Values track felt safety, not moral progress.
- **Self-control is culture-control.** Willpower is internalized social sanction.
- **Far mode is forager mode.** We profess forager ideals in the abstract and act more farmer-like in the concrete—“more farmer-like than farmers” at work.
- **This is the dreamtime.** Our wealth buys us the luxury of maladaptive, idealistic values—temporarily.
- **Competition selects values.** The future’s values will be whatever competition rewards, not whatever we now prefer.

5.9 How to evaluate the thesis

The schema’s predictive content is real but slippery. It correctly anticipates the broad direction of modern value change, and Hanson has lately tried to make it quantitative—the LLM-scored finding that roughly 89% of the last century’s Western trends point forager-ward (Hanson, 2026a), and an explicit list of confirming future trends (Hanson, 2026b). But this is exactly where it is most vulnerable: critics argue the scoring builds in the conclusion, and that “forager reversion” is flexible enough to absorb almost any modern development (CapnHollis, 2026; Bisin, 2017). A fair verdict is that the forager-farmer schema is a powerful *generative* lens—it organizes an enormous range of facts under one story and yields genuine, sometimes uncomfortable predictions about the future—while

falling short of a falsifiable model, a limitation Hanson half-concedes by calling it a “morality tale.” Its most testable and most consequential claim is the AI-futures one: if the coming machine economy is competitive, the schema predicts a hard turn away from the forager values we now treat as moral common sense.

6 Conclusion

Across more than fifteen years and dozens of posts, Robin Hanson has built the forager-farmer schema into one of the more ambitious lay theories of human values—a single arc connecting the egalitarian band, the disciplined farm, the wealthy and self-indulgent present, and a contested machine future. Its core is a claim about constraint: human nature is forager, farming imposed an unnatural discipline through culture and fear, wealth has been lifting that discipline, and only renewed competition will reimpose it. The evidence base is real but uneven—strongest where Hanson leans on Boehm’s reverse-dominance hierarchy and construal-level psychology, weakest where the romantic “peaceful affluent forager” is needed, a figure the anthropology only partly supports. The reception is correspondingly mixed: generative enough to be adopted across the rationalist world, loose enough to be charged with unfalsifiability, and politically charged enough to be read as flattering one side.

The schema’s deepest payoff is its inversion of a comfortable assumption about the future. Where many expect AI-driven abundance to entrench the liberal, leisured, egalitarian values we now call progress, Hanson’s framework warns that those values are a dividend of slack selection, not of abundance as such—and that a competitive world of cheap minds would select them away, returning us toward the farmer virtues of work, discipline, and hierarchy, if not past them entirely. Whether or not one accepts the binary, that reframing—values as adaptations to competitive conditions rather than as discoveries of moral truth—is the schema’s most durable contribution, and the one most worth arguing with as the AI era begins.

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