

AI's distinctive contribution is that it turns knowledge from something humans slowly produce and transmit into something continuously generated, recombined, and operationalized at scale, while also destabilizing our sense of who “owns” and “embodies” knowledge. In Sterling's terms, it doesn't just add more knowledge to civilization; it changes what counts as knowing, who can do it, and how quickly societies can act on it. [[sciencedirect](#)]

From stored knowledge to active processes

Sterling is talking about knowledge as a durable, civilizational asset that outlasts money, regimes, and crashes. Modern AI systems take that civilizational store—digitized text, images, code, data—and turn it into a set of ongoing processes: pattern-finding, prediction, translation, simulation, design. That shift is important because it makes “having” knowledge less about possession of static facts and more about the capacity to ask, recombine, and act on those facts in real time. [[kirkusreviews](#)]

An illustration: medical literature is already a vast knowledge base in Sterling's sense, but large models trained on it can surface rare-disease patterns, suggest treatment combinations, and flag interactions in ways no individual clinician could manage unaided. The knowledge was “there,” but AI makes it actionable under real-world constraints of time, attention, and cognitive load. [[pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih](#)]

Compression, connection, and polymathic breadth

One emerging theme in current writing about AI is its “polymath” or connective capacity: it can traverse genetics, neuroscience, linguistics, economics, and more, spotting regularities across domains that human specialization walls off. In a world where knowledge has exploded into fragmented silos, AI’s contribution is often less “new discovery ex nihilo” and more “relentless cross-connection and compression.”[[linkedin](#)]

That kind of connective work matters for civilization when problems are themselves cross-domain—climate plus economics plus geopolitics, or public health plus misinformation plus culture. AI systems can, at least in principle, help model such problems, test scenarios, and synthesize perspectives that would otherwise remain scattered across disciplines and institutions. [[aribrill](#)]

Shifting the labor of knowing

Civilizationally, knowledge has always depended on institutions that do the slow grind of education, research, and record-keeping. AI inserts itself into each layer of that stack: [[en.wikipedia](#)]

- • In education, it can individualize tutoring and feedback, lowering the cost of acquiring functional literacy in complex domains.[[freethink](#)]
- • In research, it accelerates literature review, hypothesis generation, and even experimental design, changing the tempo of scientific progress.[[sciencedirect](#)]

- In administration and governance, it can process data streams (economic, environmental, epidemiological) and surface patterns for decision-makers far faster than legacy bureaucratic processes.[[freethink](#)]

If Sterling thinks knowledge gets you through “times of no money,” AI’s role here is to cheapen access to that knowledge and to compress the time between “there is a pattern” and “we can see and act on it.”[[kirkusreviews](#)]

Fragility, bias, and epistemic risk

The darker side is that AI also amplifies bad or brittle knowledge: it can spread misinformation, harden biases, and create persuasive but false narratives at scale. Civilization isn’t just about having more knowledge; it’s about maintaining epistemic hygiene—distinguishing reliable from unreliable belief—and AI complicates that by producing fluent, authoritative-seeming outputs without the kind of grounded understanding humans naively attribute to “knowers.”
[[thesciencesurvey](#)][[youtube](#)][[pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih](#)]

This raises exactly the kinds of civilizational questions people are now asking: who is responsible when AI-generated “knowledge” causes harm; how do we attribute agency and credit; what does it mean to “trust” a system that can neither understand nor be held morally accountable in the human sense. Here, AI’s contribution might be to force a cultural and institutional reworking of our norms around expertise, evidence, and responsibility.[[youtube](#)][[thesciencesurvey](#)]

Knowledge, meaning, and non-metaphysical value

Sterling presents knowledge as an “absolute good” even when it has no immediate instrumental use. In your secular-realist frame, that maps nicely to seeing knowledge as part of the long-term ripples of a life: an accumulation of models, stories, and practices that outlast any particular economy or regime. AI changes what it means for individuals to participate in that project.[\[goodreads\]](#)

On the one hand, it can democratize certain kinds of high-level cognitive work—analysis, translation, drafting—so more people can contribute to public discourse, creative projects, and problem-solving. On the other hand, it risks hollowing out some of the craft and discipline that used to structure meaning for knowers: if the machine does the first pass on everything, what remains as the lived practice of knowing for humans.

[\[thesciencesurvey\]](#)[\[youtube\]](#)[\[freethink\]](#)

So AI’s civilizational contribution, through Sterling’s lens, may be double: it expands the reach and operability of knowledge, making it more central and more effective as a buffer against collapse, while at the same time forcing us to renegotiate what counts as genuine understanding, agency, and responsibility in a world where “knowledge work” is increasingly shared with nonhuman systems.[\[linkedin\]](#)

If we keep talking with Sterling’s Greta in mind: she’d probably insist that AI is only a contribution to civilization insofar as it deepens the human practice of seeking truth and acting from it,

rather than replacing that practice with a convenient simulacrum.[\[kirkusreviews\]](#)

If we zoom from the abstract to your own practice: would you want to lean into AI mainly as a tool for compressing the drudgery of research and drafting, or as a kind of “thinking partner” that you deliberately argue with as part of your long-term meaning-making?