When I was a kid, I watched the movie The Little Rascals. It's a cookie-cutter film with an easily identifiable, utterly unsympathetic bad guy, a basic plot meant for young audiences, and a story book ending. I found it boring, for the most part. One part stuck out at me, though.

In it, Mel Brooks does a cameo as a banker. He berates some of the kids who try and ask him for a loan. When one objects, saying he can't treat people this way, he has an iconic response: "You're not people. You're kids!"

That sentence, or the first half of it anyway, has been with me ever since.

When I started writing, I always wanted to include that idea in one of my stories. One person is mistreating another, and the second one objects. "You can't treat people this way!" The first responds calmly, even sympathetically, "you're not actually a person."

At first I translated it into science fiction terms. I was reading the Star Wars books at the time, so I saw a similarity in one of the books. In it, an X-wing pilot is training with his team in a simulator. He gets blasted into particles. When he's talking to the evaluating officer later on, he can't help but ask, "was I beaten by a person, or a program?"

Anthropomorphizing is a human trait. We love to put human concepts on objects, institutions, even ideas themselves. "Democracy loves us." "My gun is female." "America is a proud nation." That sort of thing. But when those objects/institutions/ideas are capable of actually competing with us, we react less positively. In the story, the pilot's ego is so big that he has to confirm that he was facing another pilot, instead of some computer program. I imagine Gary Kasparov felt the same, when he was beaten by Deep Blue.

Over time, I began translating the phrase "you're not a person" into politics, economics, and ethics. The ethical one was the hardest for me to handle, so I put that on hold. It's still there, unfortunately. The economic one was the easiest, so I went there first. "You're not a person... you're a product."

What's the old saying: there's no such thing as a free lunch? Well, that's just as true today as it was when the saying was coined. I can google something on my phone for free, but it's not actually free. Sure, I don't pay anything up front, but Google is charging me all the same. It's subjecting me to advertisements, and logging my activity. If I order something, it keeps a record of that. If I comment on a video I saw, it takes notice. I'm anthropomorphizing a company again, but in this case it's valid. As far as google, or youtube, or any other so-called 'free' service is concerned, we're the products! They're farming us- cultivating us. They're using us the same way we use livestock or crops. Consuming us and then discarding what's left. The fact that it's being done slowly just makes it harder to notice!

Sure, we can refuse to participate, but that would make us outcasts at best. We can resist, in the forms of VPNs or adblockers, but of course the companies are going to do whatever it takes to bypass those. Including ad campaigns telling us to not worry about it.

As depressing as that idea is, it's not the main point I'm trying to make. I moved past the economic argument into the political one. "You're not a person... you're a program."

We've been programmed- all of us. First by our parents, whether they were good or bad. Then by our educational institutions, whether they were well-funded or not. Finally by society at large, or more precisely the social media part of it.

When someone disagrees with me, my first instinctive thought is, "it's all right. They're not actually a person. They're just a program, responding the way they've been programmed."

I have to fight that instinct. It might be good not to blame people just for what they believe, but assuming that they'll never change is very bad. That said, my instinctive response is usually true. We have a multitude of influences on us: social media, news, billboards we drive past, institutions we attend (both religious and secular), and most importantly: people we talk to who have also faced those same influences. Some of the messages we get are conflicting, but most say the same things. Look out for number one. You're not a success unless you're rich. Everything is a competition, and the only people who disagree are the ones who are losing.

It's a selfish, contractual, combative way of thinking, and it's woven into every aspect of our society. In the justice system, you can only really thrive if you can hire an expensive lawyer. To quote one of my favorite sci-fi characters ever, "Does that seem right to you?"

In pushing or stopping legislation, you can only really succeed if you can get people to support your agenda. And you can only do that if you can actually reach them. And you can only do that if you have money!

I've already talked about how you can only succeed in business if you have the money to squash other businesses. Religious circles are the same as legislative ones. You can convince people to believe the same things you do, if you have the money to advertise it to them.

It all comes down to the same idea. We have been programmed, so we're not actually people. Even the programmers themselves have been programmed first! If Trump hadn't been raised by a distant rich criminal, do you really think he would have been so obsessed with popularity and wealth? Sure, some people will always be acquisitive, but most people are a product of our... programming.

First question: do we want to change that? One thing we've been programmed with is the idea that everything is fine. That the world is working exactly as intended, and there's no need to change anything. I have a natural rebellious trend against that kind of idea, but it's also simply untrue. The capitalist system is flawed at its very core: it produces a recession what.. every eight to ten years without fail? The legal system is flawed because it's affected by capitalist influence. The environmental system is approaching complete collapse because of both of those things! No, things have to change.

Second question: how do we change that? Like dealing with climate change, we can do the small steps. We can teach our children and friends not to be greedy, and not to just accept that we have to be rich to be happy. But like environmental change, that's just drops in a bucket.

The best way is to force our leaders to change. To remind them that we're their bosses, and we're tired of them being so utterly selfish, incompetent, and corrupt. To force them to stop programming us, not just because we're tired of being drained of money, but because it's just plain wrong.

I was wrong earlier. We are both programs and people. We have these societal influences which drain us and weaken us and control us, but we also have our thoughts and will, and the ability to change.

We also have a responsibility to change, and much more urgently... the need.