

# Collison’s NBER Paper, Durant’s History, and a Film for Thinking About AI Agents

Recommended Reading from Tech Founders

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## Collison’s NBER Paper, Durant’s History, and a Film for Thinking About AI Agents

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Three authentic recommendations made the cut: Patrick Collison’s NBER paper on respiratory pathogens and birth order effects, Elon Musk’s nod to Durant’s *The Story of Civilization*, and Lena Waters’s recommendation of *The Corporation* for thinking about AI agents and legal standing.

### What stood out

After filtering for direct, organic recommendations, three resources made the cut. The strongest pattern was **use-case clarity**: Patrick Collison shared a paper because it sharpened a specific causal story about birth order and wages, Elon Musk pointed readers to Durant for a civilizational lens on societal decline, and Lena Waters recommended *The Corporation* as a way to think about AI agents and legal standing [1, 2, 3, 4].

### Most compelling recommendation

#### Working paper on respiratory pathogens, birth order, and wages

- **Title:** Not specified in source material
- **Content type:** Working paper
- **Author/creator:** Not specified in source material
- **Link/URL:** NBER PDF [1]
- **Who recommended it:** Patrick Collison [1]
- **Key takeaway:** Using Danish administrative data, the paper argues that respiratory pathogens passed from older siblings to younger ones explain a large share of birth-order effects on long-run wages; Collison notes the paper claims **70%** [1]

- **Why it matters:** This is the clearest high-signal recommendation today because Collison says he had not previously seen anyone convincingly show that standard respiratory pathogens impose long-term costs on infant siblings [1]

“I haven’t until now seen anyone convincingly show that standard respiratory pathogens impose long-term costs on infant siblings.” [1]

## Two other authentic picks

### *The Story of Civilization*

- **Content type:** Book
- **Author/creator:** Durant [2]
- **Link/URL:** No direct book URL provided in source material
- **Who recommended it:** Elon Musk [2]
- **Key takeaway:** Musk recommends it in response to a Teddy Roosevelt quote arguing that civilizations weaken when materialism, luxury, safety, and pacifism erode fighting capacity [2, 3]
- **Why it matters:** The context gives the book a specific reading job: studying how civilizations lose resilience over time [3]
- **Source conversation:** X post [2]

### *The Corporation*

- **Content type:** Movie
- **Author/creator:** Not specified in source material
- **Link/URL:** No direct resource URL provided in source material
- **Who recommended it:** Lena Waters, on *Office Hours with Tom Tunguz and Lena Waters* [4]
- **Key takeaway:** Waters says the film is “prescient” for thinking about why an AI agent will not have the same kind of legal standing as a corporation [4]
- **Why it matters:** It connects a non-AI film to a current question about AI agents and institutional structure [4]
- **Source conversation:** Office Hours with Tom Tunguz and Lena Waters [4]

“Everybody should watch that movie, the corporation, because it’s kind of prescient...” [4]

## Bottom line

Today’s strongest recommendation is Collison’s NBER paper pick because it comes with a direct URL, a concrete claim, and a clear explanation of what was new to him. Musk and Waters offer thinner but still useful recommendations, each tied to a specific question: how civilizations decay, and how to think about legal standing for AI agents [1, 3, 4].

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## Sources

1. X post by @patrickc
2. X post by @elonmusk
3. X post by @infantrydort
4. Office Hours with Tom Tunguz and Lena Waters