

The World Ahead Continued

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The Danger of Thinking Simple

Today, although talk of potential global crises exists, most people feel it is too early to worry about anything significantly dangerous. I sometimes believe that the good times will last for another couple of decades, even centuries. This simply optimistic way of thinking about the future world, this complacency, is potentially quite dangerous.

There is a marked difference between the pattern of human development today and in the past. In the past, general trends of progression, at least, were predictable. More specifically, during the Middle Ages, for example, even though people knew that the Vikings could invade the next year or famine could occur, people were still going to plant their crops and participate in church activities. The medieval population could predict that there would be no major change in their lifestyle for years. During the tumultuous Industrial Revolution, when some new industries completely substituted traditional ones, many could still surmise this general substitution and adjust accordingly.

The problem is that people cannot predict major trends even 20 years into the future. Take the instance of the labor market, which is a crucial part of the economy and international development. Previously, changes in the structure and components of the labor market were predictable. Today, it is difficult to be sure that the human labor market will not be turned upside down or even continue to function properly. Artificial intelligence is advancing at a speed that spells no clear pattern. In 20 years, artificial intelligence can render many low-paying jobs that require manual labor obsolete. They would be more productive than human workers but could also operate and outcompete at lower costs. By then, will labor markets around the globe be flexible and powerful enough to cushion the impact of this AI flood? It is hard to argue a conclusive “yes.”

Given such a volatile and unclear outlook, the true dangers of thinking simple and being complacent are immense. Catastrophes of various kinds, not just the climate kind, can be secretly approaching and strike human civilization in unprecedentedly powerful ways. In two decades or so, we might witness sudden unemployment spikes, economic chaos, or a further breakdown of global political order. If world leaders and the populace do not take these potential hazards into account today and ignore that we cannot see the future with clarity, there is no proper path to prepare. This unprepared status jeopardizes civilization even more.

A Breakdown of Human Consciousness and Mentality

The world is bound to become more dominated by the internet and enter a purer digital age. If the digital age continues to develop to be more sophisticated, it has the power to lead to a complete breakdown of human consciousness and mentality. This breakdown cannot be seen with clarity yet, but it can be divided into two sections, standing at the present moment.

First, the breakdown involves individuals losing their sense of identity, value, and emotion. As explained by a previous article, three phases can summarize the process in which one gets dragged and trapped inside the internet world. During this process, there will be a double deprivation of value and identity, meaning that the person potentially loses their meaning in both the virtual and real worlds. The digital age also deprives people of their emotional independence. More and more are stuck emotionally in the internet asylum. Some are even trying to find love and romance on virtual platforms. It cannot be denied that AI might be able to cater to our emotional needs better than real humans in the future. However, there is something intrinsically disturbing with this notion. As a product of evolution, our gregarious nature is supposed to help us engage with each other in a real environment, not a virtual one. The minds and emotional responses of Homo sapiens are not yet adapted to a purely digital environment. We have not yet developed the mental mechanisms to deal with the overwhelming amount of information created by algorithms, and yet we are progressing extremely firmly into an algorithmic world. This dislocation can cause a collapse of humankind's emotional and mental spheres.

To illustrate this point further, draw an analogy to the invention of writing. Our ancestors invented writing to tackle widespread “memory overload.” This term refers to a process whereby as human civilization advances into more complex forms, our natural brains cannot process excessive bits of information. Our memories are overloaded. Writing can help the brain cope with this overload by sharing some of the mind’s job of handling information, especially those relating to a developing culture's increasingly convoluted emotional networks. Now, I argue that we are facing another “memory overload” - the internet is flooding our minds with so much memory from all over the world that our minds cannot function effectively. Are we inventing anything substantial, like writing back then, to tackle this overload? Hardly. Hence, there is unlikely a clear way to solve this round of overload that brings overwhelming consequences.

Second, the internet is shutting down our decision-making capabilities. We might be on the road to “serfdom.” We have been free because we have very powerful decision-making abilities. From a small individual to a large civilization, humankind has been more or less capable of deciding its fate, aided by advancements in social structure and technology. The problem with our decision-making is that it is not always perfect or even right from many points of judgment. As Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman argues, our decisions are affected detrimentally by many environmental factors. AI, in this regard, can make more accurate decisions since it can be



unaffected by outside factors, at least not as seriously affected as humans. When robots can make better choices overall than people, there is a tendency that humankind will increasingly rely on algorithms. This tendency is already happening. Inorganic computers implement many methods of forecasting. The moment that people collectively lose the power to decide to AI will be the one that marks the beginning of an invisible form of slavery. Our consciousness can be controlled by algorithms in the end.

Conclusion

What will be the long-run consequences of the predictions made above? It is difficult to conclude. Human civilization has expanded and become more flexible thanks to our collective ability to tell “fictional stories” and believe them, as noted by historian Yuval Harari. These stories include money, religion, states, empires, etc. When our minds and mentalities adhere to a digital being, whether it is some form of AI or robotic technology, will we still possess this crucial capability to imagine creatively and tell stories? If the answer is negative, what will happen to human culture and civilization from a broader perspective? If a collapse of human civilization occurs, in what way will we be able to recover? These are questions that lead us far into the mist of the future. However, as we are sailing into this mist right now, consciously or not, it is time to consider these questions to prepare us for the potential dangers.