

The Future: What is to Become of Us?

by Bill Herbst

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Scientist James Lovelock holds that the human species is the cutting edge of Gaia's planetary intelligence. That's an opinion not widely held, and I don't know if it's true or merely another human-created myth to pad our illusory self-importance. Does our earth possess its own consciousness as an integrated, sentient entity? Is Life on earth Gaia's way of developing and refining her own consciousness, with humanity representing the most potent form of that awareness?

If that's true, then perhaps Nature still has some tricks up her sleeve for us that we don't know about. Perhaps biology is not destiny. (If it is, we're screwed and a failed experiment...) Social selection has already overtaken the much slower mechanism of biological selection as the primary driver of evolution. Could civilization's deepening crises result in a leap forward in our collective consciousness? I don't know, but it appears that we can't look forward to another 10,000 years to grow up. Crunch time is upon us. We have a very short span — another century or two at the outside, perhaps much less (and some people hold that the die is already cast and our sad fate sealed) — to get our act together before the planet becomes uninhabitable for our species. Right now, our future looks dim.

Predicting the future, especially our collective future, is notoriously difficult. I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that it's a fool's errand — since the mystery of what is to come appeals so directly to our innate curiosity — but, for every prediction about our future that proves to be correct, ten others turn out to be bogus. Whether the predictions are rosy or dire, most are just fictional.

Dick Tracy's two-way wristwatch radio, introduced into the popular comic strip in 1946, has become a reality. Of course, what we have now bears little resemblance to a device imagined within mid-20th-century expectations. Smart phones, the internet, and social media are way, way beyond what anyone imagined back then. Other sci-fi dreams, such as flying cars, have not been realized, at least not in the manner of 1982's "Blade Runner," where everyone gets into his personal flying car to conduct daily travel through the air. Of course, flying cars were only a small part of Blade Runner's dystopian vision of a dismal urban future, where the privileged live in protected enclaves while the great unwashed masses scurry about, surviving like rats in a sewer. That possible future has not yet been refuted.

Then there is the idea of humans exiting a ruined earth to allow our species' continued survival on a new world. This is not just a science fiction proposition; it's a vision being developed and actively pursued by those with deep pockets. I am more than dubious about such plans, however. I feel strongly that people who fantasize about human beings colonizing other planets are, in fact, dreaming. Earth is our home; we will succeed or fail here. Yes, we've been to the Moon, but only for a few brief visits. Living and prospering on another world is an entirely different matter, and far beyond our means.

What about climate change? Is that now the elephant in the room? Well, maybe, but maybe not. I've been worried for many decades about the effects of climate change provoked by our hyper-gargantuan industrial and economic despoiling of the biosphere. I think back to the simpler days of recycling in the 1970s. Almost a half-century later, I still dutifully recycle glass, paper, plastic, and aluminum cans, but I do so because I'm a creature of my times, not because I believe that recycling will make any significant difference in preserving the environment or saving our butts.

Curiously, just as climate change and its potentially catastrophic effects to civilization are finally achieving traction as a serious matter in our national discussion, the biosphere/environment and nuclear war are no longer alone as the 800 lb. gorillas atop the list of frightening concerns about humanity's future. Climate change and nuclear war remain dire threats, of course, and for good reason, but they've been joined by yet another potential calamity. That dubious honor belongs to *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*, which is the converging spear point of the entire Technology Revolution.

Some futurists, philosophers, and social critics are now suggesting that AI will be the final, culminating invention of human cleverness and ingenuity, that it will also mean the end of humanity as a species, and that it's bearing down on us with terrifying speed. In this view, algorithms *are* the future. Forget the Mueller Investigation, forget Donald Trump, forget income inequality, forget capitalism versus socialism or democracy versus totalitarianism. According to the aforementioned futurists, all that is so very 20th-century as to be irrelevant.

Damn near every consumer product we buy these days has a microchip. Some have many. Cars, houses, refrigerators — they're all essentially computers. And they're all getting "smarter" with each new product rollout.

As AI steamrolls forward at breakneck speed, the machines will become exponentially smarter, while humans will probably remain at our current level of collective evolution — conflicted, contentious, and arguably disturbed. All our limitations in wisdom and maturity are likely to continue, but our excesses of consumption and biological reproduction could be severely curtailed by the economic and social costs of climate change. In this scenario, smart machines would have a decided advantage.

Maybe those who believe in the technological Singularity are correct. Maybe humanity is approaching the end of an embryonic state and will morph into a

different species altogether, or hand off the baton to a new, hybrid life form born out of Artificial Intelligence. Could machines eventually become smart enough to end their dependence on the sources of energy to which humans are currently and irrevocably tied? Might they adopt the photosynthesis strategy of plants? That sounds like science fiction, but we are living in a sliver of time where real magic and fake magic are impossible to separate.

Many myths and misconceptions exist in the public mind concerning AI, most of which come from Hollywood, via movies and TV. As with climate change, popular misunderstandings abound (such as bat-shit crazy Republican Senator James Inhofe, who made a snowball from snow on the Capitol steps and then tossed it from the podium inside the U.S. Senate chamber to “prove” that global warming was a hoax). Artificial Intelligence is an even greater mystery to both ordinary people and the elites who make policy, despite the fact that they encounter it every single day. (For instance, the Congressional hearings on Facebook are always a joke, since our elected representatives know almost nothing about social media or technology in general.)

I will make no attempt in this brief Commentary to explain AI, nor to detail its possible benefits or negative repercussions to humanity, except to state that such notables as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and the late Stephen Hawking all endorsed the idea that AI poses existential risks for humanity that must be controlled. Artificial Intelligence is much more relevant and important to our collective future than building some damned stupid Wall along America’s southern border with Mexico, which is little more than a feverish nightmare of xenophobic hate and fear. As an aside, and thankfully, Trump will not get his Wall for various reasons — his own folly in the government shutdown, the renewed power of Congressional Democrats, and the shifting equation of Republicans who no longer need Trump to keep their jobs. Odds of Trump’s re-election in 2020 are growing dimmer by the week.

The ultimate implications of AI, which have not yet been realized but are looming on the horizon, are of considerably greater concern to our national well-being than immigrant families fleeing violence and seeking asylum in our country. Such families still see America as a refuge, a safe haven, and do not realize how crazy America has become.

On the other hand, too many of the engineers, technologists, and executives who are developing Artificial Intelligence do not care whether America is crazy or sane. A significant percentage are evangelical missionaries, true believers in the religion of Technology, and they’re totally committed to taking AI as far as they can, and as fast as billions of corporate dollars can allow. I’m not a Luddite, and I accept that AI is coming. But I do believe that we should slow down and think about the future we’re creating — a future that we will shape, but probably not accurately foresee, and almost certainly be unable to control.

Catastrophic climate disruption might do us in, but it won’t change who we have been. Artificial Intelligence, on the other hand, might alter us in ways we cannot yet imagine.