'We are all now connected by the Internet' – Stephen Hawking. What does the future hold for humankind?

Introduction: uncertainty and the future

A prominent struggle for humanity is that it lives in complete uncertainty of future events. It has gone to such great lengths to attempt to erase this uncertainty, and devised formulae and algorithms for making predictions about the future, that are only reliable to a limited extent. It has done this because it is afraid of uncertainty, especially when it comes to knowing what lies ahead. The machines of civilization that deal with maintaining society are produced through this fear. They provide us with a sense of security that all the material indulgences we satisfy ourselves with today will still be there for us tomorrow. Stock market forecasts, prolonged insurance policies based on consumer trust, health care programs that depend on closely monitoring daily activity, all established on systems of invasive individual examination that promise more than they can deliver. Humanity can never truly be certain of the future. As a sapient race, our progressions compel us toward longevity, yet it is a blindsiding truth of the reality we live in that longevity is something just out of our grasp. Our shortsightedness means we must approach our own advancements with caution. In this essay, we explore the current significant developments that humanity has made in terms of technology and culture, consider the prospects of these developments and what they could potentially lead to – both positively and negatively – from acclaimed experts as well as in popular culture, attempt to establish a pattern of discovery/integration of development based on history, and conclude with a cohesive understanding of what humankind can expect from the future and how it must prepare for it.

Developments and prospects

The 21st century has been the age of exponential growth of online data usage. We are now more than ever connected by virtual strings that tie our information in knots of transparency. We allow this connection to develop heedlessly into something that we are so obliviously losing control over. Before we know it, our information that was previously considered to be individual property will become something that can be used against us. Online scandals from hackers who can simply access all our information are already a pressing threat with dire consequences for those who have fallen victim to it. Yet these hackers are not the most serious menace when it comes to online security. Advancement in technology brings us closer and closer to the dawn of true artificial intelligence, an entity capable of accessing any amount of power and information it wishes to attain from the web-based mainframe. It will overwhelm us with its capability and take total control of us based on the information we've fed into its mainframe willingly. Scientists and computer engineers debate whether it is even possible for us to create such an entity, however so many of them – Hawking included – simultaneously warn of the haunting dangers that will arise if this entity is created. The online world is to be approached with caution. You wouldn't go for a walk outside and take all your valuables with you, nor without ensuring a method of contacting help in case of an emergency. Similarly it wouldn't be advisable to publish important information on online media platforms without having a way of returning it back to you securely.

The matter of overindulgence is a constant worry of mine whenever I think of the stages of technological development. Human beings are born with the flaw of indulging in pleasurable experiences without necessary guidance. Technology is constantly providing new avenues for consumer indulgence. People don't realize that this overconsumption can lead to their being increasingly separated from reality to the point of no return. If we observe the rate at which the video game industry is expanding, it isn't hard to see that one day we could have totally virtual environments that are so perfectly simulated, they can blur the line between virtual reality and physical reality. Individuals can become so lost in this new world that lures them in by providing them with reward without consequence that the operators of this simulated world can manipulate their actions, and maybe even their cognitive processes. The people can grow into "puppets" in this virtual realm and carry out actions *for their operators*, who may or may not have criminal intent. This is why I strongly believe that every development in technology has beneficial as well as malignant prospects, of a nature so extreme that their consideration must be incorporated into an ethical approach to the technological advancement.

Patterns in history

Sometimes, when we face obstacles in looking ahead, the solutions are found by looking back. Looking back and seeing patterns. Proper application of these patterns can go a long way to fixing what we have broken. For although those that are clueless of history may be doomed to repeat it, those who study it rigorously will surely understand that repeating it may be the only way to avoid an annihilation of our freedom.

When we look at the integration of popular ideas and advancements into society, we observe the following pattern: first, the idea is presented and faced with skepticism in its review; it is then rejected and locked away for some prolonged amount of time; after this, a period of modernization commences, in which the idea is experimented on by individuals who take different approaches and attempt to fit it into the workings of society; after a plethora of these approaches is brought forth, one of them emerges as the most suitable option for all of society, after which the idea is wholly integrated into its market. And the results have mostly been positive. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that once for a concerning step towards a new avenue, there could be a way to make it brighter, and more fruitful.

Conclusion

In an effort to explain what humanity can expect from the future by observation of current progressions as well as historical patterns, I have committed a small oversight. We must not look at humanity's pleasures and advancements and consumptions in the future, rather we must look at humanity as the future. It is a dreadful truth we face that as our civilization expands in all its arenas, we start to forget the very core of human decency. In our relentless campaigns, we rig up systems of menace and usurpation when instead what we require most is systems of compassion, systems of preservation, systems of empathy. There may come a time when automation pushes our status out from under us, when people are absorbed by virtual environments, separated forever from nature, and the only way we can even hope to call ourselves human in this world is to maintain *our humanity.* Thus, the future spirals out of our comprehension, never to be tangible to us, but the only safety we can have is to remember to stop and listen to our spirits, and allow them to free us from the physical bonds of our minds.