

The System Currently In Place

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August 22, 2012

The CEO of a prominent group promoting the manifestation of a technological singularity, Luke Muehlhauser from the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence, recently came out with a very surprising statement regarding the dangers which would accompany the creation of artificial super-intelligence:¹

“Unfortunately, the singularity may not be what you’re hoping for. By default the singularity (intelligence explosion) will go very badly for humans, because what humans want is a very, very specific set of things in the vast space of possible motivations, and it’s very hard to translate what we want into sufficiently precise math, so by default superhuman AIs will end up optimizing the world around us for something other than what we want, and using up all our resources to do so.”

For those of you unfamiliar with the concept of the technological singularity... it has to do (generally speaking) with programming a thinking computer that initially has the same cognitive abilities as a human being. Due to computers regularly becoming able to process evermore information faster, in a very short time, after a computer achieved a human level of intellect, it would, conceivably, surpass that level – arguably in the next moment and almost certainly within the next few years. What would start with a computer being able to pass a Turing test (basically being able to fool human observers as to whether or not they were having a dialogue with a human or a computer) would then shortly be followed by a type of self-consciousness machine that would intellectually be capable of manipulating humans and taking human rationality to its furthest degree.

As indicated by Muehlhauser’s statement, this could all lead to disastrous results for humanity. And, while I can’t help but thinking this was some sort of an subconscious confession from him, his expressed concern is reflected by statements from other prominent individuals who work in fields related to a technological singularity. For example, Bill Joy, the co-founder of Sun Microsystems, has written about “Why the future doesn’t need us,” explaining some of the dangers posed by a potential technological singularity. Even more optimistic figures in the related fields, like Ray Kurzweil, have been quoted as saying, “*I’m not oblivious to the dangers, but I’m optimistic that we’ll make it through without destroying civilization.*”

¹ reddit.com

Personally, I'm not convinced that a singularity of the sort envisioned by the aforementioned technologists is possible or likely. It may actually be possible but I'm still wondering why we aren't already driving flying cars and living in the techno-utopia promised by similar technologists from the past. And, when I consider the hypothetical dangers posed by the proposed technological singularity, I tend to think that the existential risk to humankind outweighs the possible benefits.

More to the point, I feel that the overall technological system in place, techno-industrial society as it currently exists, is already "optimizing the world around us for something *other* than what we want, and using up all our resources to do so." Muehlhauser's fear is already the reality as far as I can tell.

Even widespread implementation of early technological systems, like widespread agriculture, has caused places like the fertile crescent to become deserts. The technological advancement of that practice has since led to more widespread disasters – rainforests are being destroyed for cropland, the crops grown are increasingly being used for bio-fuels (presenting their own problems), and roughly a billion people go hungry or starve each year on this planet despite the widespread implementation of agricultural technologies. The Bhopal disaster, one of the single most devastating industrial catastrophes to date, was related to the production of agricultural pesticides. And yet, despite this, we are generally led to believe that agriculture has been a boon for humanity and is a project which should unquestionably continue. This, to me, is an example of a technological system advancing for its own sake rather than for the benefit of humanity. It is as Muehlhauser puts it... "optimizing the world around us for something *other* than what we want, and using up all our resources to do so."

Other techno-industrial projects also proceed despite the harm they cause to humanity and despite the fact that they are using up resources in an entirely unsustainable way. Take, for example, the computer which I, as a critic, am using to write this article. We are told that computers make our lives better and lead to more progress, but their manufacturing process leads to toxic waste and their usage tends to promote a sedentary consumeristic lifestyle (presenting destructive problems in itself). But who can effectively argue that computer usage should be stymied or that broadening the world wide web of computer networks is a negative thing? To use these tools is certainly to be somewhat complicit in the problems they present, but to argue against them without employing their use seems quite futile. The system sucks us all in whether we'd like it to or not and it would be nigh impossible to escape the effects of the techno-industrial society which we have been born into. (I'd argue that certain destructive technologies can be used against themselves, but that's another subject altogether.)

The way our modern system is set up, with an exponentially growing human population, it serves more the interests of technological advancement and scientific discovery for its own sake rather than for serving the broader interests of humanity at large. A large human population, despite the problems that accompany it, simply allows for more people working for further technological advancements. And even those working in seemingly benign jobs within this modern system actually facilitate the work done in more destructive sectors of techno-industrial society. The toilet scrubbers and the bakers doing their jobs makes it so that rocket scientists, nuclear physicists, chemists, and genetic engineers, can focus more completely on their work – which has proven time and again to be highly destructive. And those latter individuals, the scientists, are largely revered by our society and held up for emulation despite the destructive powers they have repeatedly unleashed.

When any destructive aspect of our techno-industrial system must be acknowledged, like a nuclear meltdown or the occurrence of some other large toxic spill, it's presented as a necessary evil. But what is the good that comes with these disasters? Is it because, in the case of nuclear power plant melting down, more energy was previously created to be used for the broader consumption of other resources (also known as the natural world)? Or, maybe, a medical advancement is touted for saving lives despite the harm involved with the creation and implementation of that advancement? At the very best... technological advancement seems to be a double-edged sword.

But incredible dangers presented by our techno-industrial civilization persist. The negative feedback loops associated with global warming, for instance, will continue beyond most of the dates ever discussed – the Earth's atmospheric temperature will continue to steadily rise even after the end of this century. Toxic waste created over the last century will persist for hundreds of thousands of years. And the weaponization of many seemingly benign technologies threatens human existence on Earth.

And why? Why does humanity proceed down this techno-industrial path? Is it supposed to be for the creation of a computerized artificial super-intelligence (which even the proponents fear)? Why would we seek to become gods just to create the gods who will subsequently destroy us? I'm not really a Freudian, but this is the thanatos urge personified in our society – and it permeates most of us in this society. We largely serve, promote, and defend a system which is, in one way or another, leading to our collective destruction.

How long can this continue before some large portion of humanity attempts to go down a different and more sustainable path? In the past couple years we have experienced the worst ever nuclear meltdown as it occurred just outside the largest urban population center on the planet – and which subsequently inundated the largest ocean with high levels of radiation. We have experienced an oil spill which essentially turned the Gulf of Mexico into a toxic pit. And we have seen unprecedented heatwaves, forest fires, and droughts around the world which have occurred as a direct result of global warming which is brought about by our techno-industrial civilization. Our collective response to these events has been little better than that of cattle being led into the slaughterhouse. We are already going along with a system that is “optimizing the world around us for something *other* than what we want, and using up all our resources to do so.”

But I suspect humankind's broader mindset and our way of relating to this crisis might change. The disasters of techno-industrial mass society are becoming more frequent and more apparent. At some point... some significant portion of the global population may begin to effectively fight back as the things which we collectively value, and our relationship with the current system, suddenly and dramatically changes. This may or may not occur in time to prevent the anthropocene mass extinction event from finally catching up with its cause but, at the very least, humanity at large might find some dignity in our resistance to the system currently in place.

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