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Analysis: Why The Future Doesn't Need Us

"Why The Future Doesn't Need Us" is an article written by computer engineer, Bill Joy in April 2000. Bill Joy is an inquisitive individual. He reveals that as a child he was "driven by a deep need to ask questions and find answers" [1]. This hunger for knowledge allowed him to prosper in his education, soon discovering the world of computers to which he would devote his life. Bill Joy has the authority to speak on the issues and upcoming technology because of his extensive background in creating software such as "an instructional Pascal system, Unix utilities, and a text editor called vi" [1]. Being one of the first engineers to create and aid in the innovation of technology allows for one to trust his judgment, as he has personally experienced what many today cannot.

Ray Kurzweil is an American computer scientist and futurist. He gained great notoriety as the inventor of The Kurzweil Reading Machine, the first reading machine for the blind, as well as his publications and insight on the future and its involvement with technology [2]. Kurzweil believes that computers can reach a superintelligence that surpasses their human creators, thus yielding a merge of humans and computers. Joy first encountered Kurzweil at a hotel bar following the conclusion of a conference. Holding great respect for Kurzweil, it was to Joy's astonishment that a world of computers, a thought to be fiction, was possible according to Kurzweil. Joy states, "I had always felt sentient robots were in the realm of science fiction... I was taken aback, especially given Ray's proven ability to imagine and create the future" [1]. Joy learns of a utopia that Kurzweil envisions, and becomes interested in studying its possibility and the consequences that can transpire. Joy unlocked a new fear in his mind, that robots and technology could lead to the full extinction of humanity should humans ignore, or neglect the warning signs.

Joy disagrees with Kurzweil's claims. While Kurzweil envisions a utopia where humans can live at ease and happiness, Joy ponders a future where humans cease to exist. Joy's argument is supplemented with the words of Theodore Kaczynski - the Unabomber, "The machines might be permitted to make all of their own decisions without human oversight...the human race might easily drift into a position of such dependence...turning [the machines] off would amount to suicide" [1]. If a "superintelligence" as Kurzweil predicts occurs, then machines would operate swell, without the need for human interaction. Being an artificial intelligence, humans would live in a dystopia where they are in complete dependence on their machines, such dependence that they cannot live without them. This thought frightened Kaczynski enough to attempt an end to the industrial revolution, though Joy does not think with murderous intent, he is compelled to acknowledge this argument.

Joy believes humility is necessary for developing technology. He uses his grandmother as an example of a person who is "levelheaded" and aware of "the nature of the order of life" [1]. Joy emphasizes that current advocates for technology overlook how fragile life is and the commonsense to care for it in a way that does not involve its future eradication. Joy defends this claim with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their devastating effects. He states, "We should have learned a lesson from the making of the first atomic bomb...We didn't do well then, and the parallels to our current situation are troubling" [1]. I agree with Joy's opinion here. It is easy to imagine a perfect world, but it is difficult to come to terms with the consequences to

get there. To further extrapolate on the atomic bombs, they were created to be used as protection, and now they are and can be used for senseless assassinations. Can we as humans stop and take into consideration the effect our actions have on not only others but on the planet as a whole? Why are we obsessed with becoming superior to others, and where does the term “too far” come into effect? I was raised with the mindset of “treat others the way you would want to be treated”, does this mindset make me naive? I do not think so. It is not a bad thing to consider others, to have humanity left in you. Without it, what separates us from that of a robot? If we are on the road to becoming robots, I could argue we are already there with this mindset.

With respect to knowledge, Joy views it as good but an unlimited supply and access to it is dangerous. He argues that “common sense demands that we reexamine” knowledge seeking and its consequences. He sees extinction if we continue to seek truths. In contrast, Oppenheimer believes what Aristotle stated, that “All men by nature desire to know.” Oppenheimer saw science and viewed knowledge as an object waiting and wanting to be sought. He states, “It is not possible to be a scientist unless you believe that the knowledge of the world, and the power which this gives, is a thing which is of intrinsic value to humanity” [1]. Intrinsic, meaning essential. He sees knowledge as essential and necessary to humans, to acknowledge consequences and live with them rather than prevent them. This mindset is frightful and is no different from that of a tyrant, to see knowledge as power rather than a gift.

Joy’s main thesis is to think about what could happen with technology. To truly consider the consequences and to avoid human negligence. That is not to say that Joy is against technology in any way. Being one of the first engineers to aid in the industrial revolution speaks clearly that he values technology. But he has a sense of responsibility, he states, “that I may be working to create tools which will enable the construction of the technology that may replace our species. How do I feel about this? Very uncomfortable” [1]. His awareness of what his own work might and could do in the hands of other talented individuals who lack humility is frightful. I fully support his argument. Joy mentions Murphy’s law, “Anything that can go wrong, will” and I believe it is important to consider. Yes, technology has aided us tremendously and we have since adapted and become more intelligent individuals. However, have we truly stopped to consider what could happen if technology continues to evolve? Joy mentions the novel, *The White Plague*, as a nightmarish scenario that could be tangible should an individual create a machine out of spite or insanity.

Joy bases his critique of technology on the ethical principle of accountability. To understand that the future is in the hands of the now. What we do now has consequences, and we must be prepared to face them and mitigate them. He states, “My personal experience suggests we tend to overestimate our design abilities.” Thus, there is room for error in our evolution of technology should we neglect to view it.

If we curtail the technological development that drives economic growth, we would fall into an era of stalemate. To the generation that lives in this era, they must be aware of the inevitable doom, as Joy might state, that could have occurred had we continued on our path of technological advancements. It is not wrong to say that where we are currently is a good place to be. Even if we fall back a century, it is important to note that there were still people and life on earth. While less prosperous, it ensures humanity’s existence which is a good thing to have.

I share in Joy’s optimism. There is the infamous saying, “This too shall pass” and I agree with it. The passion within us stems from the heart. History has proven that humans can exist

enough in the toughest of times such as war, the Great Depression, and more. It is innate for humans to care, which is why we feel a soft spot toward babies. Thus, I believe that if we analyze and work on the current issues we have, then we could be prosperous.

In the end, I agree with Joy. Humanity exists because we, people, exist. Turning over a new leaf of transhumanism or post-humanism bears many consequences we are still not aware of yet. Though a logical fallacy of appeal to tradition, it is within nature that robots do not exist. Technology is at a good place where it is, and we can still grow on it, but to create an artificially intelligent world would be simply that; artificial.

References

- [1] B. Joy, "Why the future doesn't need us," Wired, 01-Apr-2000. [Online]. Available: <https://www.wired.com/2000/04/joy-2/>. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2022].
- [2] "Ray Kurzweil," Academy of Achievement, 16-Feb-2022. [Online]. Available: <https://achievement.org/achiever/ray-kurzweil/>. [Accessed: 21-Oct-2022].