Philosophy and the Future

5 August Philosophy and the Future - Derek Maitland

Derek argues that if we take the powerful social, economic and bio-technological trends that are leading us into the future, it could well be said that philosophy faces not just its greatest challenge as the "science of the soul," but the question of its survival as an arbiter of human behaviour.

I've called this talk "Philosophy and the Future," instead of "Philosophy In the Future," not because I think there'll not be such a thing as philosophy in the Future, but because one of the key philosophical debates down the centuries -- the philosophy of Time - argues that the Future simply doesn't exist.

It can only be said that there is such a thing as a Future when that Future actually happens, so the argument goes, and even then it's not the Future at all. By simply happening, by existing, it becomes Now.

We talk of concepts like "the future to come," "what the future holds," what we "plan for the future," but really all we're doing is firing little darts of will forward down the calculated measure of time that we ourselves have invented. And where, on the human calender of time and place they land, is where we have willed that we'll visit the doctor, or get married, or take a trip, mow the lawn or become a millionaire.

Schopenhauer called this an "abstract of will" - the will itself existing, or being fulfilled, only when that instant of time and place exists, and what was willed actually happens. And then, of course, the question is whether that instant of future itself had any meaning if it too could only exist as an immeasurable moment of Now.

And we're not even sure whether there is such a thing as Now, because there's no real way of calculating how long an instant of Now takes to happen, how long it exists as Now, and how long it takes to become Then.
In that respect, we can quite plausibly discard Now as a measure of existence, along with Future - get rid of them both -- and consider these questions:

Are we all existing in fact in an infinite continuum of Now?

And, secondly, if the time-span of that universal instant of Now cannot be measured, are we not in fact living a Past, a timeless memory if you will, perhaps playing our own predetermined roles in a vast existential theatre?

I'm certainly not the first thinker to toss and turn at night imagining such things. The question of whether we do in fact exist, or imagine we exist, in an infinite cosmic dream is one of the key arguments that have swirled, since the days of Plato, around the fundamental debate on the physical versus transcendental realms -- and the question of which one is actually the true reality.

Again, Schopenhauer spent some time pondering time - Past, Present and Future time - and related it to the concept of physical and transcendental existence this way:

"Every moment of our life," he wrote, "belongs to the present only for a moment, then it belongs to the past. Every evening we are poorer by a day. We would perhaps grow frantic at the sight of this ebbing away of our short span of time, were we not secretly conscious, in the profoundest depths of our being, that we share in the inexhaustible well of eternity, out of which we can forever draw new life and renewed time."
And that secret consciousness of the inexhaustible well of eternity is where this talk of mine is going.

In other writings, Schopenhauer spoke of time as a succession of quote "temporal instants" - each dependent upon its predecessor and in a sense implied by it. But again, the question arises: How do we measure each instant?

As for our "short span of earthly time," he characteristically described it this way: "You can look upon our life as an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness."

Of course, the future, like everything else, is conjecture, and we have to take heed of such time-honoured warnings as Emmanuel Kant's dictum that if there's anything that exists beyond what we regard as commonsense reality, we humans haven't got anything approaching the absolute perspective required to prove and understand it.

But we can begin to build an overall perspective of what we might, for want of another term, project as our Future by examining some important Present/Past trends in our evolvement as the human race.

And it's these projected trends, as I see them, which I'd like to offer tonight - not as assertions, particularly, but as questions we should perhaps be considering along with the traditional and more min-utely focused day-to-day issues of philosophical thought.
Trend number one: Whether we're fully conscious of it or not, we're challenging the very basis of humanity: We're building a new human being.

Now, it may well be argued that the current rapidly-developing advances in genetics, stem cell research, organ and limb replacement, bionics, nanotechnology and techno-biology generally are scattered, separately focused fields of research, each applied to a particular human need, curiosity or profit motive.

But taken as a general research culture, if you will, the overall aim is a far healthier, and therefore happier and more productive, disease resistant, physically powerful, intellectually capable, and, most significantly, much longer-living human being.

In fact, it's our innate craving for extended mortality - immortality, if you like - that's largely driving the whole research process, and the trends are beginning to bear this up. Our societies are ageing, but we're living longer. And most of us, I think, want to live, and work, and be productive, many years longer.

Indeed, at this present/past time there are more than 3,000 people in Australia who are over 100 years of age. Our fastest growing age group is people in their 80s, and it's estimated that the number of people aged over 60 will rise by at least 40 percent over the next thirty years.

According to Robert A. Freitas, an American research expert in biological ageing, we'll see current stem cell research, hormonal and molecular technology and, most dramatically, nanomedicine and nanotechnology, begin what he terms "rolling back the clock" of the ageing process to the point where humans could be living well over 1,000 years, and even more.

Now, trend number two: I don't think anyone would disagree that we are developing a passionate love-affair with high technology, particularly in communications. And this leads to another obvious question?

Is it possible that this techno love affair may well actually consummate and give birth itself to another, entirely new concept of humankind.
To find an answer to that, we have to consider trend number three: -- While we rush to embrace, and increasingly depend upon, every new development in computerization and information technology, research into artificial intelligence - particularly machines that can think for themselves and, indeed, build other machines - is reaching the stage of what's been termed a Singularity - a quantum development every bit as significant, from our point of view, as the Big Bang.

The acclaimed British mathematician, Irving Good - who's been labelled the “Overlooked Father of Computation” - first predicted 50 years ago that, at the current headlong pace of technological development, artificial brains would inevitably be built that surpassed the human intellect and would themselves inevitably produce even more intellectually advanced machines.

This would lead to what he called an “intelligence explosion,” leaving the intelligence of man far behind.

It was the science fiction writer, Vernor Vinge, who took this apocalyptic projection and called it the technological Singularity - the point at which the creation of technological, superhuman intelligence heralds the end of the human era.

But what sort of human being, by these trends, would exist after the Singularity? What would classify as human in an environment of autonomous, self-aware, human-like entities performing a myriad computational tasks within far vaster, more complex networks of machines?

Would we become super-intelligent human-machine hybrids, perhaps, combining biological and chrystalline components or growth, or mutualism as it's termed by those physicists and nanobiologists who already see such a partnership as a revolutionary new driving force in evolution?

If you think that's far-fetched, remember we're already beyond the threshold of human nerve-to-silicon transduction, or mutualism, in advanced research into limb prosthetics. We've also, by the way, seen the unveiling in the past few days of a robot which can feel and interpret emotions.

And then comes another more chilling question: What about the horror that Good and Vinge and a growing number of other technologists mutually warn about in this brave new superhumanity - the risk that uncontrolled machine superintelligence - machines capable of building even better and better machines -- could mark the end of the human race altogether - rendering biological humans completely redundant? We've seen the movie - now wait for life to do what it does so often, prove itself stranger and more real than fiction.

We can argue, of course, that a horror like that would never happen because while mankind retained full possession of the power plug, so to speak, machines could never control their own evolution. And no human in his or her right mind would allow machines to make their own uncontrolled decisions anyway.
But that's exactly what we've been trying to get machines do. And one horrific and already existing example of this is the so-called Dead Man's Hand defence system in the United States - a computerized nuclear retaliation program which, in event of an enemy strike which crippled the US infrastructure and command structure, would automatically rain a nuclear Armageddon on that enemy's territory.

You'll recall it was first built at the height of the US-USSR Cold War. The Pentagon called it Mutually Assured Destruction - or MAD.

On this crucial issue of control, we can also briefly take account of another critical present/past trend. Have any of us really calculated the extent to which we, as ordinary human beings generally, have, in the past few decades, systematically lost control of, or any real participation in, the interlocked political, technological, corporate decision-making which rightly or wrongly shapes and determines our lives.

Quite bluntly, we have no guarantee at all that we can, or will, control the Singularity.

And now the final trend which I want to point to this evening. And another question: Why are we, consciously or otherwise, building this new human being, this superhuman?

I firmly believe that - again, consciously or otherwise -- it's to fulfill that powerful, embedded drive within us to challenge, explore, understand and conquer the limitless mysteries of our existence.

As the science writer and quantum physics expert, George Johnson put it: We can't huddle forever on our tiny planet, "shining our flashlights into the darkness."

We all know full well that we're reaching for the stars - indeed the amazing Hubble images, reaching back almost to the beginning of time, the deep space probes and the day-by-day marvels of discovery of the Martian probe in particular, cannot but underscore where we, as a species, are obviously going from here.

We've accelerated in fact from the Space Race to the Space Rush, with the US and China now competing to be the first back on the moon by 2020 - to launch manned deep space missions from there -- with Russia of course, along with Britain, the European Community, Japan, India, Iran and even South Africa, of all nations, working to get out into space too. And that's not to mention Richard Branson of Virgin, who last week unveiled a sub-orbital plane for travel and sightseeing beyond the atmosphere.

We will develop the technology to reach the stars, there's no doubt about that. But to venture beyond our own little solar system we'll need one critical development if we are to remain, as Cyril Joad tells us, "the matter by which matter has
become conscious of itself,” and which the poet Shelley referred to as “the eye with which the universe beholds itself and knows itself divine.”

We need a human being, a Nietschzian superhuman, a techno-human hybrid if necessary, that's capable of meeting the extreme physical, intellectual and emotional demands and rigors of deep space exploration lasting perhaps thousands of light years.

And that, I suggest, is what we are, consciously or unconsciously, building now.

But here we must come back to the question of “Philosophy and the Future.” Will philosophy as we know it survive in this superhuman, techno-human environment?

How will it evolve itself from the very earthly, very human value systems that it encompasses in our present/past, to meet the demands of what may be vastly different rules and imperatives of this post-Singularity era?

Again, are we as philosophical thinkers going to throw in the towel to scientific empiricism, or are we going to try to forge a new dialogue, understanding and perhaps a partnership with the technologists?

Irving Good offered one pointer - that in the post-Singularity, post-human era, in the rigid intellectual and command hierarchy that may well reign then, we would need what he called a “Meta-Golden Rule” - basically "Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your superiors." Which translates again, of course, into the age-old philosophy of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

George Johnson offers another strikingly relevant comment: ""For a while," he writes, "modem science was content with explaining the how of existence, leaving the why to religion." And of course, philosophy.

"But sometimes," he goes on, "it [now] seems that science the world over is reaching beyond its own self-imposed limits. With its grand unification theories and cosmological schemes it is seeking answers so fundamental that they border on theology.

"Why is there something instead of nothing? Why does the universe seem to operate according to mathematical laws? What is consciousness - a biological artefact, an accident of evolution or something deeply woven into the warp and woof of the universe?"

That's what we have to find out. And again, like it or not, Cyril Joad tells us why we, as philosophers, must go along for
the ride. Quoting Aristotle, Joad tells us: "Philosophy springs originally from the impulse of curiosity, and the first requisite of the philosopher who is to make philosophy fruitful is that he or she would care passionately to know what the universe is like."