

Coming Crises and Their Solutions



An American's Handbook
to Future Game Changers

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Crisis #35

The Singularity

The term “Singularity” was coined by astrophysicists to refer to the zero-volume, infinitely dense center of a black hole where matter apparently disappears from our universe. It is a singular event that is so profoundly unique because it defies our laws of physics and nothing else like it (that we know of) occurs in the cosmos. We know that matter can change from one state to another, e.g., water, steam, or ice—gas, liquid, solid, or plasma—and mass can change into energy or vice versa; we can burn coal and make heat, ash, and smoke—but nowhere in our universe other than a black hole does matter 100 percent cease to exist—as far as we know.

Ray Kurzweil has written about an anticipated major shift in human history, an event so revolutionary as to make everything that has gone before it relatively insignificant. Many pundits agree that a paradigm shift in human history of a similar ultra-transcendental nature will occur sometime during the middle of this century but not all agree on its nature—or how it will play out. Scientists and nearly all religionists profess that it will not alter their irreconcilable viewpoints but may suggest points on which they can agree.

Futurists believe the Singularity must occur because knowledge is not only growing exponentially, but at an exponential rate so

that a veritable explosion in technological progress must occur at some point. They suggest that the tipping point will come by 2020 when quantum computing enables artificial intelligence (AI) to begin improving its own source code faster than humans can. In that Singular Moment, AI will begin outperforming human intelligence and facilitate the determination of the function of all genes and the process of protein splicing. By this theory, it will be possible to transcend biology by reprogramming our bodies to a more youthful age, perfect health, an IQ of 165-plus and a PhD in any specialized human knowledge of our choice. That means that science will be able to perfect human “nature,” overcome all human shortcomings and problems—and defy aging and death—literally forever.

But, there are questions. Is it a false promise? A promise that will benefit only a select few? How far will the practice of genetic engineering be allowed to advance? What will remain of individuality and free will? Will we ultimately all look alike—as clones or cyborgs? Would our physical bodies become superfluous—or used by inanimate “machines” for their own purposes? Bioethicists are already grappling with this issue. What would follow has already been named the “Post-Human Era.” Should we program animals to be smarter too?

It seems problematical whether a superior cybernetic (or other) intelligence would even allow humanity to continue. All would seem to thinly depend upon whether we can imbue AI with a sense of morality, empathy, and gratitude for having been created by humankind. The practical aspects of achieving such a world—without divine or extraterrestrial intervention—seem to preclude its being beneficial for all humanity. Unless . . . unless we retain one ability that AI cannot reproduce—imagination! How we might progress from here to the “other side” of the Singularity challenges rational analysis. If all the information in a human brain could be downloaded, might it not be reverse

engineered to exclude its “wrong” beliefs? Could we opt out? What would happen to individuality? Would we accept its demise as inevitable and just relax as zombies, sit back and wait for it to happen? Might we suffer a debilitating post-traumatic stress if we resigned ourselves to the Singularity?

Our world will more likely continue divided between haves and have-nots, but with the haves being those privileged to have (wireless) access to all human knowledge in an earplug, on their wrists, or in their pockets or purses while the rest lack this advantage. What is likely to happen to the latter? When genetic engineering and biochemistry are on the verge of creating superior human beings, morality may no longer be among our dominant attributes nor among those of intelligent, logical biocomputers. Morality is restrictive and confining—a phenomena of culture. What is a computer’s culture? If it has none, does it possess any morality?

Its advent suggests that at first, small numbers of humans will be turned into a superior “tribe” or “master race” that will extirpate the human condition of its many failings: deception, corruption, greed, avarice, self-righteousness, indifference, ignorance, violence, selfishness, irrationality, violence, lewdness, etc., etc. A logic system could conclude that anyone such as a corrupt legislator, or sexual predator, or rapist, or assassin, or political opponent, or business competitor who cannot instantly be genetically “cured” should be quickly annihilated before consuming more of the Earth’s precious declining resources.

Unless the conversion to a Master Race is a sudden, universal event caused by air- or water-borne microbes (or implemented by a supernatural or alien power), the first persons chosen would be unlikely to put up with the nonsense, chaos, and degradation of the world that we live in. Politicians, lawyers, and psychiatrists would probably find themselves out of a job.

The process of converting seven billion Earthlings into ideal human beings is hard to visualize. Perhaps receiving some form of instantaneous satellite brain wave and/or radiation treatment might accomplish it, but what of the beginning disparities—brains with a total lack of education vs. Nobel laureates, religious fanatics and terrorists vs. cosmic scientists and pacifists, sickly or premature newborns vs. Olympic athletes, etc.?

And what of savants? Would we “convert” some people to savants with a specific function? At best, it would seem to require a long-term, step-by-step, time-consuming progression—assuming the brain, blood, DNA, RNA, and genes could all be reprogrammed to the New Standard. All would have to receive characters and personalities that include (at the least) morality, love, empathy, reason, responsibility, integrity, ethics, nonviolence, self-control, behavioral predictability, a universal language, etc., without individual variations in the nature or degree of the critical attributes.

The “Chosen People” would have a homogenous viewpoint—neither liberal nor conservative, religionist nor atheist—but certainly believers in personal responsibility and the scientific method that bases decisions on a new cultural standard with cost-benefit analysis. If everyone is made equal by the Singularity, with the same abilities and opportunities, that implies a return to the Natural Law of “Survival of the Fittest”; if none is disadvantaged, “self-reliance” means making one’s own choices and accepting the consequences such as “sacrifice today, enjoy tomorrow.” There would be no reason for socialized protections—or transfers of wealth between classes. Religions would face perplexing realities. If one might live forever, what new role might the soul or Heaven play? Without death, there could be no final judgment, no salvation, no afterlife, no reincarnation, and no reunion with deceased loved ones? Would believers accept that? If we can still make individual choices, what will happen to people who make

wrong or antisocial choices?

Fanatical believers in any “irrational” dogma would no doubt have to be mentally “cleansed” before being reprogrammed. If that applied to all devout Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, etc., it would end personal choice—an obvious inconsistency. Some visionaries suggest that an individual cyber-companion could interface with our physical self and prevent our “wrongful behavior.” If so, no one would lie, cheat or steal, and law enforcement, jurisprudence, and most functions of government would become superfluous. Might our youthful alter ego be programmed to prevent us from having sex before marriage? What might happen to people if their change does not “take”—and they then try to opt out?

Perhaps the value of a human life would depend on the net advantage or disadvantage of its continuance. If, as many believe, the Earth already has more people than its limited resources can sustain, euthanasia might be the fate of the billions who do not “fit the new profile.” Of course, the expectation of this “Brave New World” is that the overall effect will be beneficial and that humanity will then enter into a “Golden Age” with everything as it should be: no corruption, no licentiousness, no violence, no illness, and no more death. Marriage, if it still existed, would be perfect—and permanent. Only if two differing options offered an equal cost-benefit advantage to all directly affected parties, could freedom of choice still exist.

Another possible form of the predicted “Singularity” might be the eschatological Apocalypse many religions predict will unfold when their Christ, or Messiah, or Prophet returns in the “End Times” (or “Pralay,” the Hindu end of the cosmos). There are many people who believe that event is likely to occur in the near future. They point to many preconditions and events that are revealed in scriptures that they believe have already occurred—

or are taking place now—and that are leading to Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil. Many people would undoubtedly welcome the prophesied one-world dictator who is supposed to save us from the economic, military, and political catastrophes now happening in preparation for the coming of The Messiah.

Despite all the lessons of history refuting the economic models of socialism and communism, many people still vote for socialists and communists. How can they deny irrefutable facts? Do they truly believe that the Cuban example is worth repeating? On the other hand, many intelligent people still smoke cigarettes and drive while drunk. Perhaps what that tells us is either that we have misread the lessons of history—or that there is a dire need for genetic engineering that will raise the average intelligence level to a much higher plane. (I'll go after you.)