**Entering the AI era**

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Monday, May 15, 2023

After almost 79 years on this beleaguered planet, let me say one thing: this can’t end well. Really, it can’t. And no, I’m not talking about the most obvious issues ranging from the war in Ukraine to the climate disaster. What I have in mind is that latest, greatest human invention: artificial intelligence.

It doesn’t seem that complicated to me. As a once-upon-a-time historian, I’ve long thought about what, in these centuries, unartificial and – all too often – unartful intelligence has ‘accomplished’ (and yes, I’d prefer to put that in quotation marks). But the minute I try to imagine what that seemingly ultimate creation AI, already a living abbreviation of itself, might do, it makes me shiver. Brrr…

Let me start with honesty, which isn’t an artificial feeling at all. What I know about AI you could put in a trash bag and throw out with the garbage. Yes, I’ve recently read whatever I could in the media about it and friends of mine have already fiddled with it. TomDispatch regular William Astore, for instance, got ChatGPT to write a perfectly passable “critical essay” on the military-industrial complex for his Bracing Views newsletter – and that, I must admit, was kind of amazing.

Still, it’s not for me. Never me. I hate to say never because we humans truly don’t know what we’ll do in the future. Still, consider it my best guess that I won’t have anything actively to do with AI. (Although my admittedly less than artificially intelligent spellcheck system promptly changed ‘chatbox’ to ‘hatbox’ when I was emailing Astore to ask him for the URL to that piece of his.)

But let’s stop here a minute. Before we even get to AI, let’s think a little about LTAI (Less Than Artificial Intelligence, just in case you don’t know the acronym) on this planet. Who could deny that it’s had some remarkable successes? It created the Mona Lisa, Starry Night, and Diego and I. Need I say more? It’s figured out how to move us around this world in style and even into outer space. It’s built vast cities and great monuments, while creating cuisines beyond compare. I could, of course, go on. Who couldn’t? In certain ways, the creations of human intelligence should take anyone’s breath away. Sometimes, they even seem to give “miracle” a genuine meaning.

And yet, from the dawn of time, that same LTAI went in far grimmer directions, too. It invented weaponry of every kind, from the spear and the bow and arrow to artillery and jet fighter planes. It created the AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, now largely responsible (along with so many disturbed individual LTAIs) for our seemingly never-ending mass killings, a singular phenomenon in this “peacetime” country of ours.

And we’re talking, of course, about the same Less Than Artificial Intelligence that created the Holocaust, Joseph Stalin’s Russian gulag, segregation and lynch mobs in the United States., and so many other monstrosities of (in)human history. Above all, we’re talking about the LTAI that turned much of our history into a tale of war and slaughter beyond compare, something that, no matter how ‘advanced’ we became, has never – as the brutal, deeply destructive conflict in Ukraine suggests – shown the slightest sign of cessation. Although I haven’t seen figures on the subject, I suspect that there has hardly been a moment in our history when, somewhere on this planet (and often that somewhere would have to be pluralized), we humans weren’t killing each other in significant numbers.

And keep in mind that in none of the above have I even mentioned the horrors of societies regularly divided between and organized around the staggeringly wealthy and the all too poor. But enough, right? You get the idea.

Oops, I left one thing out in judging the creatures that have now created AI. In the last century or two, the ‘intelligence’ that did all of the above also managed to come up with two different ways of potentially destroying this planet and more or less everything living on it. The first of them it created largely unknowingly. After all, the massive, never-ending burning of fossil fuels that began with the nineteenth-century industrialization of much of the planet was what led to an increasingly climate-changed Earth. Though we’ve now known what we were doing for decades (the scientists of one of the giant fossil-fuel companies first grasped what was happening in the 1970s), that hasn’t stopped us. Not by a long shot. Not yet anyway.

Over the decades to come, if not taken in hand, the climate emergency could devastate this planet that houses humanity and so many other creatures. It’s a potentially world-ending phenomenon (at least for a habitable planet as we’ve known it). And yet, at this very moment, the two greatest greenhouse gas emitters, the United States and China (that country now being in the lead, but the US remaining historically number one), have proven incapable of developing a cooperative relationship to save us from an all-too-literal hell on Earth. Instead, they’ve continued to arm themselves to the teeth and face off in a threatening fashion while their leaders are now not exchanging a word, no less consulting on the overheating of the planet.

The second path to hell created by humanity was, of course, nuclear weaponry, used only twice to devastating effect in August 1945 on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Still, even relatively small numbers of weapons from the vast nuclear arsenals now housed on Planet Earth would be capable of creating a nuclear winter that could potentially wipe out much of humanity.

And mind you, knowing that, LTAI beings continue to create ever larger stockpiles of just such weaponry as ever more countries – the latest being North Korea – come to possess them. Under the circumstances and given the threat that the Ukraine War could go nuclear, it’s hard not to think that it might just be a matter of time. In the decades to come, the government of my own country is, not atypically, planning to put another $2 trillion into ever more advanced forms of such weaponry and ways of delivering them.

Given such a history, you’d be forgiven for imagining that it might be a glorious thing for artificial intelligence to begin taking over from the intelligence responsible for so many dangers, some of them of the ultimate variety. And I have no doubt that, like its ancestor (us), AI will indeed prove anything but one-sided. It will undoubtedly produce wonders in forms that may as yet be unimaginable.

Still, let’s not forget that AI was created by those of us with LTAI. If now left to its own devices (with, of course, a helping hand from the powers that be), it seems reasonable to assume that it will, in some way, essentially repeat the human experience. In fact, consider that a guarantee of sorts. That means it will create beauty and wonder and – yes! – horror beyond compare (and perhaps even more efficiently so). Lest you doubt that, just consider which part of humanity already seems the most intent on pushing artificial intelligence to its limits.

Yes, across the planet, departments of “defense” are pouring money into AI research and development, especially the creation of unmanned autonomous vehicles (think: killer robots) and weapons systems of various kinds, as Michael Klare pointed out recently at TomDispatch when it comes to the Pentagon. In fact, it shouldn’t shock you to know that five years ago (yes, five whole years!), the Pentagon was significantly ahead of the game in creating a Joint Artificial Intelligence Center to, as the New York Times put it, “explore the use of artificial intelligence in combat.” There, it might, in the end – and “end” is certainly an operative word here – speed up battlefield action in such a way that we could truly be entering unknown territory. We could, in fact, be entering a realm in which human intelligence in wartime decision-making becomes, at best, a sideline activity.

Excerpted: ‘A Few Thoughts on 'Less Than Artificial Intelligence' From a Human Practioner’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org