

Is AI a danger to humanity?



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for humanity

There are three standard counter-responses to the claim that technology can be dangerous in itself. One, the fault is not in technology but in the humans who use such technology: guns don't kill, only people do. Two, technology is as useful as it can be harmful. Three, technology will always be under our control and so we can literally pull the plug when we want.

All these views can be effectively challenged, particularly in the case of artificial intelligence (AI). There is a fundamental difference between a knife, or even more complex machines, and AI, and that is the degree of independence that AI technologies have. An AI machine is an autonomous entity and from what we have seen of such machines, they are like other human beings in terms of their capacities for decision and action.

Enforcing a particular view

The real worry about these technologies is the emphasis on intelligence rather than other characteristics of human beings. AI is an attempt to reproduce superintelligent humans. It chooses one aspect of human beings, namely this vague idea called intelligence, and artificially magnifies it to an extent that allows the machine to do things far better than humans can. The success of these machines only reinforces the success of a particular view of human beings: not their vulnerability and finitude (characteristics that have catalysed so much of great music, art and literature), but largely some calculative capacity.

Purely intelligent creatures, whether people or machines, are bad for humanity. The restricted meaning of intelligence in AI is that associated with superlative memory, calculative power, decision-making capacity, high speeds of action, etc. These machines thus become superbeings, and a society filled with many superbeings is a recipe for disaster.

Being human is not about superintelligence and super capacity. It is about living with others and learning to live within our limitations. Vulnerability, decay and death characterise any living form. AI machines are a mirror to our desire for immortality and absence of human weaknesses. There is nothing wrong in this desire per se, but building surrogate machines is not the way to achieve this.

AI has not been used to get rid of poverty, to have more equitable distribution of wealth, or to make people more content with what they have. The types of AI we have, including war machines, will primarily be dictated by profit for the companies that make them. Is this what we need? It would be a sad world where 'life' forms come into existence based on the logic of profit.

The cost of technology

Unlike a gun, the AI machine is a performer in itself. To think that such machines will be subservient to us all the time is wishful thinking. We haven't learnt anything about the master-slave relation if we think that these machines are only meant to be our 'slaves' which make our lives 'easier'. All technologies come with a cost (not just economic but also social and psychological) and we have very little idea of the cost

that AI will extract from us. Most worryingly, these thinking machines, which are smarter than us, will know exactly how to manipulate us to the extent that we will not be able to see their negative effects.

The only good thing about horrible dictators like Adolf Hitler is that they eventually die. Imagine a Hitler who lives forever? This is what AI machines can do. The foolishness of men will come to haunt the future of humankind in more ways than one. Is AI the final beginning of the end?