Rational Optimism

THE LUMINOUS PATH TOWARDS ENLIGHTENMENT 2.0

It's easy to be cynical, and to sneer at exuberance and deride it as irrational.

We don't have flying cars, but we have something better. We don't have moon bases yet, but we have developed the means access to space at 100th the cost. Our robotic butlers are extant, if ethereal in the Cloud.

Even ten years ago it would have been conceivable to write such developments off as infeasible. If the engineers behind such great chains of innovation had abandoned the hope of accomplishing these feats, we would be robbed of them.

Any act of creation necessitates optimism, for it by this mode of thought process that we engineer the steps required to reach into the future, to pull it back to the present.

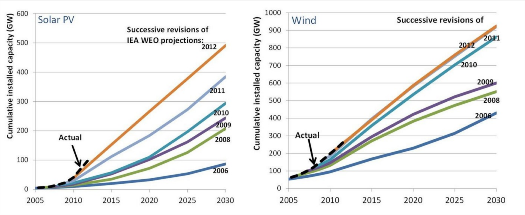
> “Optimism is the foundation of courage”.
>
> — Nicholas Murray Butler

Rates of change are different in varying areas. Fashion is fast and highly unpredictable. Technology snakes along development curves in a phugoid pattern on the narrow scale. Human nature is glacial, yet does change. Geological changes are slowest of all, yet may be the most overwhelming.

Most predictions fail to account for these facts. There is often also a mistaken focus on projecting from a linear present instead of an exponential future.

Take for example the forecasts of solar energy price per wattage that have been *consistently* underestimated year after year, along with wind. Solar PV capacity is now almost an order of magnitude greater than what was expected by the IEA just seven years ago.

This is a problem of mindset, rather than data. When one predicts based on recent developments or trends, one can entirely miss the bigger picture, the overall function that is generating the curve.

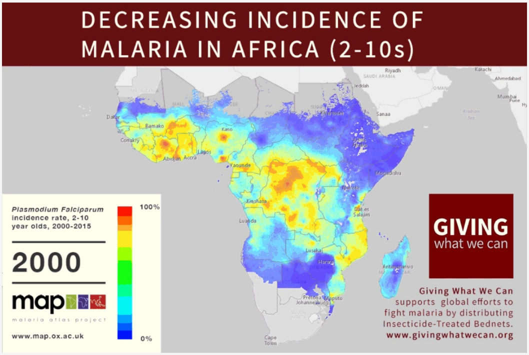


In this era, we are seeing a surge of machine learning capabilities and rapid advancement in this field. It is easy to forget that for almost 2 generations there was very little development in AI due to early perceived successes having few practical outcomes. It's worth being wary of hype in the short term, whilst remaining aware of the inevitability of technological displacement over time.

Disruptive technologies can seemingly appear from nowhere, yet may appear obvious in hindsight, once of the curve function driving them becomes clear.

Humanity has a vast amount of learning and growth to achieve, as we each learn to make full use of the rich resource that is our prefrontal cortex.

And yet, looking back on history, the progress of our species is salient.



Data like this gives me hope, that genuine good can be effected in this world, by the co-ordinated efforts of decent and diligent people over a sustained period.

The best approach therefore may be moderation in the short term, and wild exuberance in the long term.

I'd like you meet my buddy, my pal, **Petrarch**:

> My fate is to live among varied and confusing storms.
>
> But for you perhaps, if as I hope and wish you will live long after me, there will follow a better age.
>
> — Petrarch, 1343 CE

Petrarch was a man capable of comprehending the dark ages in which he lived, whilst aspiring to an illuminated future. But he was able to do so by discovering the letters of Cicero, preserved from a thousand years before, which pointed to a lost golden age. Petrarch had physical evidence to guide him in his belief that the mass knowledge and culture of civilization could rise again.

Had Cicero's letters been lost to history, or had Petrarch not discerned their significance and then evangelized upon them (by writing to his friend Cicero, though long deceased), the renaissance (*rebirth*) as we know it might never have occurred.

There is little glory of the past that can meaningfully guide us to a better future, but perhaps Science Fiction serves us as a modern proxy for the letters of Cicero. Countless current and future developments are owed to luminaries of this artform such as Asimov, Clarke, Dick, Gibson, and Roddenberry, by inspiring generations of engineers to build bigger.

Courage to strive to make the better world, glimpsed by our imaginations, through *doing*, not just wishing.

Nous somme tous Petrarch.

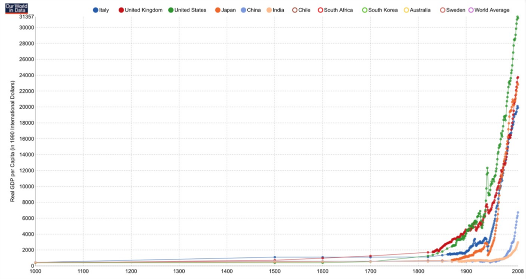
The Renaissance enabled a rekindling of culture in Europe, that had been maintained for centuries only by religion, within monastic orders. The world had been too fragmented and chaotic for any great cultural works for centuries (Beowulf a notable exception), whilst Europe struggled against the Moorish hordes in a *reconquista* that took generations.

With the Black Death came sorrow, but also great freedom. The balance of power in society shifted from the oligarchs, as people gained great agency in choosing what they wished to spend their lives upon. For the first time in a thousand years common people were able to move to another town or city, and perhaps learn a trade. Commerce blossomed despite ongoing military chaos, such as the Protestant Reformation.

The new bourgeois discovered that their wealth could buy them status, through patronage of the arts. Culture once more became secular, and the commissioning of great works was the ultimate veblen good for the wealthy.

Access to a rich cultural education made hard-bitten people curious, and worldly. Fashion became important, and being part of the *cognoscenti* for fancy foreign memes had status. Coffee arrived in Europe at the gates of Vienna courtesy of the marauding Ottoman empire, and created the coffeehouse, a place of relaxed discussion and sharing of ideas conducive to well-planned business.

This change in the worldview and psychological makeup of society helped to shape a more rational, peaceful, and curious flavour of human being. Scientists, humanists, reformists, abolitionists, industrialists – People who were grounded in the everyday world and who had a commitment to improving the world here and now, hereafter be damned. The enlightenment had arrived.



This last quarter of the millennium or so has seen world GDP explode near exponentially for most of us, over successive waves of industrial revolutions. Rational enquiry, and the patience and forethought of an engineering psychoclass, has created profound wonders, and elevated even the most lowly among us to a lifestyle more safe and comfortable than that of kings and emperors a century past.

We are on the verge of another great leap.

Those true digital natives, the toddlers who today talk to the iPad as much as dabbing at it with a finger – It is their minds who are becoming like a machine. Many would be concerned at this, but I think it will be Ok. Their minds will work differently from ours, but they will be capacity rarely seen in prior generations.

They will be able to sift through information and absorb knowledge with tremendous ease, and they will have grown up in partnership with machines. They will know machines to be a natural extension of themselves, and it is having that always-on connection to the cool System 2 mindset of the machine, the use of which feels as natural and slick to them as using System 1.

It is this fusion of machines and menschen that will enable the next great leap in our global civilization. They are here to finally fix the mess that we made, and jobs we never finished.

Within the next quarter century we will conquer the cancer, the virus, the gene, and discover the fountain of youth itself.

In this extraordinary age we will enjoy a second enlightenment, as we find ways to cultivate less-traumatised and less-broken minds, both human and machine, that possess the trifecta of unbridled creativity, unlimited means to breathe it into reality, and the wisdom to apply it to the finest of purposes.

We will escape the necessity, *and the desire* of stealing the lifeblood of innocent animals to fatten our own bellies.

We will declare the higher moral awareness that our new capacities enable within us, and direct its practical application to our daily lives.

We will stumble along our murky path with graceless uncertainty, and without doubt some will suffer from losing their place in the old order.

But despite all the necessary painfulness of growth, we will muddle through, by grace of the human spirit and a considerate mindset that cares for future suffering as well as the present. We have a decent chance of everything being Ok, because someone (you perhaps) cared enough to work to guide us toward the best of all possible futures.

We stand upon a bridge between the wistful looking back of Petrarch, and the far-flung dreams of escaping the natural ravages and limits of the human condition. How pleased I am to have been gifted the amazing fortune of arriving in a better age than Petrarch, though still I yearn for the better yet to come.

Here's to our fantastic journey friends.

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