

AI, Technology and Compassion

(Draft/Jan2023)

By M. Nadarajah

LES Multiversity/Loyola Extension Services

Loyola College of Social Sciences

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

amanibana@gmail.com

I clearly see the value of Technology/technologies. But I am not a great enthusiast of ‘runway Technology or technologies’. I do not see technology as a solution to the big and painful human or spiritual problems we acutely face today (many of which are created by over-rating ‘human intelligence’). And I do not think AI as we know it today is the pinnacle of our intelligence and technological achievement - Every generation likes to think the technology they had was the pinnacle. Why even the community we call ‘tribal’ had great technologies.

My own thoughts is that it is still at a ‘primitive’ stage and it is no where near what it is to be human, or, more accurately, eco-human. While we are all excited by such thing as ‘driverless taxi’ and all that, we are undermining our preparedness for the dangers of our limitedness and ‘collective stupidities’. My observations below are coloured by these considerations.

To Briefly Elaborate...

Let me share five critical orientational concerns (for whatever they are worth): (a) The ‘seductive narrative’ of a ‘technological utopia’, (b) The falseness of the belief that AI is the pinnacle of our intelligence (to assume that we can invent a ‘compassionate machine’), (c) the invisibilisation of our ‘collective stupidity’, (d) the fallacy that compassion is an algorithm, and (e) the challenge of popular control of technology, including AI. Let me elaborate briefly (this is draft version of a longer piece to be shared here by the end of the year).

We are all sold the idea of the Future World as the child of Technology. We all believe that we will come to live in a nurturing ‘socio-technocratic womb’. All problems will be resolved by technologies, even the problems produced by human-induced climate or health or social emergencies. All ailments will be treated, even at a genetic level. Food will be plenty with AI-supported technologies. Technology will annihilate poverty (close reading of the sub-texts of the UNSDGs seem to ideologically assume this). Humanoid robots, animated by AI, will be ‘compassionised’ (if one can use the term). People will live beyond want and need in ‘unalloyed’ Happiness....and so on. A happy, rosy story -- A seductive technological utopia built on technocracy and technocratic governance.

Most of us know that there is more wishful thinking than truth in this, bordering on a toxic fantasy. The future can be very dark and dangerous when we surrender society and humanity to Technology, to the machines we invent/produce. A dystopia is in the making as we buy into the

hegemony of technocratic narrative, seduced by all the ‘awesome conveniences’ we read about and see. Increasingly we surrender our collective political and ethical governance and control -- the start of this is when, in our everyday encounters with digital technology, a machine asks us to prove that we are humans !!!

We have more dangers ahead: The explosive mix of expanding global fascism today strengthened by a technocratic agenda will give to a slow birth -- now hidden, now overt -- to a monster taking the avatar of a ‘technocratic fascist society’. This is a real global danger before all of us. The big Technology pathway to our future is aggressively sold to us as the only path to our common future. This is part of the TINA (‘there is not alternative’) culture of late capitalism. Other deliberation on our common futures is marginalised, invisibilised, or demonised.

The human community needs to democratically keep technology under control, under its collective political and ethical governance. This is not easy but we need to be alert to its realisation. We need to understand and encourage the many eco-humanistic cultures, movements and pathways to the future that do not neglect technology but are not technocratic. A cursory examination of our rich and diverse cultures will show that we have imagination of many futures. AI-inspired future as the only one, motivated by hegemonic powers, show the poverty of imagination and the drive to abort creative and regenerative imagination. .

Let me continue my concern.

Historically speaking, I don’t think AI, as of now, is the pinnacle of our intelligence or the state of our Technology. It has not even scratched the surface. Take for instance the notion of intelligence. Popular construction and dominant narrative suggest ‘g-intelligence’ i.e ‘generic intelligence’ solely based on ‘cognitive intelligence’. This is ‘one-dimensionalising’ the human. This is how AI and robotics (i.e. the human behind all these effort) view and use intelligence. But our present knowledge of intelligence suggest multiplicity: linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. To this was added later, three more: spiritual, existential and moral intelligence. Are we not just at the beginning of thinking about AI-machine as merely a cognitive intelligence? We have identified ten other intelligences. We also have such critical intelligences as emotional, social and ecological intelligences. So what make us even accept the seemingly arrogant claim that we are at the pinnacle of our creative intelligence in relation to AI?

Historically, our technologies are nowhere near what we are fully capable of and certainly nowhere even close to being human or in creating a humanised, compassionate machine !!!

The present claims to connect AI to compassion largely depend of algorithms. In the present state of the digital technology culture, algorithm is a big thing, and it does not take much time to creatively produce ‘algorithms of compassion’. So we have efforts to develop compassion delivered through AI. This would eventually help us with creating ‘Compassionate Robots’ to live among us. Compassionate Robotics is certainly poised to become a new field of study, economic investment and a huge market. Though this excitement is to be considered and mindfully nurtured,

we need to get out of thinking that humans are just a bundle of algorithms. I believe its a serious fallacy. They are certainly not. The ways of Nature cannot be captured by the finite mind through algorithms. Algorithms are certainly a great discovery and tool today but we need to go much beyond this to really understand Creation and the nature of Life and Humanity before we are in a position to create that authentic compassion-driven robot or trans-human!

Against this way of thinking about the grandeur of AI and all that, we need to keep in mind our habit for over-rating certain realities. I think 'human intelligence' is over-rated and we tend to invisibilise 'human stupidity'. The interest, literature and scholarly work on stupidity is a growing intellectual and practical enterprise and important contributions have been done. This is not popular though; certainly not convenient to many. We need to be open to see how much all these AI-inspired technologies are really animated by human stupidity - individual as well as collective, which is more serious. Because of its individual, collective and structural stupidity, humanity is on the path of and to self-destruction. Just look at whats happening to the nine planetary boundaries/limits or the Earth overshoot day every year. These are results of human stupidities at its core and they are taking us towards disasters, pain, suffering and death. There has been extinction of so many species in the recent past. How far is our own? Of course we are fed the Hollywood-inspired imagination of inter-planetary migration as a solution!!

AI-inspired technologies, robotics, geo-engineered Earth or what else may come out from this hegemonic infatuation with Technology and AI, we cannot leave them in the hands technocrats, academics, businessmen or politicians. It cannot be in the hands of the so-called 'experts'. The effort needs to reach popular level of critical and compassionate civic engagement. People in all their diversity have to be alert and be involved in deciding how to handle Technology in general and AI Technology in particular. There is much need for collective dialogical, moral and ethical control of Technology and the way its to be developed and used so that no one (including othee living beings) is really left behind and all are taken care of. This should not come as a gift of one group to the other but as a collective effort and action. That is the reality of a compassionate society and future. A uni-dimensional compassionate algorithm will not achieve that. We need to be patient and practice great humility in trying to imitate Nature. A self-conscious eco-humanised Technology is an ecology we are nowhere near with our present infatuation with AI.

(M. Nadarajah/Draft/Jan2023/LES Multiversity/Loyola College of Social Sciences,
Thiruvananthapuram Kerala)