

Homo ex machina



WHERE WILL MAN TAKE US?

ATUL JALAN

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318 pages

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A HANDBOOK to the imminent future referencing Descartes, Vedanta, Plato's academy, life, the universe and everything, and Michio Kaku, too. Jalan, serial entrepreneur currently heading the Bangalore analytics company Manthan, has produced a very readable ready reckoner of what to expect from human ingenuity. It's small enough to carry for your travel reading, but ranges widely, from the beauty of mathematics via the developing need for machine ethics to the transhumanist ideas of Ray Kurzweil.

An introductory book cannot hope to be exhaustive, and there are obvious omissions. For instance, genetics, which is likely to fuel a boom dwarfing the IT revolution, is restricted to a single chapter. And while it explores the future golden triangle at the intersect of biology, big data and big money, it neglects to mention that paleogenetics is rapidly altering the history of the human race, our perception of ourselves and the perceived destiny of our species.

Some of Jalan's questions are quite intriguing. Such as, will astrology be upstaged by data science? The answer, unfortunately, is a poem, which is a bit of a cop-out. But he points out that algorithms are already at work in online matchmaking, replacing the priest, the astrologer and the neighbourhood barber. He takes a position on other issues like machine intelligence, where he predicts that at a future date, there would be no need for monkeys to type Shakespeare. The element of chance, he expects, will be overwritten by artificial intelligence. Currently known for winning AlphaGo games against humans, machines, he believes, can learn more human attributes.

How technology is unmaking and remaking us is a question with innumerable dimensions. In the election season, the most urgent are the filter-bubbling of news, where we seek information which may only confirm our prejudices, and the targeting of swing voters to produce predictable outcomes. This is the wellspring of the current disquiet about social media, whose influence is expected to have been a factor in the US elections and the Brexit referendum.

But the story of technology is not inevitably dystopian, irrespective of the native instinct of science fiction. For instance, despite the chaos that Bitcoin trading has seen, the currency is the only one to be completely protected against inflation, since only a finite number of coins can be mined. Also, while the currency's volatility is problematic, the underlying ledger system is being ported to record routine transactions, like in the property markets, in ledgers that cannot be forged. The questions that Jalan raises — especially his philosophical speculations — will not be answered in a hurry, but all the answers will obviously not be bleak.

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