

# Epilogue: From the Eclipse of Utopia to the Restoration of Hope

Jay Ogilvy

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The financial crisis of 2007-2008 cast a pall of pessimism over many forecasters' views of the future. As familiar as the mass psychology of economic cycles may be, there seems to be something different going on: Are we witnessing some sort of transition in attitudes towards the future? The history of utopian thinking has passed through four stages.

## **Stage one: The cyclical time of tradition**

Once upon a time there was the time of no history, the time of the ancients and the traditionalists, in which the basic features of reality were understood to be unchanging and eternal. Yes, there was a distinction between better and worse, and there were aspirations to gain access to the idea of the good. But those aspirations were not so much towards the good yet to come. The love of wisdom, philosophy, was an upward quest towards eternal ideals, towards a kind of great blueprint in the sky that did not change.

## **Stage two: Modernity and progress**

Following the first stage, when time was regarded as 'the moving image of eternity', there came the time of progressive history and evolution. Christian eschatology pointed towards a future salvation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a sense of progressive history came to define the very spine of modernity. From getting better every day in every way, to DuPont's advertising slogan from 1935 to 1982, 'Better living through chemistry', the march of progress through advances in science gained a firm foothold in Western culture.

During this long second stage in the history of utopia, the quest for the good no longer followed an upward path towards eternal truths. Instead, a more worldly path lay in the direction of a better future. Invention flourished.

But just as people were inventing better technologies, so they invented better utopias. The very nature of utopian thinking underwent its own form of progress. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian thinking evolved away from the physical particulars of cities and towards the more ethereal aspects of the human spirit. Utopian thinking passed through a period during which it shifted from architecture, city planning, and drainage systems to psychology, philosophy, and states of mind. During what might be called the *sublimation of utopia*, the terms 'utopia' and 'utopian' came to connote more about minds than about bricks and mortar. Delusions of utopia fed the kind of totalising metanarratives that can send millions to their deaths.

## Stage three: Postmodernism and the eclipse of utopia

The march of progress met with reversals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: senseless deaths in the muddy trenches of the First World War, the Holocaust, the advent of nuclear weaponry, and humanity's ability to extinguish itself by our own technologically enhanced hands.

Socio-political utopianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also foundered on the shoals of failed revolutions. The improvers of mankind had their chances, and each, one after the other, ended in their own respective versions of a reign of terror. The American experiment succeeded, but it was based not on some grand vision of a social order that would improve the souls of men and women. For all the faith in individual progress that the American Dream allowed, there was very little by way of collective dreaming – for the race, for the species, for the human condition. But here lies the rub: after the sublimation of utopia from physical arrangements to mental aspirations, the eclipse of utopia flushed out the baby of a better humanity with the bathwater of utopian living arrangements.

## The fourth stage: A tragicomic future

Now time itself is taking yet another turn. We no longer live in the ahistorical or circular time of the ancients. Nor do we enjoy the optimistic, progressive time of the moderns. Nor, hopefully, the apocalyptic closing time of the postmodernists. Now we live – or could live if we choose to – in the tragicomic time of multiple scenarios. Now the future is flying at us both faster and less predictably than ever. Surprise is its middle name. There's promise to be sure, but risk just as surely. Our research labs are churning out discoveries at an unprecedented rate.<sup>1</sup> The life expectancy of individuals is increasing even as the life expectancy of the species is not.<sup>2</sup>

This fourth form of lived time – the first being the traditional, the second progressive, the third apocalyptic, and the fourth tragic-comic – has about it a certain intensity. The stakes are high. Choices matter.

## The scenaric stance

We are now facing a landscape described by the ways that nature *branches* from time to time, and often in ways that a calculus of continuity has difficulty describing.

We need some tools to handle the uncertainty and complexity of an unpredictable future, and scenario planners have begun to provide those tools. But even among scenario planners there is often a tilt towards modern optimism or a tendency towards

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<sup>1</sup> Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Sir Martin Rees.

postmodern pessimism. It is the burden of this epilogue to advocate for a more disciplined balance between both the high road and the low road. Both have their gifts and those gifts are even more generous when held in mind together.

In adopting the sceneric stance by holding multiple futures simultaneously and constantly in view, one achieves a kind of emotional and intellectual maturity that is not available to either the simple optimist or the simple pessimist. Yes, things could turn out badly. But, no, that is not in itself reason for inaction. Yes, things could turn out very well, but, no, that is not in itself reason for foolish bravado. By holding in mind several different futures at once, one is able to proceed deliberately yet flexibly; resolutely yet cautiously.

The sceneric stance isn't simply a tool to solve a problem, like a calculator, or double-entry bookkeeping. It's a frame of mind. Its framework can be measured in three dimensions. First, you find a relentless curiosity, a willingness to learn, an eagerness to experience new frames of reference. The sceneric stance is curious not just for facts, though certainly you want plenty of those. A good scenario shows you a way of looking at the world that you hadn't seen before. This is its outside-in or afferent dimension. Second, you gain a capacity for commitment, a resoluteness towards action, and once having acted, a clarity of follow-through. This is its inside-out, effective, or efferent dimension. Third, you achieve a capacity to balance these in-coming and out-going flows.

## The restoration of hope

How, then, does a sceneric stance restore the hope that the utopian tradition held out? And what does that utopian tradition have to tell us about how we might craft more optimistic scenarios together with their dystopian counterparts?

To embrace the digital optimists' computational metaphor for consciousness is to claim that the brain is a biological computer and that our ideas are so much software running on the hardware, or 'wetware', of the brain. Some have objected that the brain, if it is in any sense a computing machine, must be an analogue machine and not a digital machine. But this objection is not that serious. Mathematician and computer scientist John von Neumann proved some time ago the logical equivalence of analogue and digital approaches to computation. No, the real problem has to do with entropy – the Second Law of Thermodynamics that tells us how, due to the thermodynamic hum at the heart of reality, things tend towards disorder, not greater order. Left at room temperature, your cup of coffee gets cooler, not warmer. Put cream in your coffee, and it does not stay on one side of the cup in a neat order, white on one side, black on the other. The initial order of white and black, even if it is a swirl rather than a straight line, quickly gives way to the disorder of the mixed white and black.

In computation, creators of both hardware and software go to great lengths to eliminate entropy. Unlike natural language, which contains all kinds of ambiguities,

computer code is unambiguous. A properly built, properly programmed computer will produce the same output every time it receives a given input. Computers don't prevaricate. They are utterly predictable. Not so the human brain. And where entropy and disorder are threats to orderly computation, introducing 'bugs' that need to be removed, for human thinking, entropy is a feature rather than a bug. As with the random variation of genetic mixes produced by sexual reproduction, in human thought, so-called 'noise' can be the source of innovation – a feature, not a bug.

Computers run on unambiguous algorithms – rules specifying that *every* time there's a given input, a specified output will be generated without fail. Computers are thus deterministic. In protecting against the deterministic inevitability of technology's agenda, or the economic means of production, or genetic heritage, we are holding out for free will as opposed to determinism. But this freedom cannot be the negative freedom of indeterminacy or randomness. The kind of freedom that makes for purposeful autonomy depends on the setting of goals and intentions – reasons rather than causes. But this kind of information processing is fundamentally different from the sort of information processing that goes on in a computer.

Intentional action requires semantics and pragmatics. Semantics relate signs to the things they represent. Pragmatics relate purposive intentions to their ends or goals. Computers don't have goals. My laptop doesn't give a damn. It has no desires. Computation is purely syntactical, relating signs to other signs in purely predictable ways, never reaching out to refer to things in the world semantically. *We* make those interpretations once we see the output. Much less does a computer exhibit purposive, pragmatic autonomy by setting its own goals and then achieving them. A computer just shuffles bits and bytes, ones and zeros, never knowing (semantically) what they refer to, much less (pragmatically) why.

## Realistic hope – and human will

Whether we witness the promise of digital utopianism, as Ray Kurzweil sees it, or instead we experience 'an atrophy of the very vocabularies of citizenship, moral responsibility, and political community' is not something we can determine by seeing into a future that is inevitable. It's not a matter of trying to catch a glimpse of some predetermined reality, as distinct in its outlines as the far side of the moon prior to our first circumnavigation. Instead the issue is very much one of the choices we make – of human will.

In his important book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, Jaron Lanier makes a strong case for not giving in to computationalism, even as he sees that low road as a distinct possibility. 'Human beings are free', he writes. 'We can commit suicide for the benefit of a Singularity. We can engineer our genes to better support an imaginary hive mind. We can make culture and journalism into second-rate activities and spend centuries remixing the detritus of the 1960s and other eras from before individual creativity

went out of fashion. Or we can believe in ourselves. By chance, it might turn out we are real'.<sup>3</sup>

We need a new approach to the future, a new attitude towards time. Neither ahistorical like the ancients, nor optimistic like progressive modernity, nor pessimistic like the postmodernists, this new approach would hold in mind at once both the high road and the low road, acknowledging the possibility of either, and giving full weight to human will in determining which path we actually take. We have it in our power to choose the high road. But it will take more than an epistemology based on computer code. It will take human will.

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## About the Author

**Jay Ogilvy** co-founded Global Business Network together with Peter Schwartz and Stewart Brand and is the author of nine books, including *Facing the Fold: Essays on Scenario Planning* and *Creating Better Futures*.

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<sup>3</sup> Lanier, p. 44.

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Jay Ogilvy

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