BOOKS et al.

TECHNOLOGY

What we owe the present

A physicist issues an urgent call to deflate the world-shaping power of tech billionaires

By **Àlex Gómez-Marín**

More Everything Forever—the title of astrophysicist Adam Becker's new book—is a perfect encapsulation of the sinister ideology that has come to possess the heart of Silicon Valley. Determined to control the future of our species, tech oligarchs posture to create a posthuman race. Even if they are bluffing, Becker argues that their ideas, as the book's publisher puts it, "pervert public discourse and distract us from real social problems." But only if we allow them to.

Becker articulates a timely and informed wake-up call: "If we don't want tech billionaires setting those terms, we need to understand their ideas about the future: their curious origins, their horrifying consequences, and their panoply of ethical gaps and scientific flaws." His vehement critique is fundamental to diminishing their power.

Becker provides the reader with much-needed literacy to navigate the dominant tenets professed by the tech elite. It is a mouthful of entangled isms: effective altruism, longtermism, transhumanism, rationalism, etc. This is what they entail.

First, championed by the Scottish philosopher William MacAskill among others, we have effective altruism, a modern movement that seeks to optimize philanthropic efforts. When coupled with longtermism—a radical form of utilitarian ethics that prescribes current actions to maximize scenarios far in the future—morality turns into an optimization problem that easily goes off the rails. Hypothetical future humans—conjured ageless silicon minds traveling through empty space—matter more than the lives of real people here today, reinforcing the escalating accumulation of wealth and power by a self-

selected club. Philanthropy (etymologically, mankind-loving) then becomes sweetened plutocracy and, ultimately, misanthropy.

Another peculiar crowd, the transhumanists, promise to redeem the world by means of a spooky hybrid of tech-fiction and technocracy. Apparently unconcerned with the reality that exponential growth ultimately saturates, they prophesy a practically inevitable (and morally imperative) utopia: the singularity. Very soon, soothsays the American inventor Ray Kurzweil, we will literally

Silicon Valley's obsession with future humans jeopardizes today's societies.

merge with our machines, whose computing power will be so colossal that what it means to be human will be transfigured or, perhaps, disfigured. Such an obsession to copy, paste, and edit the human condition is a pseudo-religion concealed under the rhetoric of technoscientific progress.

Next, Becker addresses a movement that buys into the gospel of an inevitable singularity but fears dystopia on our way to utopia. If transhumanists shine in the gloom of *The Matrix*, rationalists inhabit the doom of *Terminator*. To avoid a "paperclip apocalypse"—a thought experiment by Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom—rationalists are devoted to aligning artificial intelligence so that it is friendly to human interests. There is no middle ground here either: We go to tech-bro heaven, or we miserably die.

Silicon Valley's convoluted, implausible, and arguably immoral "solutions" to existential risks distract us from existing ones. Poor education, unsafe foods, political polarization, prospects of nuclear war, engineered pandemics, privacy invasion, the end of democracy, and so on, all look like minor disquietudes to this network of influential people, companies, institutes, and think tanks.

Uncovering this act of misdirection is one of Becker's major goals. I agree that we are facing a double-helix of dangerous bullshit.

Becker emphasizes the triple core of such faulty ideas: systematic "reduction" of any problem to a technological one, humongous "profit" afforded by the gospel of growth, and misplaced "transcendence" encouraging the disregard of all limits and limitations, including death.

Powerful, intelligent, rich people with poor ideas can be terribly dangerous indeed. That is why this is a serious issue rather than a "quirky tour of wacky ideas." We must rightfully protest: Who has appointed these deranged individuals to be the stewards of mankind?

Toward the end of the book, Becker suggests that the solution lies in "eliminating billionaires" as "an investment in the political stability that makes prosperity possible." His diagnosis seems far deeper than his prognosis. Perhaps reluctant to dive into anthropological, metaphysical, and even spiritual waters, the best he can offer is a sensible but ultimately facile critique of wild capitalism as the root of all evil.

At the end of the day, rather than "more everything forever," the world could do with a little bit more kindness here and now. This is what we owe the present: fewer prophets and more poets, fewer technocrats and more dancers, less Silicon Valley and more Monty Python. Riffing on a fabled slogan, it is time to make humanity humane again, so that the values that guide our actions sing a love letter to our granddaughters. ∎

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