

Contemporary Alchemy

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Besides looking for keys from nature to cure diseases and finding life-prolonging elixirs, the alchemists from the sixteenth century mainly focused on transforming ordinary metals into gold. Although we honour the alchemists as forerunners of science (chemistry), they are usually spoken of with pity. But what do our distant posterity see when, for example, in 2222 they look back on our contemporary quest for technological innovation?

That's right, alchemy of the 21st century. Every university and tech company focuses on living technology, on artificial intelligence, with real thinking power, to be able to make autonomous decisions based on a built-in moral compass. The dream of yore, to turn lead into gold, is now to create mental faculties (mind), for example in CPUs. The dream is proudly called the "digital transformation", reminiscent of the terms transformation of the alchemists and the places where it was implemented, the Labs.

Nevertheless, if one looks back in 2222 to us now in 2022, one will probably see the alchemists of 1666 as the smarter ones. With the ancient alchemists we share the ambition to be Creators, or in the words of Yuval Harari, Homo Deus. The alchemists did not achieve that, and we have achieved just the opposite: we are able to destroy the planet, but not to create as nature does, in infinite diversity.

No, as nagging toddlers we really know how to translate every human problem into a technological challenge against our better judgement. The elixir of yesteryear is now "deep learning", robot, or chatbot, or at least "digital transformation". For example, if we don't have people to take care of our sick or elderly fellow human beings, we immediately develop care robots regardless of the reasons for the lack of care staff. A teacher shortage thus leads to digital education, distance education, blended learning and educational robots. Transport needs lead to self-driving cars, digital guide dogs for the blind, etc.

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The alchemists were less intrusive, they did not try to solve every problem with their "religious" pursuit of wealth (gold) and thus power and eternal life. But that was probably mainly because there were then far fewer alchemists (intellectuals) than there are now highly educated people. In other words, our numbers are now much greater than the number of alchemists then and the consequences of our "alchemy" is much more visibly disastrous. In 2222 we will probably be seen as more pathetic than our illustrious predecessors. In itself it is not a disaster to be regarded as less smart from the future. Yet our alchemy threatens to have disastrous irreversible consequences.

The power of our contemporary alchemy is (1) that it appeals enormously to the imagination (who wouldn't want to be Homo Deus; I graduated on an autonomous music generator) and (2) that 'smart' technology is economic miracle oil. However, we are undeniably doing a lot of damage with it and that remains largely hidden from public opinion. As a student I worked on facial recognition algorithms, which now degenerated into terror. Anyone who protests against a terrorist regime (now in Russia, for example) runs the risk of being lifted out of bed a few days later (facial recognition, cameras everywhere). And what about autonomous killer drones? But even this is not the biggest problem.

The main problem is that we replace humanity (contact, closeness, relationship, reality) with surrogate (virtual, artificial, fake, distance). Living technology is as much a fairy tale as turning lead into gold. The alchemists sought to change cheap (lead) into noble (gold). We pursue the opposite with transforming people into systems (the artificial). Gold cannot turn into lead, people cannot turn into machines. We can, however, frustrate people with having to adapt to systems throughout their lives (digital transformation). We neglect the power and value of the human solutions, and experience the negative consequences of the technological alternatives exponentially (what happens to the Uyghurs "thanks to" technological innovation). It is long overdue to turn the tide. I don't want to be an alchemist anymore!