

Human beings are the only species not fully governed by natural instinct. Because we are designed with brains and many choices, we have evolved civilizations, ways of living very different from our first emergence as humans. In our beginnings, we looked much like our related ape species: we hunted and gathered and migrated.

But over the millennia, we devised technologies that made our lives far more complex, and in many ways, better. Over each technological leap, however, the benefits were accompanied by unforeseen consequences that were not necessarily good.

Fire

Taming and harnessing fire gave us many benefits: cooking food had health consequences; it gave us heat during the ice ages; it was essential to metallurgy, melting and fusing ores for tools, weapons for hunting, and machinery; all of these benefits to life. The downside of fire was its use in warfare, burning villages and crops, and its worst use: executing human beings.

Taming the Horse

This advance gave human beings mobility and also transporting necessities, formerly requiring slave labor. The negative consequences were warfare, a human practice of taking the lives and bodies of other people by force. The combination of the horse and metallurgy continued to evolve into methods of violent human behavior.

Sea-Going Boats

Going to sea increased the human diet to include vast amounts of seafood. It also contributed to the human practice of trade and merchants, adding sea voyages to land travel. But it also added to the human practice of warfare (in this case piracy) in preying on peaceful towns, capturing women for sex and slaves, to row boats. When sailing ships were invented, whole forests were ravaged to provide masts and vessels. This denuded the Mediterranean forests and contributed to climate change.

Industrialization (taming electricity)

Factories replaced constant and laborious hand work, making textiles, ceramics, and furniture available to more people. However, it also poisoned the lives of countless workers to tend the machines. It made economic sense to employ child and ill paid female labor. Fortunately, the human brain and ingenuity, along with compassion, engaged lawmakers to remedy the drawbacks.

The New World

Human ingenuity clashed when Europeans were able to use ships, metal weapons, and the horse to conquer and ravage the civilizations flourishing in the New World. The benefit to the world was the doubling of the food supply, adding Native American foods (and tobacco, quinine, and aspirin) to the collected foods of Eurasia. This made a dent in famine, but also had health consequences for New World cultures. The change in diet for Mexican natives, adding meat, frying oils, and dairy foods, introduced illnesses not known before: obesity, diabetes, tooth decay. These health consequences were already present in Europeans.

California

Native Californian tribes had an ingenious method of controlling their environment: planned fires. By using such fires to keep the forest undergrowth low, hunting was benefitted, and the great redwoods healthy. Fire has always been a danger in the Pacific forests, but the native practices managed it. Natural fires actually opened seed pods, keeping coniferous trees healthy. Such fires also provided many food seeds (acorns) that fed these people. The conquerors from Europe put an end to these practices, with consequences for the lives, health, and survival of the native populations, and the horrific wildfires destroying lives and property today.

Animal Lives

The taming of the horse replaced their free lives with slavery and drudgery, only relieved by industrialization and the automobile, truck, and aircraft. We have not always treated other animals with compassion either. Consider pets (dogs began wild, as did cattle and pigs), and even whales suffer from our technologies. They were almost exterminated once.

Artificial Intelligence

This is the latest technology showing enormous promise in improving human life. It can find diseases better than human doctors, performing tasks that were once slave labor, and solve laborious calculations quickly. However, some of our best minds are

worried about AI's ability to deceive us: what is true and what a lie, and how can these abilities take advantage of the least educated and unsophisticated among our voters?

All new technologies have consequences.

685 words

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