

#TECHNOLOGY

Making A Difference!

As our expectations shift, we are left wondering about the next innovation that will capture our imagination.



In the evolving relationship between technology and society, humans have shown themselves to be incredibly adaptable. What once left us breathless, soon becomes integrated into our everyday lives.

The astonishing functionalities of large language models (LLM) like ChatGPT were, just a few months ago, the epitome of cutting-edge AI. They are now on the verge of being mere add-ons and plugins to our text editors and search engines.

We'll soon find ourselves relying on their capabilities, and seamlessly incorporating them into our routines.

Yet, this rapid acclimatisation leaves us with a lingering question: what's next? As our expectations shift, we are left wondering about the next innovation that will capture our imagination.

People will try to achieve all kinds of smart - and not-so-smart - things with AI. Many ideas will fail, others will have a lasting impact.

Our crystal ball is not much better than yours, but we can try to think about what's coming next in a structured way. For AI to have a lasting impact, it needs to be not only technically feasible, but also economically viable, and normatively acceptable - in other words, it complies with the values that society demands we conform to. There are some AI technologies waiting on the sidelines right now that hold promise.

AI Legal Help

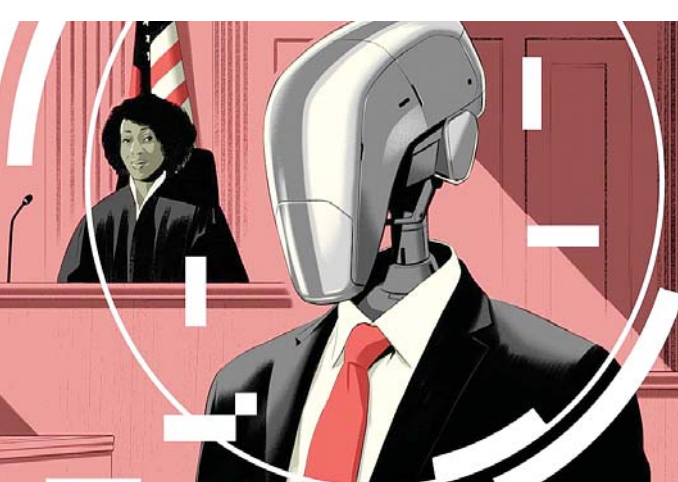
The startup company DoNotPay claims to have built a legal chatbot - built on LLM technology - that can advise defendants in court.

The company recently said it would let its AI system help two defendants fight speeding tickets in real-time. Connected via an earpiece, the AI can listen to proceedings and whisper legal arguments into the ear of the defendant, who then repeats them out loud to the judge.

After criticism and a lawsuit for practising law without a license, the startup postponed the AI's courtroom debut. The potential for the technology will thus not be decided by technological or economic constraints, but by the authority of the legal system.

AI Scientific Support

Scientists are increasingly turning to AI for insights. Machine learning, where an AI system improves at what it does over time, is being employed to identify patterns in data. This enables the systems to propose novel scientific hypotheses - proposed explanations for phenomena in nature. These may even be capable of surpassing human assumptions and biases.



AutoGPT

For example, researchers at the University of Liverpool used a machine learning system called a neural network to rank chemical combinations for battery materials, guiding their experiments and saving time.

While AI cannot currently formulate hypotheses independently, it can inspire scientists to approach problems from new perspectives.

AutoGPT

We will soon see more new versions of AI chatbots based on the latest LLM technology, known as GPT-4. We'll see AI that can handle different types of data, such as images and speech, as well as text. These are called multimodal systems.

Auto-GPT is given a general goal, such as planning a birthday party, and splits it into sub-tasks which it then completes by itself, without human input. This sets it apart from ChatGPT.

Auto-GPT incorporates AI agents, or systems, that make decisions based on predetermined rules and goals. Despite installation limitations, such as a functionality problems when used with Windows, Auto-GPT shows great potential in various applications.

Humanoid Robots

Humanoid robots - those that look and move like us - have significantly advanced since the first Darpa Robotics Challenge in 2015, a contest where teams built robots to perform a series of complex tasks set by the organisers. These included getting out of a car, opening a door and drilling a hole in a wall. Many struggled to achieve the objectives.

However, startups are now developing "humanoids" capable of doing tasks like these and being used in warehouses and factories.

Taking The Long View

The long term success of these four will depend on more than just computation power.

Humanoid robots could fail to gain traction if their production and maintenance costs outweigh their benefits. AI lawyers and chatbot assistants might possess remarkable efficiency. However, their adoption might be halted if their decision making conflicts with society's "moral compass" or laws don't agree with their use.

Striking a balance between cost-effectiveness and society's values is crucial for ensuring these technologies can truly flourish.

As you climb up from Akkamalai Estate in the Anamallais after walking about 14 kilometers you eventually come upon a substantial stream. In the 70's and 80's it used to be stocked with Brown Trout. Usually, some enthusiastic planters from nearby estates would ensure that the check dams were regularly repaired. The check dams and the little pools they created became good drinking places for Gaur, Sambar, and elephant. While Sambar did not do any damage to the dam, Gaur and elephant sometimes inadvertently broke the dam and the water would drain away.



Mirza Yawar Baig  
Naturalist and wildlife conservationist

The Shola forests of Grass Hills are ideal habitat for both predator and prey species. The forests impartially shelter leopards, tigers, wild boar, Sambar, and elephant. This sets it apart from ChatGPT.

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Grass Hills, Elephants, Me And Friends (...2)



#FORESTS

level of water in the stream did not fall too low. The check dams and the little pools they created became good drinking places for Gaur, Sambar, and elephant. While Sambar did not do any damage to the dam, Gaur and elephant sometimes inadvertently broke the dam and the water would drain away. This was disastrous for the fish, which would either be stranded or in the case of the young fry, would become easy prey for the many Kingfishers in the area. So, these dams had to be regularly maintained. Given that maintenance, the Grass Hills stream provided some excellent fly fishing in an ambience that simply can't be equalled. Where else in the world could you imagine being able to watch a herd of elephants or a lone Sambar while you were standing on the bank of the stream casting your fly? I won't talk about what the sight does to your casting because that is something that you must experience.

The APA (Anamallai Planter's Association) had built a cottage on



the bank of the stream, called the Grass Hills Hut. Mrs. Alastair Craig, whose husband was a planter in the Anamallais in the 1960s/70s informed me that hut was built in the first instance as a staging post to the South, during World War II in case evacuation became necessary. It was a substantial two-bedroom cottage with a small veranda and an elephant trench all around. There was a flimsy bridge made of planks that you had to walk across to get inside. This was essential because without it, elephants would try to re-engineer the hut; something which they had managed to do on a couple of occasions. It then fell into disuse and later the Forest Department took it over and has now constructed a big concrete structure in its place with all the charm of a government building, totally incongruous and sticking out like a sore thumb, built in the style of architecture which Auntie Mohini used to call, Modern Indian Horrible.

I used to go to Grass Hills as often as I could with my two companions, the Raman brothers. They were cousins and had the same name. We would leave my motorcycle in the garage of the Assistant Manager of



Akkamalai Estate - it didn't matter if you knew the person or not. It was our code of hospitality that at such places your house was open to anyone who needed help. If someone wanted to park a car or motorcycle or needed some petrol or a cup of tea, he only had to ask, and it was all provided with a smile.

Most Spectacular Views

The Raman brothers and I would start walking up. The distance to the APA Hut is about fourteen kilometers. If you don't take the road and instead walk up the hillside it is a couple of kilometers shorter, but you need a lot of stamina for the climb. The climb is steep, the elevation (six thousand feet) takes its toll, especially if you are not used to it - as I discovered when I went to the Grass Hills in 2007 after a gap of twenty years. The footing is very rough and uncertain as the tough tussocky grass grows in clumps and you must find your way between clumps. If it has been raining, then almost every single blade of grass will have a leech or two on it and you are more than likely to be viewed as manna from heaven by them. But if you can overcome the effort and the bloodshed then you are rewarded with some of the most spectacular views that you could ever imagine. The road is simpler and easier but like all simpler and easier tasks, less rewarding.



Etch A Sketch Day

Do you remember Etch a Sketch? If you spent many happy hours drawing pictures on the screen then magically removing them using the plastic slider, you'll relish the opportunity to relieve your childhood on Etch a Sketch Day. This day is all about creativity, so undertaking anything which involves a pencil, pen or brush is appropriate. Why not have an Etch a Sketch competition with friends or colleagues, or give everyone a thirty-second limit to produce a work of art?



there, which was probably a good thing for us. Such people tend to take a different view of guests.

The Sound Of Silence

We descended the ridge and made our way to the APA Hut. There the Raman brothers got busy with cooking our evening meal, the makings of which we had carried with us while I went downstream with my rod to catch a fish or two for the pot. To my disappointment, the check-dams had been broken by elephants and the pools had been drained and so there were no fish to catch except some very small fingerlings which were not worth the effort. But that didn't detract from the wonderful view of the sun going down behind the high ridge leaving behind an orange glow long after it had disappeared. I sat there until Raman the Elder came to call me. We ate our meal together and I got into my sleeping bag while the Ramans had their last smoke for the day before turning in. There was no need for a watch as we were surrounded by a trench around the hut. There is no danger in sleeping in the wild except from men with evil intentions.

Grass Hills is very cold at night, so a good sleeping bag is essential. It is a very rare pleasure to be able to lie in your sleeping bag and listen to the sound of silence, broken occasionally by the call of the hunter or the unlucky hunted as it ends its life. There is the hooting of the owl and the occasional moan of the tiger.

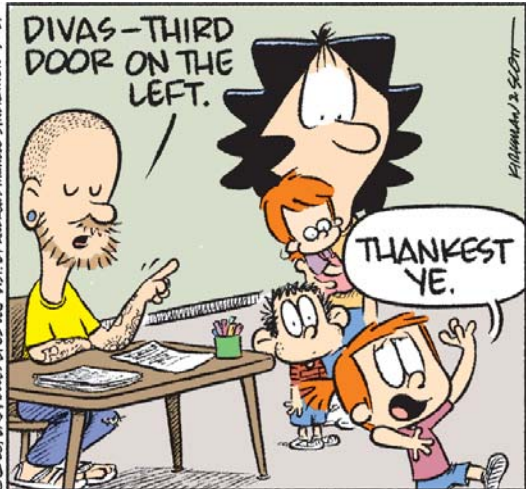
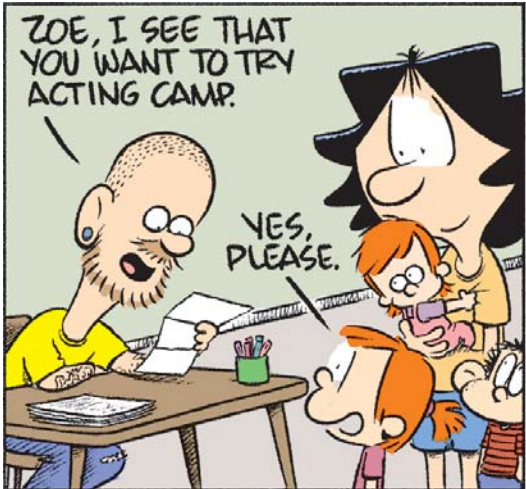
When I visited the Anamallais in 2007, one of the things I did was to revisit Grass Hills with my friends, the Ramans. They were as eager to go there again as I was. This time we didn't spend a night in the hut, but we did the walk up the hill, a source of great satisfaction and achievement for us all that we were still able to do it, despite being twenty years older. Almost nothing has changed in Grass Hills, mainly because the road is unmotorable and people are too lazy to do the climb. So, it remains relatively untouched. We did see a dozen forest guards with backpacks walking back from the Forest Department Cottage. What they are doing there in those numbers, I have no clue. But I hope it is something for the preservation.

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By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

BABY BLUES



ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman

#THINKING-MINDS

The Axial Age

Today, we're the heirs of the Axial Age.



There are special moments in history when the world throws up a torrent of genius. Consider how, in a single century, the world saw Descartes, Leibniz, and Newton, not to mention Shakespeare, Milton, and Bach. Or consider how, in one generation, someone could hypothetically have met Bismarck, Queen Victoria, Marie Curie, and Edison.

But all of this pales in comparison to what German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the "Axial Age." It's here that we find the very origins of why we think the way we do today.

The Birth of Philosophy

Modern humans have been around for roughly 250,000 years, and we've lived in complex societies for at least 6,000 years. That's a lot of time, with not much going on (other than a lot of walking).



Then, within a span of merely six centuries, there was a huge explosion of thought. From roughly 800 BCE to 200 BCE, all of the major civilizations produced incredible people with incredible ideas. It's like there was something in the water (more than just parasites).

In Greece, we saw the likes of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Hippocrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In the Middle East, we got Jewish prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, as well as Zoroaster in Persia. In India, we got the Buddha and the writing of the Hindu Upanishads. And in China, Confucianism and Daoism came into their own, as well as the famous Sun Tzu.

It was like nothing seen before, and this is exactly why Jaspers called it "The Axial Age," where an axis means simply "dividing line." There was the time before, and there was the era that came after.

Universal Truths

Seen up close, these thinkers can seem about as different as chalk and cheese. What could Lao Tzu's Dao and Aristotle's Eudaimonia have in common? How are Yahweh and Brahman similar?

When you zoom out a bit and see these thinkers as a whole, there are remarkable commonalities to be found.

The greatest of these is the move toward what's called "universalism." Universal truths, universal religion, and universal morals. It's the idea that there are certain values and rules that ought to apply to everyone, everywhere, no matter the circumstances.

How History shaped Philosophy

Why was a very specific 600-year period necessary for the Axial Age to take off? A bit of history helps explain.

The Axial Age was an era where empires expanded outwards to become huge, both in terms of size and population. It was a time of the Persian and Carthaginian empires, the Roman Republic, and the Zhou Dynasty. This means several important things happened:

used to be that a ruler, and even a religion, was confined to a small area. A king would only have a claim to his particular territory.

The Greek gods, even almighty Zeus, were powerless in "universalism." Universal truths, universal religion, and universal morals. It's the idea that there are certain values and rules that ought to apply to everyone, everywhere, no matter the circumstances.

becoming so powerful, people came to feel impotent and unimportant. The morals and rules of previous generations were replaced by a new urban decadence. There were no values to live by anymore. And so, ideology and ideas became powerful in themselves. They were the weapons and means by which people could push back against the encroachment of emperors and their armies.

For these reasons, we see that certain common themes emerge from the Axial Age. For instance, in Plato's Theory of Forms, the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, and Isaiah's monotheism, we see a vision of transcendent ideals, which are set over and against the base, immoral, vain efforts of the material world.

The Axial Age was the moment when "Truth" came to stand above whatever worldly "truths" a ruler might push.

The Axial Age laid the foundation for modern thought.

Today, we're the heirs of the Axial Age. It's in the idea that, no matter how powerful a person or state might be, there are values or norms that cannot be violated. It's seen in all the major world religions, and it's seen in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Any revolution or resistance movement, from the Magna Carta to Marx, is united by the Axial belief that some things matter more than authority alone.

Furthermore, the Axial Age gave us the idea that some things in life are infinitely more important than trivial worldly concerns. Like philosophy.

