



Why Bother About the Future When We Know We Will Be Wrong?

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Sometimes while standing in front of a classroom eager to learn everything about concept development I get the question why we invest in developing concepts as just one of the possible ways to solve a problem in the future. This means that there may be other, better solutions, implicitly accepting that the approved concept may be wrong. Before answering, I reply that I am sure that whatever concept we develop it might be wrong, at least it will not be completely right. A varying part of it will completely miss its goal. Only historical concepts hold the magic to be right and we are not in the business of that kind of work.

Why? Well, it is inherently impossible to predict the future with accuracy. However, we still try to do it in one way or another even when the great majority who attempts it tend to get it wrong. David Bouchier griped that “financial advisers, think tanks, opinion polls, market researchers, the Federal Reserve and the CIA all specialize in getting the future completely wrong at enormous cost.” We might add HQ SACT to that list.

Here we are in 2021. On the cutting edge of genetically personalized medicine, autonomous cars that can fly, artificial meat made in the lab, artificial superintelligence improving our lives, and... Wait a minute. Have not all those things been predicted for years? Are they not supposed to be here already? Where are they?

Well, yeah. Which begs two questions. Why are they not here? And, why do we keep trying to predict the future when we are so bad at it?

Even some genuine prophets felt they might be better off with a “real” job. “How did I ever get into the predicting business?” asked Isaac Asimov. He was convinced that “predicting the future is a hopeless, thankless task, with ridicule to begin with and, all too often, scorn to end with.”

So why do we bother about the future when we know we will be wrong?

Lost in the woods

Suppose you wake up in the middle of a forest with no idea how you got there and where you are. Truly lost in mind and space. You first wonder if this is a dream. Or, have you lost your mind? After a while, you calm down and assess the situation.

You have many options, but the first thing you have to decide is if you want to survive. If yes, then there only one option and that is to have a plan. Working as a K9 SAR volunteer, I know that doing nothing or giving up is the biggest killer when being lost.

Considering your predicament, you are not sure if somebody will miss you. Even if somebody would report your disappearance to the authorities, where would they look for you? You are here without the slightest idea where 'here' is. How would somebody else know where you could be? You could be abducted by some aliens and be on another planet. So, scrap one of the smartest options when lost and missed with a good idea where to look for you, i.e. staying put and arranging for shelter and water.

Besides playing a local Robinson Crusoe and live long on your undiscovered island in the woods, your only chance of survival is to walk in one direction making sure they can trace you. Which direction? Preferably towards a highly visible landmark and if you do not see any, the direction that is easiest to keep going. Your decision to start moving in a determined direction is a plan. Is it the best plan? Most probably not, but it is much better than no plan. Why?

During the First World War, a small group of Hungarian troops was camped in the Alps. Their commander, a young lieutenant, decided to send out a small group of men on a scouting mission. Shortly after the scouting group left it began to snow, and it snowed steadily for two days. The scouting squad did not return, and the young officer, something of an intellectual and an idealist, suffered a paroxysm of guilt over having sent his men to their death. In his torment, he questioned not only his decision to send out the scouting mission, but also the war itself and his own role in it.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, on the third day the long-overdue scouting squad returned. There was great joy in the camp and the young commander questioned his men eagerly. "Where were you?" he asked. "How did you survive, how did you find your way back?" The sergeant who had led the scouts replied, "We were lost in the snow and we had given up hope, had resigned ourselves to die. Then one of the men found a map in his pocket. With its help, we knew we could find our way back. We made camp, waited for the snow to stop, and then as soon as we could travel we returned here." The young commander asked to see this wonderful map. It was a map not of the Alps but of the Pyrenees!

Some writers have expanded the moral of this story, but the sole role of the map was to calm the soldiers as they could find their way back to camp on their own.

The mere existence of a plan improves your survivability by enhancing your comfort and hence safeguarding your reasoning skills.

But why are we so wrong about the future?

Before we further consider why we need to predict the future, let us explore the reasons why we will be (mostly) wrong about it.

Psychology research suggests that the more desirable a future event is, the more likely people think it is. This so-called unrealistic optimism makes you think that good things are more likely to happen to you than to other people, whereas bad things are less likely. People predict that they are less likely than others to experience illness, injury, divorce, death, and other adverse events - even when they are exposed to the same risk factors. This is also true for our predictions about groups and organizations. Are we not all thinking that NATO will stay forever and that we will prevail over every adversary?

Sometimes predictions are influenced more subliminally. You may unwittingly only gather and synthesize facts that support the outcome you want. Anxiety is such a devious influencer, but also strongly held beliefs. The self-interest influencing people's predictions is simply their desire to be right. People predict outcomes that will affirm their beliefs about the world: that democracy is winning, that good will conquer, that we will find the right technologic solution for world threatening problems... People committed to something have a stake in the outcome, and thus they assess a higher success rate. Strongly held beliefs become self-interested beliefs. In other words, to get better at predicting you need to ban your prejudices from their probability equations. That is why we need to adhere to methods and use heterogeneous teams.

Since the Renaissance, science and technology have dominated our visions of tomorrow, our common dream to "go where no-one has been gone before". However, the actual pace of technology has usually surpassed that expected by those peering in to the future, the quantum leaps made possible by a new discovery being impossible to anticipate. In 1898, H.G. Wells nailed a number of technologies like radio, movies, and air conditioning, which were to be but underestimated how quickly they would appear, about 40 years instead of his projected 200. Wells was off by almost a century when it came to man's landing on the moon, analogous perhaps to how we will misread the rapid evolution of current technology.

Even more than overshooting technological achievements, however, has been the failures to anticipate major social change, or in our case, the military use of those

technologies. The bias towards predicting technological versus capability progress has been and continues to be an Achilles heel. The next technological wave is easier to see coming than the disruptive tsunami of its employment. It is ideas and concepts, not technology, that have stirred the biggest changes in human and military history. Not technology is disruptive; its employment causes the disruptive effect on the equilibrium. Agree, some new and futuristic technologies lend them better or easier to disruptive applications, but old tech can as powerful in a surprising manner.

So why doing it?

Back to being lost in the forest. Your plan of hiking in one direction not only gives you peace of mind; it also helps you to recognize an opportunity when you see one. Following Lewis Carroll advice that only when you know where you are heading, you will recognize the road leading to your destination. You will also be able to recognize a path that does not lead to your destination. At that point, you can decide to change your objective and exploit the new opportunity, or just stick to your plan because it is still better. That flexibility of thinking is, according to Albert Einstein, the key to solve problems created by our current thinking.

Now, I will take this mind exercise a step further by ‘teleporting’ you to an enchanted forest. Here, your thoughts can influence the environment, the future things you will encounter. A few instances after you imagine a road; you could discover indications that there might be one. Walking further, you see a small path broadening ahead leading you in the direction of your objective. A step too far?

Earl Nightingale told us “everything begins with an idea.” New ideas can only find their origin in new thinking. First, we imagine our future world and then we see the signs and make it happen. In short, we predict the future because it affects what we do in the present, and what we do in the present shapes that future. We recognize patterns because we already saw them with our mind’s eye.

We desperately need predictions about the future, even wrong ones, to help us narrow the infinity of plausible futures down to a manageable handful one. These ideas or concepts of possible futures are our advance scouts infiltrating the undiscovered country ahead to come back with reconnaissance maps of possible worlds to come. Without those, we will be surprised by every event unable to recognize new threats or opportunities.

The study of the psychology of risk perception has found that one of the most powerful influences on fear is uncertainty. The less we know, the more threatened we feel, because lack of knowledge means we don't know what we need to know to protect ourselves... which equates to a lack control over health and safety, life and death.

Knowledge, even if it is incomplete or not completely right, is power over how things turn out. Power, a feeling of control (even if it is false) is reassuring. Without knowledge, and some sense of control, we are more afraid. The best way to prevent uncertainty is to look down the road and try to see what lies around the next curve(s), in more than one way.

Even when hindsight lets us look back and see how blind and optimistic our foresight usually is, the reassuring nature, the possibility to exploit new opportunities, and the power to change what is ahead of us makes it a worthwhile exercise.

The future is ours to think.