# The Singularity, the Humanistic Ethic, and the Enlightenment Project

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The children's television show *Sesame Street* sometimes displays a group of objects while asking kids to determine which one is the most different. "One of these things is not like the other. One of these things doesn't belong," the accompanying song goes. "Can you tell which thing is not like the other by the time I finish this song?" Since Big Bird, Elmo, and the Cookie Monster aren't likely to consider the terms listed in my title, I'll ask you; which of these things is not like the other—The *Singularity,* the *Humanistic ethic,* or the *Enlightenment project?* But first, here are some brief definitions of each:

> The *Singularity* refers to a time in the near future when human intelligence will merge with machine intelligence. It is a term borrowed from mathematics and physics, but only as a metaphor. In mathematics it describes an undefined point; in physics it's a point where the laws of physics break down and we have no idea what's happening beyond it. Although we can roughly predict when the Singularity will occur, and some of the achievements that will happen up to that point, we can't imagine what life will be like afterward. Like a black hole, we have no insight regarding what lies beyond or within this technological singularity.
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> The *Humanistic Ethic* refers to the moral idea that everything we do, all of our laws, institutions, and endeavors ought to be for the benefit of human welfare and individual unfolding (which includes care for our environment and empathy for other creatures). It has been loosely articulated as the ancient Universal Golden Rule, *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*; more directly as Immanuel Kant's Categorial Imperative, that *no person should be used as a means to another person's end, but should be considered an end within themselves*; and as Democracy's core commitment to the *inherent worth and dignity of every person*.
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> The *Enlightenment project* refers to the 18th-century liberal, intellectual, and philosophical movement that emphasizes reason, individualism, and human progress as the primary means to improve society and understand the world. It champions ideals like freedom, reason, tolerance, and human dignity. Today the term is also used in reference to ongoing efforts to apply these Enlightenment principles to modern life, societies, and human advancement.

So, which of these things is not like the other? The Singularity? So it would seem, but I will argue that the Singularity is a direct consequence of the Enlightenment project and has been largely driven by its commitment to the Humanistic ethic. This is so whether the Singularity's engineers and proponents realize it or not, or whether most Enlightenment liberals have ever heard the term before.

The Enlightenment project and the Humanistic ethic are so intricately entwined that it is difficult to say which came first. Historically, the Humanistic ethic was expressed in some form long before the Enlightenment, but it is hard to conceive that this exquisite principle could have emerged from anything other than enlightened minds.

Yet the fast-approaching technological Singularity is also a consequence of the Enlightenment. And if whatever lies beyond it is going to be good for humanity, then we must keep our exponentially improving technology, especially artificial intelligence, coupled with the Humanistic ethic—the

belief that the sole criterion of ethical value, as social psychologist Erich Fromm phrases it, "*must be human welfare*"[1] and that "the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities,"[2] and, I will add, of all our entrepreneurial endeavors.

Additionally, the scientific and technological revolution that we're enjoying today began in the 19th century, as a direct result of the 17th and 18th centuries Enlightenment and its liberal principles. But before we get there, it's important to know that the Enlightenment was an outgrowth of the Renaissance of the 14th through 16th centuries, which was itself inspired by the Early Greek philosophers 2,500 years ago, the first thinkers in history we know of who worked to explain the mechanics of the world in natural rather than supernatural terms.

The first among them, Thales of Miletus, for example, was famous for often saying, "It's not magic. There's a reason for all of it." Using reason and observation, he developed a natural theory explaining earthquakes; and was able to accurately forecast the weather and predict solar eclipses. His brilliant student, Anaximander was the first person known to have realized "The Earth is a body of finite dimensions floating in space,"[3] which must have sounded crazy at the time. (With no concept of gravity, how can something float in empty space without falling?) Anaximander was also the first to claim that "Rainwater is water from the sea and rivers that evaporate because of the Sun's heat" and that "Thunder and lightning are caused by colliding and splitting clouds," and "Earthquakes are caused by fissures in the Earth."[4] He also said that "All animals originally came from the sea or from the primal humidity that once covered the Earth. The first animals were, thus, either fish or fishlike creatures. They moved onto land when the Earth became dry, and they adapted to living there," including human beings, whom, he said, "grew out of fishlike creatures."[5]

A few years later, Leucippus and his student Democritus developed atomic theory. Physicist Carlo Rovelli says Democritus explained that "the entire universe is made up of a boundless space in which innumerable atoms run ... Atoms have no qualities at all, apart from their shape. They have no weight, no color, no taste."[6] In Democritus's own words, "Sweetness is opinion, bitterness is opinion; heat, cold and color are opinion: in reality only atoms, and vacuum."[7]

Thales, Anaximander, Leucippus, Democritus, and other early Greek philosophers understood things about the nature of reality—gravity, evolution, quantum physics—that weren't rediscovered again until the likes of Newton, Darwin, and Einstein came along more than 25 centuries later. No wonder Aristotle called them *phusikoi*, "the physicists." Imagine where the world would be today had the ideas and discoveries of these brilliant thinkers not been shut down and forgotten at the start of the Dark Ages. We would have probably cured cancer and been living on Mars centuries ago.

The Renaissance is so named because of its "renewed" interest in and discovery of these early Greek philosophers, especially their way of seeing the world, including their necessarily positive view of human reason and human agency; their belief, that is, in our own ability to figure things out. These ideas, in turn, flourished during the Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century, resulting in many social reforms, including Democracy and the abolition of slavery in the 19th century. But more to the point here; the Enlightenment, dedicated to reason and science, having a

positive view of human nature and human agency, and a commitment to human welfare and progress, resulted in a scientific and technological revolution that remains unparalleled in human history. As philosopher Heinrich Treitschke once said, "everything new that the nineteenth century created is the work of liberalism."[8] (a.k.a., the Enlightenment project)

Treitschke's words were cited in 1927 by my famous predecessor, John H. Dietrich, the Father of Religious Humanism, who himself said, "it was this movement of liberalism which marks the nineteenth century as the most remarkable period of human history. In fact, the nineteenth century did more to add to the sum total of human life than all the other centuries of the Christian era put together."[9]

Of course, 1927 was nearly 100 years ago. The computer, internet and, today, artificial intelligence have since come along. Surely these are more impressive than anything invented during the 19th century. Yet, as scientist Vaclav Smil says in his 2020 book, *Numbers Don't Lie*, "most recent advances have been variations of two older fundamental discoveries: microprocessors and exploiting radio waves,"[10] which occurred during the 1800s. "In fact," Smil says, "perhaps the most inventive time in human history was the 1880s. That's when electricity became a household commodity thanks to the invention of thermal- and hydropower generation stations that still provide 80 percent of the world's electricity."[11]

It's also when the first electromagnetic waves were discovered, leading to the first wireless communications technology, the radio. electric irons, multistory steel skyscrapers, the steam turbine, coin operated vending machines, the four-stroke combustion engine, elevators, revolving doors, electric street cars, electric motors, cash registers, x-rays, ultraviolet light, microwaves, infrared radiation, chain driven bicycles, and many other inventions that our lives and technology still depend upon today, were all discovered in the 19th century, immediately following the Enlightenment's Age of Reason.

As political scientist Francis Fukuyama says, the same is true in general, "Historically, liberal societies have been engines of economic growth, creators of new technologies, and producers of vibrant art and culture. This occurred precisely *because* they were liberal."[12] Liberalism, it should be obvious, is but another term for the Enlightenment values I have outlined. And it only makes sense that societies devoted to freedom, including the freedom for individuals to think for themselves, will foster many innovations, including in the areas of science and technology.

All of this adequately makes the case that technological advancement is a direct consequence of the Enlightenment project. But how does it relate to the Humanistic ethic; to the human dignity and wellbeing that is at the heart of the Enlightenment project?

It is undeniable that technology has often had devasting impacts on our environment—polluting our air, fouling our water, killing our oceans, and contributing to global warming, one of the worst existential crises the world has ever faced. Yet, I would argue that such damage, though caused directly by some industries, is more indirectly caused by the failure of our governments to do their job through adequate, though not overbearing, regulations and laws.

Scientists have known about the greenhouse gas effect since it was discovered, guess when, in the 1800's. But it wasn't until the 1960's that people became aware enough to be concerned about the impacts humans are having on the environment, thanks largely to the publication of Rachel Carson's historic book, *Silent Spring* (1962). Seven years later the National Environmental Policy Act was passed requiring federal agencies to assess the environmental impacts of their proposed projects. A year later, on April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day in the US occurred in the form of a protest involving more than 20 million Americans, still the largest demonstration in the natiion's history. That same year, during his inauguration speech, President Richard Nixon said:

> Restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions. It has become a common cause of all the people of this country. It is a cause of particular concern to young Americans, because they more than we will reap the grim consequences of our failure to act on programs which are needed now if we are to prevent disaster later. Clean air, clean water, open spaces—these should once again be the birthright of every American. If we act now, they can be.[13]

As Ezra Klien and Derek Thompson explain in their recent book, *Abundance*, Nixon "went on to sign the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act, and he created the Environmental Protection Agency, making him arguably the most important environmentalist president of the twentieth century."[14] These are examples of federal laws and agencies that have worked to protect and repair the environment, including bringing some species, like the Bald Eagle, back from the brink of extinction. Another is the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, an international treaty signed in 1987, including by the US and Canada, that reduced and eventually eliminated the chemicals like Chlorofluorocarbons and Hydrochlorofluorocarbons that had caused a hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer. The hole is now gone because of government action.

The point is, when our government's main goal is human welfare and progress, guided by the Humanistic ethic, we're able to collectively address our greatest challenges. But when they're focused on other priorities, like hoarding and maintaining power, or pursuing the interests of only a few, then we can't adequately address these challenges. But this is a failure of our governments, not of industry, big business, and capitalism, which often get the blame.

I often say corporations are not persons and should not have the same rights as persons. But they are owned by persons, employ persons, and serve persons. For me, as a humanist who believes in the fundamental goodness of humanity, I presume most businesses and corporations are owned, operated, and employed by good people with good intentions. Having dipped my toe in the waters of Silicon Valley, the tech capital of the world, through my connection to Singularity University and the Abundance digital community, I've become confident that this is so.

During a 2019 conference, Will Weisman of Singularity University said, "I'm here because like so many of you I believe in my core that an abundant world is possible in the not too distant future, and I want to do everything that I can to help bring that to fruition. To me that looks like a world where we feed everyone, where we educate everyone, where we shelter everyone, a world where people feel safe and they feel they have a fair shot at living a good life." As SU's founder, Peter

Diamandis often says, "Rather than a future of dog-eat-dog, I [see] a world of increasing abundance, a world where we [can] actually imagine uplifting humanity and using technology to meet the needs of every man, woman, and child."[15] That's the Humanistic ethic talking.

We often want to blame capitalism in general and billionaires in particular for our economic woes, but people are not poor because some people are wealthy, not any more than some people are dumb because some are smart, or some are mean because some are kind. Most billionaires today are billionaires because they've invented transformative technologies that have enriched our lives and that are reasonably affordable to most people. Millions to billions of consumers made them billionaires, not a rigged system. As Diamandis often says, "If you want to make a billion dollars, help a billion people." The problem with wealth is when our governments fail to apply adequate but not overbearing tax structures and budgets, which, again, is a failure of government, not economics. When most people speak ill of capitalism, they are really referring to "crony capitalism," a term coined by journalist George M. Taber in 1980 to describe a system "characterized by close, mutually advantageous relationships between business leaders and government officials." This kind of capitalism is, again, a failure of government officials as much as anyone else.

But my point here is only to show that businesses are not innately unjust and greedy enterprises, including, if not especially, those that are tech driven. They are human endeavors that allow humans to serve and benefit the whole of humanity through our system of trade. The very term, *entrepreneur* comes from the French word meaning "adventurer." That's what they are, people driven by an overwhelming goal that often compels them to risk almost everything they have in the service of humanity. As the authors of the book *Conscious Capitalism* say, "with few exceptions, entrepreneurs who start successful businesses don't do so to maximize profits. Of course, they want to make money, but that is not what drives most of them. They are inspired to do something that they believe needs doing."[16] Their book goes on to say:

> Entrepreneurs are the true heroes in a free-enterprise economy, driving progress in business, society, and the world. They solve problems by creatively envisioning different ways the world could and should be. With their imagination, creativity, passion, and energy, they are the greatest creators of widespread change in the world. They are able to see new possibilities and enrich the lives of others by creating things that never existed before.[17]

I think I've made my case well enough that even Oscar the Grouch would have to agree, the Singularity is intricately entwined with the Humanistic ethic and the Enlightenment project. But my real point—the only reason I'm addressing this topic at all—is to remind all of us that the purpose of technology lies in its service to human well-being, progress, and individual growth and development. Technologies that are contrary to this purpose are not worth pursuing and if they already exist they should be abandoned or eliminated. Technologies that are aligned with human values and needs, yet have some negative consequences, ought to be replaced with improved versions as soon as possible. And, most importantly, technologies for which the positive consequences are obviously transformative, yet may have unforeseen negative consequences, like artificial intelligence, which may give us godlike powers within the next few years, must remain coupled and aligned with the Humanistic ethic so that they exist for no greater purpose than human welfare and advancement (which, again, always includes the welfare of our planet and

fellow creatures, for we cannot be healthy humans without a healthy environment, and we cannot be whole humans without empathy.)

Fortunately, this is the mandate already being heavily discussed in Silicon Valley these days, where it especially needs to be happening. My hope is to remind my fellow Singularitarians that the values they're talking about have already been well outlined in the Humanistic ethic, and that their efforts are but the continuation of a human endeavor that began centuries ago, known today as the Enlightenment project. The technological Singularity is rooted in the past, perhaps as far back as whatever singularity erupted to create our Universe to begin with, but at least as far back as the early Greek philosophers whose forgotten ideas were rediscovered a few centuries ago and have since led to the many cultural, societal, scientific, and technological advances we now enjoy, and are leading to the technological miracles that are just around the corner. No matter where we end up, may their creativity, curiosity, courage, and, above all, their humanity long remain part of who we are and who we are to become.

[1] Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

[2] Ibid., p. 229.

[3] Rovelli, Carlo. *Anaximander: And the Birth of Science* (p. 34). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[4] Ibid., (pp. 35-36).

[5] Ibid. p. 36).

[6] Rovelli, Carlo. *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity* (p. 20). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Dietrich, John H., "What Is a Liberal?", *What if the World Went Humanist*: *Ten Sermons*, Fellowship of Religious Humanists, Yellow Springs, OH, 1989, p. 4.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Smil, Vaclav, *Numbers Don't Lie*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2021, p. 97.

[11] Ibid., p. 98.

[12] Fukuyama, Francis, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2022, p. 138.

[13] Klein, Ezra; Thompson, Derek. Abundance (p. 52). Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

[14] Ibid.

[15] https://www.diamandis.com/blog/scaling-abundance

[16] Sisodia, Rajendra; Rajendra. *Conscious Capitalism*, With a New Preface by the Authors: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business (p. 20). Harvard Business Review Press. Kindle Edition.

[17] Ibid., p. 14.