

Chapter 1

The Future of Human Civilization

We need to face and explore some fundamental questions about the future of our civilization.

Human civilization today is vibrant, powerful, flourishing, rapidly changing, deeply concerned. Developed over thousands of years, it has now spread to every region of our planet and occasionally to other bodies in our solar system. Human civilization includes a remarkable diversity of cultures, organizations, beliefs, world views, values, music, architecture, environments, capacities, and life-styles. It simultaneously encompasses altruism and selfishness, joy and misery, wealth and hunger, love and revenge, compassion and terrorism, peace and war, highly positive potentials and extraordinary dangers, penetrating insight and foolish short-sightedness.

If we look ahead a few decades, we note that our civilization has enormous potential not only to flourish happily but also to deteriorate appallingly. In fact, humanity literally has the capacity to exterminate itself, thus joining the many other species that have become extinct. However, our civilization also has the capacity to avoid the worst dangers and to flourish peacefully for thousands of years. At this peculiar moment in human history, our two extreme potentials (for destroying everything and for achieving a highly positive future) may both be vaster than at any time during the past 10,000 years.

The actual outcome will result from human choices and actions over the next few months, years, and decades. Consequently it cannot be predicted with any certainty. Humanity's future is not predetermined, preordained, nor carved in granite. On the grand scale of some ancient cosmic myth, our worldwide civilization today is engaged in a titanic struggle. This vast human drama being played on our global stage may be the most important and exciting drama in our entire galaxy at the present time. Each of us plays some small but nontrivial part in this drama.

Both sets of forces in the struggle are powerful, pervasive, and probably increasing. The forces arrayed on one side include

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thoughtfulness, intelligence, wisdom, caring, long-range considerations, awareness of global issues, a commitment to equal opportunity for future generations, harmonious cooperation, altruism, learning, and a willingness to make fundamental changes if necessary. These constructive forces are pushing human civilization toward a positive future.

Other forces are pushing us toward a future that could be much worse than today. They include thoughtlessness, short time horizons, apathy, disregard for others, widespread material luxury, destructive urges toward violence and war, overarching self-interest for one's own group or nation, foolish societal risk-taking, and highly biased or incomplete knowledge of today's world and tomorrow's potentials.

What will be the outcome? Will this global-scale drama have a happy ending? Will it turn into a somber Shakespearean tragedy with dead bodies littering the stage? We cannot yet know the drama's ending, of course, but we can certainly be intellectually excited and deeply moved by the conflict's scale, significance, and suspense.

The Fundamental Questions

The dramatic situation in which human civilization finds itself can stimulate us to consider several profound and important questions. These could well be the most significant questions in the world today. Each of these questions deserves our best intellectual efforts even if it cannot be answered precisely and definitively; if the question is deeply important, we should explore it as fully and carefully as possible. Such exploration will be useful not only for our own personal and intellectual development, but also for tackling the global issues and problems on the world stage.

Eight fundamental questions (or clusters of questions) stand out as particularly important for our attention. Each of these questions provides the central focus for one chapter in this book. (As you read this brief preview, you may want to think through your own responses and even jot them down.)

What is most important of all? Is it the long-term flourishing of human civilization? Why should we care about the next 40 years, not just the next few months? How much responsibility do we have to future generations?

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Why do we act in ways that hurt our future? What forces and factors oppose the importance of humanity's future?

What will our actual future turn out to be? What are our chances? Is pessimism or optimism more appropriate?

How can we achieve a satisfactory future? Which priorities are fundamental?

Which catastrophes would be the worst of all, and how can we prevent them?

What sorts of intelligent life and civilizations exist in the universe? What role will they play in our future?

From which aspects of reality can we gain meaning and purpose?

How can each person contribute? Can one person make any difference? Why is it worth trying?

The Future: A Fascinating Phenomenon

The future of human civilization is a fascinating phenomenon that has at least five unusual characteristics.

For one thing, it does not exist at present (except in our minds) even though it is a real phenomenon or at least will be a real phenomenon someday. Unicorns, the Land of Oz, and the ancient Greek gods and goddesses are fantasies, mere creations of the human mind and of filmmakers. They never have existed and never will exist in any other way. The future of human civilization, by contrast, will definitely exist in reality someday. It will be a fact. In summary, the future is a phenomenon that will be completely real someday even though it does not exist today.

For this reason, the title of this book uses the singular word “future.” Let us pick any particular date in the future: April 12, 2023, for instance, or January 6, 2036. Today, many alternative futures are possible or desirable for that particular date. For this reason, futurists often use the plural word “futures” or refer to their field as “futures studies.” By the time the year 2023 or 2036 arrives, however, only one future will have actually occurred.

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Although it is appropriate now to consider various potential futures, on any given date we will in fact have achieved only one multifaceted future.

Second, humanity's long-term future is a huge mystery or puzzle. We simply have no idea how it is going to turn out. Every now and then over the years I list my biggest mysteries and questions, my most significant areas of ignorance. Humanity's long-term future always appears on these lists. We can use disciplined and creative thinking to speculate about the future, we can conduct empirical research on trends and causal forces, but we cannot know for sure what the future will actually turn out to be. The further ahead we look, the less certain we can be about our best guesses actually coming true.

Even the duration of human civilization is a complete unknown for us. Our culture, civilization, and gene pool could continue for thousands or even millions of years into the future. At the opposite extreme, it could all end before you have celebrated two more birthdays.

Third, the phenomenon of the future is inherently interesting and thought-provoking. All of us can enjoy the intellectual stimulation and emotional excitement of looking ahead at life in the future. We can become fascinated by the extraordinary range of prospects and potentials, both positive and negative. Many of these are elaborated by future-fiction books ("science fiction"), movies, and futurists. We can create additional possibilities in our own imagination. We can gain a fresh mental perspective and a feeling of suspense by exploring humanity's potential futures.

Fourth, facing our possible futures can evoke a variety of emotional responses. Reading the vast array of literature on potential futures (or simply using one's own imagination) can evoke feelings of horror, terror, despair, and anger as well as hope, joy, exhilaration, and commitment. Some people feel overwhelmed, paralyzed, hopeless. Others feel challenged, excited, enthusiastic, and empowered.

Finally, the future of human civilization is so profoundly important that it is an ultimate priority or supreme value. The next two chapters focus on this importance.