Whatever You Wish

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The difficulty in deciding on what the professions of the future would be is that it all depends on the kind of future we choose to have. If we allow our civilization to be destroyed, the only profession of the future will be scrounging for survival, and few will succeed at it.

Suppose, though, that we keep our civilization alive and flourishing and, therefore, that technology continues to advance. It seems logical that the professions of such a future would include computer programming, lunar mining, fusion engineering, space construction, laser communications, neurophysiology, and so on.

I can’t help but think, however, that the advance of computerization and automation is going to wipe out the subwork of humanity—the dull pushing and shoving and punching and clicking and filing and all the other simple and repetitive motions, both physical and mental, that can be done perfectly easily—and better—by machines no more complicated than those we can already build.

In short, the world could be so well run that only a relative handful of human “foremen” would be needed to engage in the various professions and supervisory work necessary to keep the world’s population fed, housed, and cared for.

What about the majority of the human species in this automated future? What about those who don’t have the ability or the desire to work at the professions of the future —or for whom there is no room in those professions? It may be that most people will have nothing to do of what we think of as work nowadays.

This could be a frightening thought. What will people do without work? Won’t they sit around and be bored; or worse, become unstable or even vicious? The saying is that Satan finds mischief still for idle hands to do.

But we judge from the situation that has existed till now, a situation in which people are left to themselves to rot.

Consider that there have been times in history when an aristocracy lived in idleness off the backs of flesh-and-blood machines called slaves or serfs or peasants. When such a situation was combined with a high culture, however, aristocrats used their leisure to become educated in literature, the arts, and philosophy. Such studies were not useful for work, but they occupied the mind, made for interesting conversation and an enjoyable life.

These were the liberal arts, arts for free men who didn’t have to work with their hands. And these were considered higher and more satisfying than the mechanical arts, which were rarely materially useful.

Perhaps, then, the future will see a world aristocracy supported by the only slaves that can humanely serve in such a post-sophisticated machines. And there will be an infinitely newer and broader liberal arts program, taught by the teaching machines, from which each person could choose.

Some might choose computer technology or fusion engineering or lunar mining or any of the professions that would seem vital to the proper functioning of the world. Why not? Such professions, placing demands on human imagination and skill, would be very attractive to many, and there will surely be enough who will be voluntarily drawn to these occupations to fill them adequately.

But to most people the field of choice might be far less cosmic. It might be stamp collecting, pottery, ornamental painting, cooking, dramatics, or whatever. Every field will be an elective, and the only guide will be “whatever you wish.”

Each person, guided by teaching machines sophisticated enough to offer a wide sampling of human activities, can then choose what he or she can best and most willingly do.

Is the individual person wise enough to know what he or she can best do? —Why not? Who else can know? And what can a person do best except that which he or she wants to do most?

Won’t people choose to do nothing? Sleep their lives away?

If that’s what they want, why not?—Except that I have a feeling they won’t. Doing nothing is hard work, and, it seems to me, would be indulged in only by those who have never had the opportunity to evolve out of themselves something more interesting and, therefore, easier to do.

In a properly automated and educated world, then, machines may prove to be the true humanizing influence. It may be that machines will do the work that makes life possible and that human beings will do all the other things that make life pleasant and worthwhile.