

Description of Utopia in Marshall Brain's "Manna:" An Analysis

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the depiction of a utopian society in the fiction novel "Manna" written by Marshall Brain in 2003. Additionally, it is intended to evaluate the possible outcomes of the 'robotic revolution' in the near future. Utopia is a community or society possessing highly desirable or perfect qualities. In any utopian society, technology, government, people, education, the standard of living, environment, population control and freedom is to be perfect and according to the desire of the community. Everybody has different needs and different concepts of utopia. Utopia, therefore, provides different governments and conditions so that all can live in a world that's perfect for them. The novel reveals two possible results of the 'robotic revolution' in the near future. Each is possible from the current world we live in. A sufficient literature review is also done and it is revealed that the utopian society is one that constantly improves, as technology improves, so should society. The paper concludes that Utopia is then a perfect society that undergoes continual improvement to achieve the highest aggregate satisfaction level for most people.

Keywords: Utopia, Manna, Marshall Brain, Artificial Intelligence, Fictional island society, Robotic Revolutions, etc.

Introduction:

Novel "Manna" by Marshall David Brain¹ is a science fiction that explores several issues in modern information technology and user interfaces, including Transhumanism.² Some of its predictions, like the proliferation of automation and Artificial Intelligence in the fast-food industry, are becoming true years later (Manna, 2017). "Manna" is thus more like a thought-provoking and conceptual prototype novel instead of merely an entertaining book (Blum, 2015).

The story of the novel is set in 2050 in Cary, North Carolina. The narrator flies to Australia and starts a low paid job at Burger-G. He is removed from the job due to Manna which is a computer management system and is fast replacing human beings in industry. After his dismissal, he takes a bus to a welfare dormitory provided by the government and meets a friend. He is also visited by two girls there who tell him that years ago his father bought stock in the Australia Project

¹Born May 17, 196, he is an American author, public speaker, and entrepreneur. A college instructor and computer programmer, Brain is the founder and author of the "How Stuff Works" book series. He has appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Good Morning America, CNN, and Modern Marvels and in many other media outlets.

²An international and intellectual movement that aims to transform the human condition by developing and making widely available sophisticated technologies to greatly enhance human intellect and physiology (Transhumanism, 2017).

and that he is invited to live in Australia because of this. The narrator then flies to Australia to discover various aspects of the Australia Project.

The novel shows two possible results of the “robotic revolution” in the near future. Each is possible from the current world we live in. In the first world, robots begin eliminating human jobs in places like retail stores, fast food restaurants, construction sites, and transportation. The only expense involved in this is a computer version system which is very inexpensive but eliminates more than half of the jobs in the United States of America. Tasks like restocking shelves, cleaning bathrooms, and taking out the trash are dictated by management software called “Manna” that speaks through an earpiece each employee wears while on the job. All human managers are eventually replaced by this software. This world is described as “Dystopia” around US capitalism³. In the second world, a utopia is based upon a communal⁴ and technological society in Australia, where robots are not in control of humans. Instead, the humans control the robots and use them to make life easier. People living in this world must agree with the core principles of that society e.g. everyone is equal, everything is reused, nothing is anonymous, nothing is owned, tell the truth, do no harm, obey the rules and live life better and better (Brain, 2003). The two worlds differ drastically in economics, transparency, and use of energy, ownership, honesty, and life quality. It is obvious that the world is heading more in the direction of the dystopia rather than the utopia. In the book's Postscript, Brain mentions that utopia is still a possibility for the world to manifest (Manna, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the utopian community, a society possessing highly desirable or perfect qualities and possible outcomes of the “robotic revolution” in the near future.

Research Questions:

- i. How are the Utopia and Dystopia described in the novel “Manna”?
- ii. What are the possible outcomes of the “robotic revolution” in the near future?
- iii. How to make a living when robots take up human jobs?

Review of Related Literature:

Utopia means a community or society which possesses perfect or highly desirable qualities. The word was coined in Greek by Sir Thomas More⁵ describing a fictional island society in the Atlantic Ocean. Utopia is perfection. Some argue that Utopia can never be achieved because perfection can never be achieved. This is true because there is always room for improvement but Utopia has a quality of universality, as revealed by the fact that it has fascinated readers of five centuries, has influenced countless writers and has invited imitation by scores of “Utopianists.” Still, however, an examination of the period of which it was the product is necessary in order to view the work in depth.

More’s idea of giving geographical particulars for his ideal commonwealth was novel and effective - novel, since neither Plato nor his successors had employed that device and effective in as much as nearly every succeeding utopian writer adopted it. He gives the island kingdom a name, and reports maximum data in numbers and measurements, in a businesslike fashion. This gives credibility to the story. This style was later on used by Swift in “Gulliver’s Travels” also. The

³Private enterprise

⁴Shared

⁵for his 1516 book Utopia

creation of the imaginary witness, Raphael Hythloday, has added to this credibility, who reports having visited the distant island. This, too, was a device of More's invention, inspired by the new discoveries of the preceding quarter of a century (ibid).

Aldous Leonard Huxley⁶ in his book "Island" explores many of the themes and ideas that interested him in the post-World War II decades and were the subject of many of his nonfiction books of essays, including "Brave New World Revisited," "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow," "The Doors of Perception," and "The Perennial Philosophy." Huxley's concept of real utopia is in accordance with mescaline and LSD⁷ related experiences. But until we get the biological underpinnings of our emotional well-being securely encoded genetically, then psychedelia is mostly off-limits for the purposes of paradise-engineering. Certainly, its intellectual significance cannot be exaggerated; but unfortunately, neither can its ineffable weirdness and the unpredictability of its agents. Some of these themes and ideas include overpopulation, ecology, modernity, democracy, mysticism, entheogens, and somatotypes (Island novel: Map, 2017). Huxley's *Brave New World*⁸ gives a projection of life on earth in 500 years if technology continues to play a dominant role and if government control of human activity becomes absolute. Skyscrapers will rise higher and higher and factories will become more and more efficient. Likewise traveling will be only by air and diseases will be virtually eliminated. In the future, universal happiness will be provided through a happiness pill called soma (Huxley, 1962).

This concept of utopia is coming to reality to the extent that self-driving cars have started in several countries that have already done amendments in their laws to accommodate the new technology. Initially, when autonomous test cars were used, they were not taken as robots due to not having humanoid shape⁹ yet these cars were adopted quickly and widely such as buses in the UAE and Netherlands, taxis in Singapore, private cars in the US and China, etc. Although there was a fatal accident in Florida, yet it did not raise concerns over their use. The driverless, and even without steering wheels or gas pedals vehicles, merged into traffic, stopping at signals and signs, taking passengers to destinations lounged them in comfort giving them a reason to occasionally take selfies.

It is predicted that through the technological revolution, the robots are going to transform the economy. People whose living is driving, around 3 million in the US only, will lose jobs. E-commerce is another field that may experience change, and car ownership will also become obsolete as "targeted car sharing and public transportation systems" will be developed. The destination address will be inserted in-app and the robot cars will take the passenger to plane at the airport, and after the plane lands another car will take the passenger directly to the destination (Cixin, 2016).¹⁰ Thus robots will creep into the various fields, serving as bus conductors, waiters, etc., so as man is investing in robotic transport, this will create their influence in not only "environmental detection and modeling" but also "hypercomplex problem solving and fuzzy-logic applications." With the advancement in this technology, the use of robots with AI¹¹ will expand to various other fields such as health care, police, national defense, and also education. Humans will not protest very much as the AI systems that drive cars will teach people to trust machine intelligence over the human variety - car accidents will become very rare and when given an

⁶26 July 1894 – 22 November 1963

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/26/doors-perception-huxley-mescaline-reading-group>

⁸1932, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave_New_World

⁹ As science fiction movies have made people to expect that a robot is always in a human shape.

¹⁰The science-fiction writer Liu Cixin is a nine-time winner of the Galaxy Award, China's highest honor for science-fiction writing. He is the first Chinese writer to receive the Hugo Award for Best Novel.

¹¹Artificial Intelligence

opportunity to delegate a job to a robot, humans will placidly do so without giving it much thought (ibid).

Gradually, the distinction between utopian and science fiction literature became increasingly blurred and many, if not most, sci-fi novels contain at least some elements of utopian or dystopian ideas. However, many modern utopias and dystopias may be better described as “speculative fiction” rather than science fiction, in that they do not necessarily involve the invention or anticipation of futuristic technologies, merely extrapolations or exaggerations of currently available technologies. The perfect societies which are portrayed by utopian novels are mostly communistic or socialistic in characteristics. On the other hand, dystopias are mostly fascistic in nature. However, both are societies where individuals are discouraged when interfering with primary goals of the state, and state tends to replace religious or family values (Mustin, 2008).

Utopia in “Manna:”

This book states that machines are doing a great job because they are serving people and the world is gradually moving towards a complete automated restaurant system but if a dystopian view is considered the man is seen to be imprisoned by machines. The book makes it clear what a technocrat imagines about the world and how the world would look like if he was made in charge. A technocrat has a dystopian vision that seems to be capitalism. On the other hand, in the Utopian vision, a complete mechanized system is the need of the day and everything is advanced technologically. Human beings are plugged into a central system, where, for example, a crime is prevented by computer because it predicts it and consequently takes over a person’s body stopping it to commit the crime. Examples of assumptions of utopian vision are:

- i. There is infinite energy available to perform a task
- ii. Resources are infinite.
- iii. Robots do not have desires so they are merely tools completely in the hands of mankind to achieve human’s ends
- iv. Human beings have unlimited desires about arts and literature and everything, which are only limited by money and ultrarich people

The utopian society provides freedom for all. Everybody has different needs and different concepts of Utopia. Utopia, therefore, provides different governments and conditions so that all can live in a world that’s perfect for them. One man’s heaven may be another man’s hell (Utopian States: Loves happy people, 2017). A utopian society would allow a man to move from a society that is his hell to a society that is his heaven. In Utopia, one size does not fit all. Each man is free to shift to a place where he finds what he needs be it living in a billionaire’s mansion as a servant. Another man might rather live in a dormitory or barracks and live in total freedom from subjugation, suppression, and government. Utopia is then a perfect society that undergoes continual improvement to achieve the highest aggregate satisfaction level for most people (Brain, 2003).

The funniest part is in his dystopian vision of a fully mechanized reality, the Roberts are in the true control, and they keep people inside confined areas and feed them for free. Of course, the whole Robot society is working for a few ultra-rich people. For some reason, all usages of labor have been thrown aside. When so many people are laid off, the price of labor falls significantly,

we would observe an inverse Ricardo effect¹² and more people will be hired (Brain, 2003). The real wages of the individuals would actually go up because these people can buy ultra-cheap Robot products now. But no, the super greedy ultra-rich people instead of employing a large amount of labor for even more purposes, instead retire them and provides them with welfare. The few assumptions of dystopian vision of the future are:

- i. Human desires are limited.
- ii. Robots have desires. They are not merely a tool to achieve human desires.
- iii. Ultrarich people hate humanity and therefore do not want to see another human being.

Usually previously, due to technological revolutions, people moved to new jobs once losing a job they were in but this will not be the case when the robots will take over. AI that can learn from experience will replace many accountants, lawyers, bankers, insurance adjusters, doctors, scientific researchers, and some creative professionals. Intelligence and advanced training will no longer mean job stability. Gradually the AI era will transform the essence of human culture. When we're no longer more intelligent than our machines, when they can easily outthink and outperform us, making the sort of intuitive leaps in research and other areas that we currently associate with genius, a sort of learned helplessness is likely to set in for us, and the idea of work itself may cease to hold meaning. As AI takes over, the remaining jobs may dwindle to a fraction of what they were, employing perhaps 10 percent or even less of the total population. These may be highly creative or complex jobs that robots can't do, such as senior management, directing scientific research, or nursing and child care.

In the future, how we will spend our time is hard to predict. "He who does not work, neither shall he eat" has been the cornerstone of civilizations through the ages, but that will have vanished. History shows that those who haven't had to work — aristocrats say — have often spent their time entertaining and developing their artistic and sporting talents while scrupulously observing elaborate rituals of dress and manners. In this future, creativity is highly valued. We sport ever more fantastic makeup, hairstyles, and clothing. The labor of past ages seems barbaric. But the aristocrats ruled nations; in the AI era, machines are doing all the thinking. Because, over the decades, we've gradually given up our autonomy, step by step, allowing ourselves to be transformed into AI's docile, fabulously pampered pets. As AI whisks us from place to place - visits to family members, art galleries, and musical events, we will look out the windows, as unaware of its plans for us as a poodle on its way to the groomers.

Most of us have wondered what we might do if we didn't need to work – if we woke up one morning to discover we had won the lottery, say. We entertain ourselves with visions of multiple homes, trips around the world, or the players we would sign after buying Arsenal. For many of us, the most tantalizing aspect of such visions is the freedom it would bring: to do what one wants when one wants, and how one wants.

But imagine how that vision might change if such freedom were extended to everyone. Someday, probably not in our lifetimes but perhaps not long after, machines will be able to do most of the tasks that people can. At that point, a truly workless world should be possible. If everyone, not just the rich, had robots at their beck and call, then such powerful technology would free them from the need to submit to the realities of the market to put food on the table. Of course,

¹²Ricardo effect is a proposition of David Ricardo that an increase in wage rates will lead to a replacement of labor by machines and vice versa, an increase in machinery costs will lead to the use of more labor.

we then have to figure out what to do not only with ourselves but with one another. Just as a lottery cheque does not free the winner from the shackles of the human condition, all-purpose machine intelligence will not magically allow us all to get along. And what is especially tricky about a world without work is that we must begin building the social institutions to survive it long before the technological obsolescence of human workers actually arrives.

There are two schools of thought on the subject, though:

The Utopians believe that society will become incredibly productive and rich without human beings having to do very much. Robots will do all the work. For humans, work will become optional. Infinite leisure will then enhance the quality of life dramatically. A Universal Basic Income will provide a livelihood to everyone. Society will become free of poverty. In the utopian scenario, where we've anticipated these changes and come up with solutions beforehand. Those in political power have planned a smoother, gentler transition, perhaps using AI to help them anticipate and modulate the strife. At the end of it, almost all of us live on social welfare.

The Dystopians believe that automation will eliminate jobs by the tens of millions. Fortune will become (further) concentrated at the tip of the pyramid. Inequality will wreak havoc with society. Governments will not be able to afford enough welfare budgets to sustain the have-nots which will be most of the population. In a dystopian scenario, jobless numbers rise across the globe, and societies sink into prolonged turmoil. The world could be engulfed by endless conflicts between those who control the AI and the rest of us. The technocratic 10 percent could end up living in a gated community with armed robot guards.

Whichever reality unfolds, though, we do have some time in hand. The kind of mass-scale automation that may eventually come about is still 50-100 years away, most likely. Technology takes a long time to be developed, but industry and society take even longer to adopt it. So, for example, if driverless cars are there, quite some time will be required for them to become legal on the streets.

The key is to create a society where people have their needs met, opportunities to fulfill their dreams. At the same time, people seem to feel needed, and something major would be lost from the human experience and people's characters if humans were no longer needed to accomplish the basic functioning of society.

The lesson of the story is spot on. Humans can move forward and let the technological revolution lead them into a horrible world completely controlled by a few human beings. Humans can consciously make a decision to have a robotic revolution leading to a good life for mankind. The ending makes it clear that the protagonist's life becomes awesome Robots get complete control of a "well designed centrally planned economy." It is an amazing book on good, bad, and ugly facets of what technology might be keeping in store for humans in the future.

Conclusion:

Through qualitative analysis of the novel, it is concluded that Manna's world is too dark; it becomes a caricature of the world that your typical left-wing extremist claims are inevitable. In contrast, the Vertebrae world is so utopian that it becomes uninteresting. These worlds are so perfectly bad/ good that it becomes tedious to listen to the horrible nature of the Manna world and the amazing nature of the Vertebrae world. In a futuristic world where everything is automated and every aspect of life is controlled by computers, open-source and free software would be the solution for the problem of every kind. So let's qualify Utopian perfection. Let's define Utopia as a society that as perfect as possible for the era. We should probably also add that the utopian society is one that constantly improves. As technology improves, so should society.

Recommendation for Future Research:

Although automation may mean a post-work society, humans should not be afraid. To benefit from the automation revolution humans need a universal basic income, the slashing of working hours and a redefinition of them without work. The engineering profession should consider the seriousness of this issue and understand that it is management as well as a political problem. Mechanisms should be set up to monitor the employment impacts of automation and to identify the points at which political and technological intervention may be useful or necessary.

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