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# The Quest

Using the hands and minds of its most prominent representatives, humanity has been on a remarkable quest to combat evil, dangers, suffering, life's hardships, and premature death. Who or what have our enemies been?

To begin with, a multitude of natural processes. Inundations caused by floods and tsunamis, the havoc and death wrought by hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, as well as epidemics of disease. But another danger came from humans themselves, displaying their twofold nature. People were helpers, pillars of support, and protectors, but they also brought about exploitation, slavery, destruction, and invasions, in addition to stealing, killing, and torturing. What methods could be employed to fight these two kinds of adversaries?

Some focused on humanity itself – on creating a new Adam, in whom good would prevail after evil was ousted. Through fervent faith, humans would shed hatred and aggression, embracing love even for their enemies. A world of universal love would be a safe place for everyone. The powerful secular ideologies of the twentieth century sought to cleanse those they saw as malevolent, sparing the good while pursuing

what they regarded as the eradication of evil from the world. If all the humans left were good, after all, who could possibly perform evil deeds? These zealous efforts nevertheless all proved counterproductive: the ensuing perils, debasement, suffering, and genocide all reached apocalyptic proportions.

There was also a hope that universal education would rid humans of their proclivities for evil, that stupidity and malice could simply be attributed to ignorance. However, advances in knowledge and universal education only failed to usher in an era of rational goodness, and merely “lent new shades to human idiocy” (to paraphrase the philosopher John Gray). Moreover, the acquisition of knowledge does not eliminate proclivities for evil – as is demonstrated by the existence of individuals who hold doctorates yet engage in criminal behavior or harbor anger and rage.

Humanity has been more successful in mitigating non-human threats than in confronting the dangerous aspects of human nature. Exceptional individuals, both historically and today, have demonstrated impressive creativity in this area. Sometimes, the results they achieved surpassed even the most impossible dreams. Humans once dreamt of flying carpets, the realm of fairy tales, yet those dreams eventually materialized as airplanes, now within reach for almost everyone. Many regions were once plagued by famine, where mass deaths due to starvation were a recurrent horror, but such calamities are now a thing of the past. Medicine has also witnessed tremendous advances in its capabilities.

Initially, the accomplishments of science and technology led to the birth of a novel kind of religion – a belief in progress that would create a paradise on Earth. “A new type of man will arise... a superman... an exalted man” (Karl Kautsky). “Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. (...) The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise” (Leon Trotsky).

It was commonly believed that every invention was a miraculous force for good, and its effects could only be beneficial. In the United States and England, X-rays were used for a long time for hair removal, achieving

**J. Aurelia Sikiewicz-Wojtaszek,**  
*Adam and Eve*  
 100 × 150 cm,  
 acrylic on canvas



the desired outcome but inadvertently causing cancer. The concept of adverse effects had not yet emerged to describe the “flip side” of otherwise highly beneficial interventions and innovations. Such unplanned, adverse side-effects shape the human world to a great degree, often equal to or even surpassing the impact of their counterparts – the intended, desirable effects.

Lead was added to gasoline, but not with the purpose of poisoning young children. That was merely an unintended side-effect. Emitting poisonous fumes and killing people were not the reason why the Bhopal chemical plant in India, or the factories in Szopienice and Skawina in Poland, were built and operated. Insecticides and pesticides, which played an important role in ending famine, made their way into breast milk, but that was not planned. Hospitals were not established with the intent of spreading infections, and famine eradication efforts did not aim to cause the spread of obesity-related diseases. Lastly, when fossil fuels started to be used to generate energy, the goal was to significantly boost the number and power of machines and enhance the quality of life, not to cause global warming.

Over time, these unintended and unknown effects nevertheless made themselves apparent. And yet, even today inventions are being introduced with great haste, although their possible side effects are as yet unknown. But there are certain things we do know. In the past, medications were believed to be nothing but advantageous and life-saving. Nowadays, leaflets for patients openly outline the potential adverse effects of drugs, including the risk of death.

The hope that science and technology can rectify the very problems they themselves (inadvertently) cause has been borne out only to a limited extent. The things we humans create are not self-contained systems but rather parts of the natural world, systems of interconnected elements that influence one another. For instance, we construct water supply systems to enhance sanitation, which helps lower disease rates. But this also means that we generate more sewage and significantly pollute our rivers, thus reducing the quality of our tap water. We construct filters and treatment plants that rely on electricity. As a consequence, however, power plants emit more smoke, air quality deteriorates, and respiratory diseases become more prevalent. Needless to say, the activities listed here have broader effects. For the sake of simplicity, I will not go into their other impacts: dead fish, devastated forests, ruined soil – not to mention other effects we are simply too ignorant to even be aware of.

Recently, in the context of COVID-19, many people found it hard to believe the stupidity of those labeled as “anti-vaxxers,” who perceived vaccinations not as something that would save us, but as part of some grand conspiracy or as harmful poisons. Yet we could say that those people did have a certain point. Throughout history, beneficial innovations have often led to



harm, albeit inadvertently. Since engineers and scientists created chemicals that were used in gas chambers, would it be unreasonable to exercise caution and at least consider the possibility of a similar scenario unfolding once more?

Humanity’s quest to combat dangers and improve our well-being, mentioned at the beginning of this article, has led us to a paradox. People now lead better lives, surpassing what was once thought impossible, and they have a multitude of opportunities. Yet, their confidence in a bright future seems smaller than in the difficult eras of the past, and the potential for anxiety, the constant fear of something going wrong, may be intensifying. In this way, it could be said that side-effects have their own side-effects: a dwindling faith in progress, reduced respect for science – and in some cases an aversion to it, concerns about the natural environment, and a growing sense of connection to animals and plants. Consequently, we can observe the disappearance of the once profound admiration, almost bordering on worship, for explorers and inventors, who were once revered as geniuses and were the subjects of adulatory books akin to the lives of the saints – as those people were indeed considered saints of the religion of progress. ■

**J. Aurelia  
Sikiewicz-Wojtaszek,**  
*The Golden City,*  
70 × 100 cm,  
acrylic on canvas