

AI doesn't relieve us of the need to think

There's magic in the
humanities too.

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Diogenes by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1860 (public domain - Wikimedia Commons)

"We must learn to balance the material wonders of technology with the spiritual demands of our human nature." - John Naisbitt

In a 1968 letter to Science magazine, Arthur C. Clarke wrote what eventually became known as the third of Clarke's Laws: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Indeed, it is magical, allowing us to conjure up a liveried vehicle with the touch of a button or make our wish its command to deliver a summary of The Iliad faster than a caffeinated classics professor.

We're so fascinated with the digital dazzle of the present that we're not only becoming less enamored with the humanities, we're sometimes forgetting that they ever existed, when they're more necessary than ever.

In the age of AI and the rising importance of STEM education, philosophizing about the humanities might seem counterintuitive. At first blush, Plato doesn't seem to be of much use in coding. Hannibal may have crossed the Alps on elephants, but he can't navigate an algorithm for an autonomous vehicle.

And Abraham Lincoln thought that the world would little note nor long remember what he said, but can he help write ad copy?

In Tom Peters' first appearance on my podcast Timeless Leadership, he made it clear that over his four decades of consulting, advising, speaking, and writing about leadership, the skills gained from the humanities (and humanism) were directly tied to better-performing individuals and companies.

His simple but powerful reminder of what matters in leadership: "Be thoughtful, be kind, be caring, focus on people." And that's something that, try as it might, AI just can't do.

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“I think technology really increased human ability. But technology cannot produce compassion.” - Dalai Lama

AI can capture and regurgitate history and knowledge, subjects that Will and Ariel Durant called “a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers still live and speak, teach and carve and sing.”

But then a business is developed primarily through the lens of engineering, algorithms, and technology and fails to properly account for ethics, human behavior, and compassion, society is left to struggle with the results.

"The humanities allow us to apply perspective and ethics to the field of technology."



“If there is a technological advance without a social advance, there is, almost automatically, an increase in human misery.” - Michael Harrington, 1962

Enjoy those computer science degrees while you have them, Mark Cuban says. Because with the rise of AI, the ability to program will be quickly assumed by machines.

Longer term, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills will be more valued because these are things that are bound by emotions and empathy. In 10 years, a philosophy degree will be worth more than a computer science degree. The humanities allow us to apply perspective and ethics to the field of technology. To not only game out the potential scenarios, but to mind the why and wherefore before those situations even exist.

“The real problem is not whether machines think but whether men do.” - B.F. Skinner, 1969

While Clarke’s third law cited the indistinguishability of technology and magic, Grey’s Law states: “Any sufficiently advanced incompetence is indistinguishable from malice.” We stand at a moment in history like no other. One in which machines become ever more powerful. These technologies can produce wondrous and amazing things, but in the hands of the wrong individuals, they can be wielded as weapons.

The question is whether we’re prepared. We can turn to stories from statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers, and philosophers from history to inform us — to help us think — and give us the chance to create meaning from technological magic. Only humans can feel compassion. Our spiritual demands require it.



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Scott Monty is a strategic communications and leadership coach and advisor who helps the C-suite embrace better communication with timeless and timely advice. Scott spent six years as an executive at Ford, where he helped turn the company around with the ability to merge technology with humanity.

He also has another decade and a half of experience in communications and marketing agencies. Scott’s clients have included companies such as Walmart, IBM, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Google, and TD Bank.

He was ranked by The Economist as #1 atop the list 25 Social Business Leaders and Alan Mulally, the CEO of Ford Motor Company, called him “a visionary”. He writes the Timeless & Timely newsletter, to help leaders make sense of today with lessons from the past, and hosts the Timeless Leadership podcast.

TIMELESS & TIMELY

He writes the Timeless and Timely newsletter, to help leaders make sense of today with lessons from the past, at TimelessTimely.com. He uses timeless lessons from history, literature and philosophy to help leaders make decisions with empathy, integrity, and wisdom.

His knowledge of history, philosophy and literature, together with his ability to trend-spot, shows teams and audiences that the key to our future is in understanding human nature while focusing on integrity and values. Please feel free to sign up.