

Real danger men:  
begin to think like  
computers



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This quote by Sydney G. Harris has several connotations to it. In one view, it essentially shows that how we work, how we live and even the way we think is constrained by the tools that we use. Explaining it with a very simple example, as an adult in the world today, we do not have to write anything at all. We just type everything. So, there really is no call for proper handwriting. It is very similar to another famous quotation “ If you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail”. It narrows your thought. It narrows your skills and diminishes your imagination.

The essential significance of this quote by Sydney G. Harris is that one should open up one’s mind and realize the peril that we all face today, and not what we perceive to be the real threat. Today, the predilection is for us to think about how one day, machines and computers might be able to think like us, and the troubles that that might bring for the human race. Have we all not given a thorough thought to it after watching the Sci-fi Hollywood movies set in the 22nd century, where the true enemy of earth is the army of machines that men themselves once created? But people do not realize the real hazard that faces us today, which is that if we start thinking, behaving and acting like the machines do; it would be by far more disturbing than the former.

Let us try and answer some very simple questions to understand what Mr. Harris is all apprehensive about. What is that inimitable human trait that we stand to lose and in the process become like machines? What is it that separates humans from computers? Is it our ability to think? Or is it our ability to comprehend and learn? As quoted by Edsger W. Dijkstra “ The question of whether computers can think is just like the question of whether

submarines can swim. They do not do it on their own, but it solves the purpose". With the development of expert systems and advanced technologies, machines do now think by themselves and learn on their own. So, what is the fine line between humans and machines? May be it is our ability to feel, to imagine, to be intuitive and to have emotions. As Albert Einstein once said, " Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand." Let us look at the difference between this imagination, intuitiveness and facts, the knowledge accumulation.

Blaise Pascal was one of the very famous physicist, mathematician and philosopher, who also invented the first digital computer to add or subtract up to eight digit numbers. One of his most famous works is called the *Pensées*, explained the distinction between the spirit of geometry and the spirit of finesse, the difference between machines and humans. The key distinction between these two modes of according to Pascal is that while the spirit of geometry analyses observable facts into clearly definable elements and uses deductive reason to construct a system of knowledge and rules based on meticulous attestation, the spirit of finesse concerns ideas and perceptions which cannot be precisely defined or broken down into parts, and uses instinctive reason to make sense of the relevant phenomena as a whole. Furthermore, the spirit of finesse results in imperfect opinions about which intellectual people may from time to time argue.

A computer thus, works as a spirit of geometry and humans as a mix of the spirit of geometry and the spirit finesse which gives them the ability to

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reason logically and also to have an intuitive mind, which has a suppleness of contemplation for things it loves. Such a brain is accustomed to adjudicate at a single glance and that too tacitly, without mechanical rules. For example, Einstein did not uniquely possess any piece of information that was not accessible to physicists of that era when he developed the theory of relativity. He merely deduced the same existing facts in a completely different manner, and then made testable prophecies on the basis of them. This explains another of the very famous quotes by Albert Einstein “ Laws are only reached by non-logical methods. To make a law one has to have an intellectual love of the subject.”

We may now deduce the apprehensions of Mr. Harris. While the mechanical thinking of computers implies that every predicament has a definite and clearly definable solution, still not all the human thinking can be equated with problem-solving. There are no set rules and theorems which can logically conclude many important questions that confront us in the human life - “ What is religion?”, “ Does God truly exist?”, “ How should one choose a career path?”, “ Am I truly in love?” These questions do not have unambiguous solutions, but these queries are difficulties that require thoughtful illumination. [Richard Van de Lagermaat, 2002]

The danger of losing our humanly thoughtful illumination is very evident in today's world. Apart from the example of using computers for writing, we can deduce from the classroom teachings, how we lay heavy importance on facts and information. Every school focuses on a truck load of information which is stormed into the young brains. We inculcate the substance of logic in our children at a tender age, thus, taking away the essentials that make <https://assignbuster.com/real-danger-men-begin-to-think-like-computers/>

them more human than anything else, the originality in thinking, in perceiving, in imagining all by them themselves.

A quote from Charles Dickens' novel, *Third Times* strengthens this school of thought: "Facts alone are wanted in life, Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them." It shows the direction that we are moving. But this is not the lone want from our life and our education. It is also a must to understand how to think intelligently on the basis of raw facts, make consequential connections between them, and come up with imaginative original ideas.

The above discussions pose computers as an evil creation of humans. Does that mean that computers are truly an iniquity? Are they destroying the very nature of mankind? Evidently and quite rightly it is untrue. According to some researchers, programs such as clip art and Microsoft Word "encourage creativity in children by making it possible for them to write and edit documents without getting encumbered with the mechanics of handwriting and spelling" [Provenzo, 1999].

The computer is thus, not evil unless it is used as an alternate to learn the fundamentals, such as writing, reading and basic mathematics. The time that we become dependent on computers and start using it as our numero uno resource of education, we lose the basics which build everything else. This is when we lose our creativity, originality and narrow our thinking to programmable machines.

Thus, this quote expresses an extraordinary message, that even though technology is highly advantageous and it truly makes our life a lot easier for us, if used incongruously, it is also as devastating as it is obliging. For example, a car is surely is a faster and more comfortable way of commuting from one place to another, especially over long distances. And with time, it has only improved to better suit the needs and comfort of ours. However, while exploiting the luxury and ease, we tend to become so used to this comfort that we start neglecting the very nature of ours, walking, as and when possible. From the very first word to the last one in this quote, Sydney G. Harris is trying to differentiate between a human's lifestyle and a computer's lifestyle. By saying that men will begin to think like computers, he indicates that our future is likely to be lazy because this is what the tool all of us use gives us. Computers are out hammers which drill all the nails by themselves. It gives us shortcuts for all the problems we feed it; it does things the easy way.

The same implies to any other technology. Consider the following questions. Has Google made us lazy? Are Facebook friends our true friends? Are we more efficient when we are multi-tasking on our android and windows hand-held devices?

We need true answers to all these questions. What we need is a real-time realization, a quick snap back to the time when we did not have all or any of this. That time, we used to read in libraries to find out about people, places and things and in this process used to learn more in the library than what we do through Google, just the overview. We used to be close to our dear friends and met them often, confided in them instead of dropping a virtual <https://assignbuster.com/real-danger-men-begin-to-think-like-computers/>

hippopotamus on them through Facebook. We used to be more focused. We used to have more time than we seem to have right now with all the technology and we thought multi-tasking was saving us all the energy and time in the world. We used to be healthier than we are. We used to go out and play under the sky on a green earthly carpet of grass instead of building virtual farms, cities and caring for pets that did not exist.

We need a quick consciousness, to apprehend that we live inside a computer now. We have our own virtual lives and cities and events, all inside a computer. And between this entire clamour, we are forgetting how it felt to be real, to be human. Through this quote, Mr. Harris is trying to turn us around to face the real danger and make us understand that, in fact, we are losing our inherent humanness. He is trying to alarm us that if we humans continue on this path to think, act and behave like computers, the consequences will be far more severe. The author of the quote has surely achieved his ambition by saying this quote.

John F. Kennedy once said “ Man is still the most extraordinary computer of all.” The discussions surely suggest that we may not be far from the time when this quote becomes the unintended reality of the human race and we are all reduced from the most extraordinary creature to have walked the planet, to the most extraordinary computer to exist.

To conclude, in this progressively more computer subjugated and fact-driven world, as the quotation by Sydney G. Harris suggests, the real danger is not that machines would start thinking like humans, but neither is it that humans will start thinking like machines. The biggest concern is that humans will stop

thinking like humans do. We will lose the very innate nature that makes us humans. We face the hazard that people begin to think solely like computers and that we lay more value to technical proficiency than astuteness, and mathematical calculations than sound acumen. We live in virtual lives and in process forget the wonder of natural life we have been bestowed by the almighty. We are succumbing into our own trap, into our own creation. Hence, following the theory of Pascal, we must inculcate from childhood in our students, not merely the spirit of geometry, but more importantly, the more difficult and ever so obscure, the spirit of finesse.