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Letter from Utopia

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Letter from Utopia

Nick Bostrom

Abstract

The good life: just how good could it be? A vision of the future, from the future.

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Dear Human,

Greetings, and may this letter find you at peace and in prosperity! Forgive my writing to you out of the blue. Though you and I have never met, we are not strangers. We are, in a certain sense, the closest of kin...

I am one of your possible futures. One day, I hope, you will become me. Should fortune grant this wish, then I am not just a possible future of yours, but your actual future: a coming phase of you, like the full moon that follows a waxing crescent, or like the flower that follows a seed. I am writing to tell you about my life – how marvelous it is – that you may choose it for yourself.

Although this letter uses the singular, I am really writing on behalf of my all my contemporaries, and we are addressing ourselves to all of your contemporaries. Amongst us are many who are possible futures of your people. Some of us are possible futures of children you have not yet given birth to. Still others are possible artificial persons that you might one day create. What unites us is that we are all dependent on you to make us real. Think of this note as if it were an invitation to a ball – a ball that will take place only if people show up.

We call the lives we lead here “Utopia”.

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How can I tell you about Utopia and not leave you nonplussed? What words could convey the wonder? What inflections express our happiness? What points overcome your skepticism? My pen, I fear, is as unequal to the task as if I had tried to use it against a charging elephant.

But the goal of understanding is so important that that we must try even against long odds. Maybe you will see through the inadequacies of my exposition.

Have you ever known a moment of bliss? On the rapids of inspiration, maybe, where your hands were guided by a greater force to trace the shapes of truth and beauty? Or perhaps you found such a moment in the ecstasy of love? Or in a glorious success achieved with good friends? Or in splendid conversation on a vine-overhung terrace one star-appointed night? Or perhaps there was a song or a melody that smuggled itself into your heart, setting it alight with kaleidoscopic emotion? Or during worship?

If you have experienced such a moment, experienced *the best type* of such a moment, then a certain idle but sincere thought may have presented itself to you: “Oh Heaven! I didn’t realize it could feel like this. This is on a different level, so very much more real and worthwhile. Why can’t it be like this always? Why must good times end? I was sleeping; now I am awake.”

Yet behold, only a little later, scarcely an hour gone by, and the softly-falling soot of ordinary life is already piling up. The silver and gold of exuberance lose their shine. The marble becomes dirty.

Every way you turn it's the same: soot, casting its veil over all glammers and revelries, despoiling your epiphany, sodding up your white pressed collar and shirt. And once again that familiar beat is audible, the beat of numbing routine rolling along its tracks. The commuter trains loading and unloading their passengers... sleepwalkers, shoppers, solicitors, the ambitious and the hopeless, the contented and the wretched... like human electrons shuffling through the circuitry of civilization.

We do so easily forget how good life can be at its best – and how bad at its worst. The most outstanding occasion: barely is it over before the sweepers move in to clean up the rice. Yellowing photos remain.

And this is as should be. We are in the business of living, and the show must go on. Special moments are out-of-equilibrium experiences in which our puddles are stirred up and splashed about; yet when normalcy returns we are usually relieved. We are built for mundane functionality, not for lasting bliss.

So you allow the door that was ajar begins to close, disappearing hope's sliver behind an insensate scab.

Quick, stop that door! Look again at your yellowing photos, search for a clue. Do you not see it? Do you not feel it, the touch of the possible? You have witnessed the potential for a higher life: you hold the fading proof in your hands. Don't throw it away. In the attic of your mind, reserve a drawer for the notion of a higher state of being, and in the furnace of your heart keep at least one aspiring ember alive.

I am summoning this memory of your best experience – to what end? In the hope of kindling in you a desire to share my happiness.

And yet, what you had in your best moment is not close to what I have now – a beckoning scintilla at most. If the distance between base and apex for you is eight kilometers, then to reach my dwellings would take a million light-year ascent. The altitude is outside moon and planets and all the stars your eyes can see. Beyond dreams. Beyond imagination.

My consciousness is wide and deep, my life long. I have read all your authors – and much more. I have experienced life in many forms and from many angles: jungle and desert, gutter and palace, heath and suburban creek and city back alley. I have sailed on the high seas of cultures, and swum, and dived. Quite some marvelous edifice builds up over a million years by the efforts of homunculi, even as the humble polyps amass a reef in time. And I've seen the shoals of colored biography fishes, each one a life story, scintillate under heaving ocean waters.

The whole exceeds the sum of its parts. What I have is not merely more of what is available to you now. It isn't just the particular things, the paintings and toothpaste-tube designs, the record covers and books, the epochs, lives, leaves, rivers, and random encounters, the satellite images and the collider data – it is also the complex relationships between these particulars that make up my mind. There are ideas that can be formed only on top of such a wide experience base. There are depths that can be fathomed only with such ideas.

You could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these are words invented to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond human feelings as my thoughts are beyond human thoughts. I wish I could show you what I have in mind. If only I could share one second of my conscious life with you!

But you don't have to understand what I think and feel. If only you bear in mind what is possible within the present human realm, you will have enough to get started in the right direction, one step at a time. At no point will you encounter a wall of blinding light. At no point will you have to jettison yourself over an end-of-the-world precipice. As you advance, the horizon will recede. The transformation is profound, but it can be as gradual as the growth that made the baby you were into the adult you think you are.

You will not achieve this through any magic trick or hokum, nor by the power of wishful thinking, nor by semantic acrobatics, meditation, affirmation, or incantation. I do not presume to advise you on matters theological. I urge on you nothing more, nothing less, than reconfigured physical situation.

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The challenge before you: to become fully what you are now only in hope and potential. New capacities are needed if you wish to live and play on my level.

To reach Utopia, you must first discover the means to three fundamental transformations.

The First Transformation: Secure life!

Your body is a deathtrap. This vital machine and mortal vehicle, unless it jams first or crashes, is sure to rust anon. You are lucky to get seven decades of mobility; eight if you be fortune's darling. That is not sufficient to get started in a serious way, much less to complete the journey. Maturity of the soul takes longer. Why, even a tree-life takes longer.

Death is not one but a multitude of assassins. Do you not see them? They are coming at you from every angle. Take aim at the causes of early death – infection, violence, malnutrition, heart attack, cancer. Turn your biggest gun on

aging, and fire. You must seize the biochemical processes in your body in order to vanquish, by and by, illness and senescence. In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable media. Then continue to improve the system, so that the risk of death and disease continues to decline. Any death prior to the heat death of the universe is premature if your life is good.

Oh, it is not well to live in a self-combusting paper hut! Keep the flames at bay and be prepared with liquid nitrogen, while you construct yourself a better habitation. One day you or your children should have a secure home. Research, build, redouble your effort!

The Second Transformation: Upgrade cognition!

Your brain's special faculties: music, humor, spirituality, mathematics, eroticism, art, nurturing, narration, gossip! These are fine spirits to pour into the cup of life. Blessed you are if you have a vintage bottle of any of these. Better yet, a cask! Better yet, a vineyard!

Be not afraid to grow. The mind's cellars have no ceilings!

What other capacities are possible? Imagine a world with all the music dried up: what poverty, what loss. Give your thanks, not to the lyre, but to your ears for the music. And ask yourself, what other harmonies are there in the air, that you lack the ears to hear? What vaults of value are you witlessly debarred from, lacking the key sensibility?

Had you but an inkling, your nails would be clawing at the padlock with sacred frenzy.

Your brain must grow beyond any genius of humankind, in its special faculties as well as its general intelligence, so that you may better learn, remember, and understand, and so that you may apprehend your own beatitude.

Mind is a means: for without insight you will get bogged down or lose your way, and your journey will fail.

Mind is also an end: for it is in the spacetime of awareness that Utopia will exist. May the measure of your mind be vast and expanding.

Oh, stupidity is a loathsome corral! Gnaw and tug at the posts, and you will slowly loosen them up. One day you'll break the fence that held your forebears captive. Gnaw and tug, redouble your effort!

The Third Transformation: Elevate well-being!

What is the difference between indifference and interest, boredom and thrill, despair and bliss?

Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are worth more than a king's treasure, and we have it aplenty here in Utopia. It pervades into everything we do and everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea.

The universe is cold. Fun is the fire that melts the blocks of hardship and creates a bubbling celebration of life.

It is the birth right of every creature, a right no less sacred for having been trampled on since the beginning of time.

There is a beauty and joy here that you cannot fathom. It feels so good that if the sensation were translated into tears of gratitude, rivers would overflow. I reach in vain for words to convey to you what it all amounts to... It's like a rain of the most wonderful feeling, where every raindrop has its own unique and indescribable meaning – or rather it has a scent or essence that evokes a whole world... And each such evoked world is subtler, richer, deeper, more multidimensional than the sum total of what you have experienced in your entire life.

I will not speak of the worst pain and misery that is to be got rid of; it is too horrible to dwell upon, and you are already cognizant of the urgency of palliation. My point is that in addition to the removal of the negative, there is also an upside imperative: to enable the full flourishing of enjoyments that are currently out of reach.

The roots of suffering are planted deep in your brain. Weeding them out and replacing them with nutritious crops of well-being will require advanced skills and instruments for the cultivation of your neuronal soil. But take heed, the problem is multiplex! All emotions have a natural function. Prune carefully lest you accidentally reduce the fertility of your plot.

Sustainable yields are possible. Yet fools will build fools' paradises. I recommend you go easy on your paradise-engineering until you have the wisdom to do it right.

Oh, what a gruesome knot suffering is! Pull and tug on those loops, and you will gradually loosen them up. One day the coils will fall, and you will stretch out in delight. Pull and tug, and be patient in your effort!

May there come a time when rising suns are greeted with joy by all the living creatures they shine upon.

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How do you find this place? How long will it take to get here?

I can pass you no blueprint for Utopia, no timetable, no roadmap. All I can give you is my assurance that there is something here, the potential for a better life.

If you could visit me here for but a day, you would henceforth call this place your home. This is the place where you belong. Ever since one hairy creature picked up two flints and began knocking them together to make a tool, this has been the direction of your unknown aspiration. Like Odysseus you must journey, and never cease to journey, until you arrive upon this shore.

“Arrive?” you say; “But isn’t the journey the destination? Isn’t Utopia a place that doesn’t exist? And isn’t the quest for Utopia, as witnessed historically, a dangerous folly and an incitement to mischief?”

My friend, that is not such a bad way for you to think about it. To be sure, Utopia is not a location or a form of social organization.

The blush of health on a convalescent’s cheek. The sparkle of the eye in a moment of wit. The smile of a loving thought... Utopia is the hope that the scattered fragments of good that we come across from time to time in our lives can be put together, one day, to reveal the shape of a new kind of life. The kind of life that yours should have been.

I fear that the pursuit of Utopia will bring out the worst in you. Many a moth has been incinerated in pursuit of a brighter future.

Seek the light! But approach with care, and swerve if you smell your wingtips singeing. Light is for seeing, not dying.

When you embark on this quest, you will encounter rough seas and hard problems. To prevail will take your best science, your best technology, and your best politics. Yet each problem has a solution. My existence breaks no law of nature. The materials are all there. Your people must become master builders, and then you must use these skills to build yourselves up, without crushing your cores.

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What is Tragedy in Utopia? There is tragedy in Mr. Snowman’s melting. Mass murders, we have found, are not required.

What is Weakness in Utopia? Weakness is spending a day gazing into your beloved’s eyes.

What is Imperfection in Utopia? Imperfection is the measure of our love for things as they are.

What is Dignity in Utopia? Dignity is the affirming power of “No” said discriminately.

What is Suffering in Utopia? Suffering is the salt trace left on the cheeks of those who were around before.

What is Courage in Utopia? Courage is the monarchy of the self, here constrained by a constitution.

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What is Solemnity in Utopia? Solemnity is the appreciation of the mystery of being.

What is Body in Utopia? Body is a pair of legs, a pair of arms, a trunk and a head, all made of flesh. Or not, as the case may be.

What is Society in Utopia? Society is a never-finished tapestry, its weavers equal to its threads; the parts and patterns an inexhaustible bourne of beauty.

What is Death in Utopia? Death is the darkness that enshrouds all life, and our guilt for not having created Utopia as soon as we could have.

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We love life here every instant. Every second is so good that it would blow your mind had its amperage not been previously increased. My contemporaries and I bear witness, and we are requesting your aid. Please, help us come into existence! Please, join us! Whether this tremendous possibility becomes a reality depends on your actions. If your empathy can perceive at least the outlines of the vision I am describing, then your ingenuity will find a way to make it real.

Human life, at its best, is fantastic. I'm asking you to create something even greater. Life that is truly humane.

Yours sincerely,

Your Possible Future Self