

Letter from Utopia

(2005) Nick Bostrom

Dear Human,

May this letter find you at peace and prospering! I hope you will forgive me for writing to you out of the blue. Although we have never yet met, we are not complete strangers. We are in a certain sense related. Closely related...

I am one of your possible futures. If all goes well, you will one day become me. If that does happen, then I am not only a possible future of yours but your actual future – I am a coming phase of you.

I want to describe my life so that you can see how wonderful this possible existence is. You may then choose this future for yourself.

While I am writing this in the singular, I am really writing on behalf of my contemporaries, and we are addressing ourselves to all of your contemporaries. We are writing to you to ask you to make us real. Among our numbers are many who are possible futures of your people. Some of us are possible futures of children that you have not yet given birth to. Some of us are possible artificial persons that you may one day create. What unites us is that we are all totally dependent on you to make us real. You could think of this letter as if it were an invitation to a ball – but the ball will only actually take place if you decide to turn up.

We call the lives we lead here “Utopia”.

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How can I tell you about Utopia and not leave you mystified? What words could convey the wonder? What language could express the happiness that we have here? I fear that my pen is as unequal to this task as if I were trying to use it to kill an elephant.

Yet I will give it a try. My hope is that you will see through the inadequacies of my exposition and somehow intuit what I am trying to describe. I wish I were a better writer because there is so much at stake in this attempt at communication, for both of us.

Well, let me begin. As I look around this place, I see... But never mind what my eyes see!

Have you ever experienced a moment of surpassing bliss? Maybe on the rapids of creative work when a force greater than yourself is guiding your movements to trace out the shapes of truth and beauty? Or perhaps you have found such a moment in the ecstasy of romantic love? Or in an extraordinary success you achieved with a team of good friends? Or perhaps there was a song or a melody that managed to smuggle itself into your heart, setting it alight with kaleidoscopic emotion?

If you have experienced such a moment, experienced *the best type* of such a moment, then a certain idle (but sincere) thought may also have presented itself to you: “Oh Heaven! I never realized it could feel like this. This is on a different level, so much more real and worthwhile than anything else. Why can’t it be like this always? Why must good times end? I was sleeping and now I am awake.”

And yet look, a little later, a few hours gone by, and the softly-falling soot of ordinary life is already beginning to accumulate. The silver and gold of exuberance lose their shine. The marble becomes dirty. Everything takes on a slightly ashen appearance.

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 shirt (and the clergyman’s collar if you care to look). And once again the 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 when the street cleaning machines move in to sweep up the rice. Yellowing photos remain.

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

So you might once or twice have caught a glimpse of how good life can be, but the memory is difficult to access, perhaps you doubt that realizing such a state on a more permanent basis would be compatible with remaining functional in the world, and in any case you do not see how this could realistically be achieved. The door that was ajar begins to close; the sliver of hope disappears behind a blank surface.

Quick, put a foot in that door! Hold on to your yellowing photos and examine them more closely, for they contain a clue. Your view of what is possible has been expanded. However dim your immediate prospects may be, the fact is that you have glimpsed the possibility of life above the clouds. I ask you to preserve this realization. Set aside a little conceptual space in some corner of your mind for the possibility of a higher state of being. Make sure there is always at least one coal left alive.

I have invoked the memory of your best experience – to what end? I’m hoping to kindle in you a desire to share my happiness.

And yet, what you felt in your best moment is not similar to what I feel now. I’m pointing to it as a landmark only. It shows a direction.

If the distance between your plateau and the tallest peak you know is eight kilometers, then to reach my location you would have to continue for another million light years. It is beyond the moon and the planets and all the stars your eyes can see. It is beyond your dreams. You cannot imagine what it is like here.

My consciousness is wide and deep. I’ve read all the books that you humans had written by your time – and a good deal more. I know life from many sides and angles. I have swum in a whole spectrum of different cultures, more numerous than the words in your dictionary. Quite a bit of culture builds up over a million years (even as the humble polyps amass a reef given enough time). Well, all this information I have incorporated into my mind, and much, much more. Each etching, each record-cover, each toothpaste tube design – they are all lodged in my memory banks, and my appreciation of each object is as intimate as the appreciation that the most sensitive connoisseur has of her favorite artifact.

The whole is more than the sum of its parts. It’s not just the particular things, the paintings, books, epochs, lives, leafs, rivers, the random encounters, the satellite images and the particle collider data – it is also the complex interrelationships between these particulars that make up my mind. There are general ideas that can be formed only on top

of such a wide experience base. There are depths that can only be fathomed with such general ideas.

My experience is clear and intense. I don't conceive of this the way you would if you could somehow cram it all into your mind. My mind is shaped by what it has assimilated. I don't just think about deep truths; my thoughts themselves are deep.

You could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these words are used to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond ordinary 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 that is impossible. Your container could not hold even a small splash of my joy, it is that great.

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 should have enough of an idea 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. Although the transformation you will undergo is profound, it can be as gradual as the growth that transformed the baby you once were into the adult you are.

This is not a religious vision. I do not presume to advise you in religious matters. The game that I am talking about is the one that is played out in the material world, with pieces of metal, glass, and silicon; muscle, skin, and nerve. What I am urging on you is nothing more and nothing less than a new situation in this material world. Of course, you cannot effect this kind of change by the power of wishful thinking or by any simple change of mindset, nor by mental acrobatics, yoga, meditation, affirmation, magical incantation, nor yet by democratization alone. Many of the key pieces on the board are not moved by those means.

Fundamentally, the challenge before you is one of self-transformation. You need to grow up. This is not only about technology, but technology is necessary to achieve the deep changes that will enable you to participate in new ways of life. If you want to live and play on my level, you will need to acquire new capacities. To get to Utopia, and to experience firsthand what life is like here, you will need to discover the means to achieve three radical transformations.

Transformation one: Extend your healthy lifespan.

Your biological body, in its current form, will not take you far. It wears out too soon. Eighty years is not enough even to get started in a serious way, much less to complete the journey. Genuine maturity of the soul takes more than eighty vigorous years to develop. Why, even a tree-life takes more time to complete.

Take on the causes of early death – infection, violence, malnourishment, heart disease, cancer. Take on the deterioration your body undergoes as you age: find ways to reduce the rate of aging, or to reverse the negative effects of aging via rejuvenation therapy. Develop control over the biochemical processes in your body in order to eliminate, more and more, illness and senescence. In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable mediums by augmenting your nervous system with hardware and by migrating into computers. Improve the system over time, so that the risk of death and disease continues to decline. Asymptotically zero involuntary mortality over cosmological timescales is your ultimate aim. Any death prior to the heat death of the universe is premature if your life is good.

Oh, aging is a cruel cage. Gnaw and pull at the bars, and you will slowly loosen them up. One day you will break the grid that kept your forebears imprisoned. Gnaw and pull, redouble your efforts!

Transformation two: Boost your cognitive capacities.

You have many special mental faculties: humor, spirituality, eroticism, music, mathematics, aesthetics, nurturing, gossip and narration. Aren't these the capacities and sensibilities that give life much of its meaning? Blessed you are if you possess several of these capacities to any significant degree; but their higher-order manifestations are even better. These rooms have no ceilings. Be not afraid to grow.

But what other capacities are possible beyond those that you currently have? Imagine the poverty of a world without music. What other harmonies are there that you lack the ears to hear? What riches are you foregoing because you lack the specific sensibilities required to unlock those vaults of value? What a pity to go through life in mental squalor because you are deaf, dumb, and blind to the infinite wealth of meaning that you would discover or invent if only you had the needed capacities. There is always music in the air, but without a suitable receptacle the waves are imperceptible and travel in vain.

Your capacities and sensibilities need to be enhanced, beyond the level of any genius of your kind. You will also want to develop new faculties and acquire more general-purpose

intelligence so that you can learn, remember, and understand better. Sagacity is a means: you need understanding to find your way around the obstacles you will encounter on your journey. But it is also part of the 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 pull at the poles, and you will slowly loosen them up. One day you will break the fence that held your forebears captive. Gnaw and pull, redouble your efforts!

Transformation three: Elevate your emotional well-being.

What is the difference between indifference and interest, boredom and thrill, despair and euphoria? 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 infuses 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. It creates a bubbling celebration of life! Joy is the birth right of every creature.

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 wish I could elaborate but language abandons me. I grope in vain for words to convey to you what all this 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 deeper, richer, subtler, 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 aware of the ethical urgency of palliation. My point is that in addition to removing the negative, there is also an upside imperative: to enable the full flourishing of enjoyments that are not currently realizable.

The roots of suffering are set deep in your brain. Weeding them out and replacing them with sustainable nutritious crops of well-being will require sophisticated methods and tools for the cultivation of your neuropsychological soil. But the problem is multiplex. All emotions (including hate, contempt, jealousy, and sadness) have a natural function. Take heed when you trim your feelings lest you accidentally reduce the fertility of your

plot. Fortunately this is not a necessary consequence. Yet fools will build fool's paradises. I recommend you go easy on your paradise-engineering until you have the wisdom to do it right.

It is worth getting 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 efforts!

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

How do you find this place? How long will it take to get here? I am not able to pass you a 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. There is a shore and a land, such that 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. I have been trying to indicate the direction in which you have to go. Like Odysseus you must journey and never cease to journey until you arrive upon this shore.

“Arrive?” you might now be saying; “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, just a dangerous folly and an incitement to mischief?”

My friend, that is not a bad way for you to think about it. Utopia is not a place or a particular form of social organization.

The blush of health on a convalescent's cheek. The sparkling 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 ours should have been. Vitality, understanding, and pleasure are among its essential aspects.

I am concerned that the pursuit of utopia could bring out the worst in you. Please take my message in the right spirit. Many a moth has been incinerated in pursuit of a brighter future. Seek the light! But approach with care, and change course if you smell your wingtips burning. Light is for seeing, not dying.

When you take up the quest you will need a cool head. A difficult set of problems will confront you. To solve them will take your best science, your best technology, and your best politics. Yet for each of the problems, there *is* a solution. The laws of nature permit a life like mine to exist. The building materials are all there. Your people must master the skills to use these physical elements to build yourselves up and to set the human spirit free.

Do not accept that it is good for you and your friends to get sick and die in a cage. Do not assume that it's a blessing to be confined forever behind the fences of stupidity. Do not believe that there is nothing worth experiencing outside your current psychic limitations.

Ever since one hairy creature picked up two flint stones and began knocking them together to make a tool, your ancestors have been rattling those bars, and they are getting looser all the time. The day of the breakthrough is drawing nearer.

And when finally the bars break, go out and deal with the problems of a free life! What sadder image of humanity's future could there be than that of a liberated beast that continues to pace the confines of its former cage?

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We love life here every second. Every second of life is so good that it would knock you unconscious if your mind had not been strengthened beforehand. My contemporaries and I bear witness, and we are asking for your help. Help us come into existence! 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