

For Humankind

Keynote Remarks at the Inauguration of the Joint Academy on Future Humanity

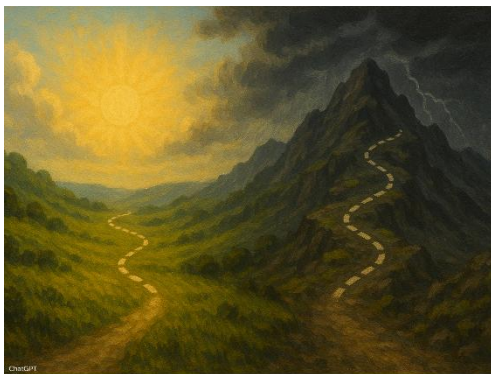
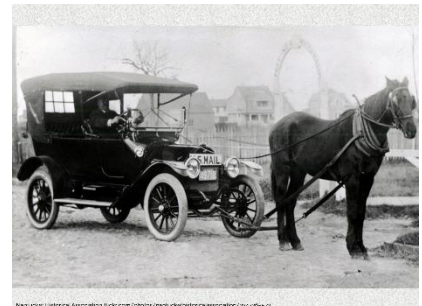
Bryant Walker Smith



“The Jetsons” is a famous American children’s cartoon show from the 1960s about life in the 2060s. It imagines a time when humans live all over the cosmos and rely on flying cars to travel around their little space towns. Yet the human characters still need to manually drive these flying cars; they still have steering wheels! And all of the pernicious sexism of the 1960s is still on full display—including misogynistic jokes about the supposed ineptitude of “lady drivers.”

The fallacy of the Jetsons lies in projecting merely a few aspects of human existence far into the future while assuming that everything else remains frozen in time—not just other technologies but also human conditions, systems, and values. In reality, however, everything can change.

We make a similar mistake when we look backward at the past and proclaim simplistically that, for example, “cars replaced horses.” That’s true—to a point. But, at least in the United States, cars also replaced walking, bicycling, and taking trains and trolleys—and thereby fundamentally altered, for better or worse, how society organizes itself.



The story of humanity is a story of change—not just through biological evolution but through deliberate experimentation, innovation, and education. This means that studying the future of our species is not merely a predictive exercise of guessing what might happen by chance or by cruelty. It is also a prescriptive exercise of forging new paths, calling out to our contemporaries to follow us, and leaving markers for our successors so that they may learn from our successes and failures.

This requires humility, for in truth many of our successes and failures are still unknown. To the extent that cars did replace horses, they were initially celebrated as environmentally friendly. Cars, after all, don't poop. Except that they do. After a century of horrific smog and lead poisoning, here's a striking statistic: A horse dumps about ten kilograms of manure a day, and a car dumps about ten kilograms of carbon dioxide a day.

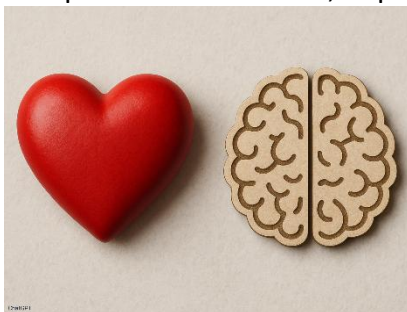
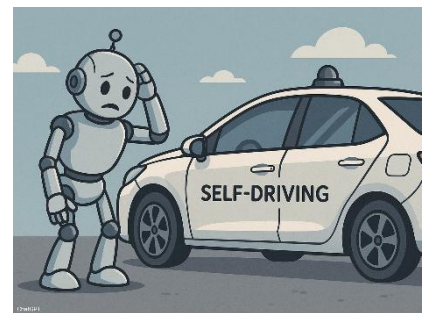


$$\Sigma_{\text{new problems}} < \Sigma_{\text{old problems}} ?$$

新问题之和 < 旧问题之和?

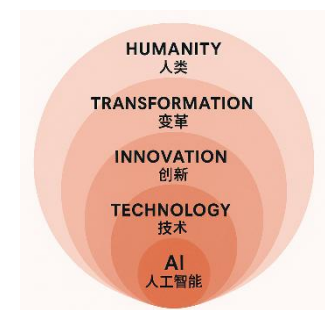
And so the story of humanity is also about replacing an old set of problems with a new set of problems and hoping that, in aggregate, our new problems are less bad than our old problems. Humanity's story then continues—as long as we have the time and talent to replace our new problems with even newer problems.

In current debates about artificial intelligence, we vacillate between describing humans and technologies as the bigger problem. On one hand, we hope that automated vehicles will replace human drivers who are drunk, distracted, drowsy, or otherwise dangerous—and we thereby diminish some of the wonders of our human brains. On the other hand, we fear that generative AI will be a biased, unpredictable, and uncontrollable creation—and we thereby overlook the fact that we humans are the quintessential biased, unpredictable, and uncontrollable creation.



Artificial intelligence may eventually take over our cars, factories, and offices—but it must not take over our hearts and our minds. AI requires us to think more, not less, about humankind: where we excel, and where we struggle; what we should do, and what we should not; who we are, and who we want to be.

That is why I applaud Rénmín University and Westlake University for launching this Joint Academy on Future Humanity. At a time when the world is focused on AI, the Joint Academy reminds us that AI is part of technology, technology is part of innovation, innovation is part of transformation, and transformation is part of the human story.



Origins, Life Extensions, and Future States of Humankind. Digital, Mind and Self-Twinning, Science and Art, Existential Risks and Future Security, Societal Transformation and Digital Governance, Value Revaluation and Philosophical Transformation, Global Cooperation and Smart Co-Governance, Multi-Agent Decision Making and Complex Conflicts, Space Exploration and Interstellar Civilization, Civilizational Conflict and Coexistence.

人类的起源演化、生命健康与未来形态。数字心智与自我孪生。科学与艺术。存在性风险与未来安全。社会变革与数字治理。价值体系与哲学转型。全球合作与智能共治。多主体决策与复杂冲突。太空探索与星际文明。文明冲突与共生机制。

Thanks to the creativity of students around the world, the Joint Academy has now identified ten key research topics. When I first reviewed the draft topics, I was struck by the breadth and depth of insight evident in them. They challenge our assumptions, our expectations, and our aspirations. They challenge even the English language.

To wit, I see at least four key conceptions of humanity underlying these ten topics:

The first is the *human*: In the future, how will human beings be different? Will we even be able to distinguish among discrete humans—or will temporal, physical, and epistemic boundaries between individuals become blurry?

个体 Human
人外 Nonhuman
众类 Humankind
人心 Humanity

The second is the arguably *nonhuman*: How will humans relate to and interact with AI, animals, and even extraterrestrials? Will humans even be distinct? If so, whom will we include in our moral community? Or will we humans actually fall from the apex and become “the other”?

The third is *humankind*: How will human society be different? How will the meaning and importance of our social circles—family, friends, neighbors—change? How will we govern ourselves and our creations? How will we balance humankind’s present with humankind’s future?

The fourth is *humanity*: What, if anything, will still be special about us as humans? How will our values change—and how will they remain the same? What will it mean to lead a “good” or “eudaimonic” life? How will we find and express and challenge ourselves through art and language and love?



How marvelous that Rénmín University’s very name encapsulates this spectrum—from the person to the people. I am honored to be at the People’s University of China. May it be of the people, and may it live up to its motto of seeking truth from facts.

This seeking, this search, must never end. I phrased my earlier conceptual questions predictively: For example, how *will* we be different? As we say in English, “it is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future,” and so it is that current predictions must invariably give way to future facts. But my questions could also be normative: For example, how *should* we be different? And here we must, with both courage and humility, continually challenge the past, the present, and the future.

Rénmín's equal partner in the Joint Academy, Westlake University, exemplifies this pioneering spirit. Westlake was founded on a promise of possibility. At both universities, that promise is realized not only in their laboratories but also in their classrooms, through their researchers and their teachers as well as through their graduates and their students.



I see this same promise in the Joint Academy. It is interdisciplinary, as of course it must be. It is also intergenerational—from preeminent professors to aspiring students. This bears repeating: Much of the inspiration for the Joint Academy's ten inaugural topics comes from young people.



Personally, I've felt time really accelerate over the last few years: The clock just keeps going ever faster. Last week, a Rénmín graduate told me that I'm "so much older" than I used to be, which—by the way—is very much *not* a compliment in my country. But, in all honesty, she might be right. At this point my students are clearly in a new generation that is not my own. They are humanity's future.

That is why I am especially honored to share this stage today with the four students whose talks will immediately follow mine. This is not my first CCTV appearance; if it were, I would say "Hi Mom and Dad!" But even if this is a debut for our student colleagues, they are still ahead of me by many years. I am excited to hear their thoughts today, and I am excited to see their contributions tomorrow.



My home institution is the University of South Carolina. A fun fact: South Carolina is not the same as Southern California.

Another fun fact: Our state motto is "Dum spiro spero"—"While I breathe, I hope." This is a motto full of optimism and determination. And yet it also speaks to our own mortality—"While I breathe." I don't know the future of humanity—you students are going to solve all that—but perhaps we can dream even bigger. Perhaps someday we will omit the "While I breathe" and simply declare, "I hope."

