

Do we need a global brain?

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Currently, there is an exciting vision of the Internet of things – a network of interconnected devices recording facts and extracting knowledge, a sort of a global brain. Modern technology, especially the increasing capacity of hard disks and the rising throughput of communication channels makes it possible to store and distribute enormous amounts of data. Swarms of sensors can scrutinise the disappearing glaciers and rain forests. In e-Health, intelligent wearable and implantable devices monitor the function of our bodies and alarm the hospital via cellular phone in case of a stroke. Ambient assisted living systems provide a caring environment for elderly people. Soon, we will be surrounded by a host of invisible helpers, knowing everything about us and making decisions in our name.

Typically, the issue of oppressive governments is raised in this context. We should not forget that a democratic government may turn into a dictatorship (what happened in some otherwise civilised countries), so we should be cautious when providing the infrastructure for a total control. We should neither forget the Milgram experiment that showed that giving power over other people is dangerous in any case.

But there is another problem. We are giving control over our lives to automatic systems. Already now we live in a symbiosis with power plants and networked computer systems. If they break down we will die out. But even if working, they may take wrong decisions. Recently, “something” in my bank system decided not to let my bank card into some ATMs. I could still contact human tellers, I have a cash reserve. But one day it may not work anymore.

The decisions of a computer assisted society may be also questionable. A prenatal genetic test may be obligatory and a cost-optimizing decision may be strongly suggested in case of a risk of a hereditary disease. Omniscient systems may assist us in accomplishing a healthy lifestyle and penalise our bad habits. Not everybody is ready to accept it, but such changes are occurring in small steps. We may not notice when it will be too late.

On the positive side, the way is open for the experimental sociology and psychology. If we have all the data about the human behaviour, including the daily movement patterns, water usage for shower and toilet, blood pressure and cholesterol level, shopping list and visited Web pages, we can know so much more about our fellow humans. Of course, it works only if “we” are noble researchers.

Such total knowledge about us and about our environment is useful in order to take scientifically sound decisions. Sometimes reason may give better advice than emotions. However, science can show us the practical consequences of our decisions, but it has not much to say about morality, and normative ethics is culturally dependent.

This evolution could lead to an implementation of Plato’s rule of the philosophers, now incarnated as computer supported experts, but do we want it??