

# Endless Invention—Panacea or Peril?

**O**UR CIVILIZATION'S A BIT ONE-SIDED. It chooses almost always to invent external devices for doing things. It almost never uses those same needs-to-do-things as occasions for evolving human skills and awareness. Let's call that tendency "externalism." We are "externalizing" almost every human ability. Handwriting, for instance, is replaced by typing. Typing is replaced by speech recognition software. As computers voice more text, perhaps reading itself will fade. Our polar opposites would be "internalists." Such people would employ relatively simple external tools to develop very high levels of human skill and awareness. Their attitude would be, gosh, don't invent a gizmo for doing that. Such a gizmo would take away all the health and strength and growth we get out of doing it ourselves. Our skills bring meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

As externalists, when the horseless carriage comes along, we clap our hands and say, cars!--wow, cool, it's inevitable! So long, walking! We'll go twenty times as fast, with no effort at all! Internalists, on the other hand, would be very suspicious. Without walking, they would ask, what happens to the strength of our hearts and legs? Or, how would we visit with people and trees and the river on our way to work?

Bottom line--when faced with dirty dishes, externalists will discover electricity and invent the dishwasher.



Internalists will hold seminars on efficient, artful ways to scrape and stack, and turn the act of washing into a kind of meditation. They'll evolve something like the "Japanese rinsing ceremony."

Notice where the creativity tends to reside in these two different ways. With externalists, a few people, usually male, have inventive epiphanies. But the results of these few eureka moments are then imposed on everyone else, for better yes--but also for worse. How creative is commuting in stop and go traffic? Is time saved and used for some better purpose, or is it just absorbed in the need to drive ever longer distances? Is choosing to walk any longer even possible?

For internalists, alternatively, the emphasis is on developing, around simple tools, systems of human skills that can be taught and evolved over generations. Everyone who practices these is enriched by them. As skills pass from older to younger, many many people contribute to them. Whole communities might be designed, in this culture, just so that people could always walk to work. Typewriting might exist, but handwriting would be prized above it.

But hold on, you say. Those internalists will likely remain utter primitives! They will never invent even the wheel, much less go to the moon, or build a computer! Still slaving in hardscrabble gardens, chopping at tree roots with stone axes--how can you say that's better?

Well--I'm not saying it's better. It's an extreme. It's somewhat unreal, and has very definite problems. It's good you see them so clearly. But I wonder if you perceive the other side of the coin. If internalism is an unworkable extreme, then so is externalism as practiced in our post-modern world. The out and out rush to create external devices to do for us, including as it now does such activities as build for us, think for us, fight for us, and soon reproduce for us--this rush creates a world in which we have fewer and fewer roles to play. How healthy, challenging, or enriching is a life consisting mostly of sitting, eating, driving, viewing, and pushing little buttons? True, we still do some of the thinking. But for how long?

Is this profound erosion of the human skill base really inevitable? Or is some sort of balanced approach also a choice? Decades ago, it became possible to manufacture nylon stockings that would never run, and kitchen sponges that would not wear out in a few weeks. But these don't exist, because someone chose not to produce them. Apparently, then, choosing to forgo certain kinds of progress is not completely impossible. Corporations say "no" to progress all the time, whenever profits are at stake. Perhaps people can too, when lives are at stake.

In the East, over several centuries, amazingly effective systems of self-defense evolved employing very minimal external tools--such as hands and feet alone, or sword, or bow and arrow. Advancement in these "martial arts" was often accompanied by profound spiritual growth. Since the real struggle was with oneself and one's worldview--an adept learned far more than just how to "fight."

In the West, on the other hand, a very small number of creative men had their inventive epiphanies--creating muskets, then repeating rifles, then Uzi's, and so on. Each step in this direction, though highly creative for one person, put greater abilities to kill into the hands of people with less and less skill, wisdom, or even physical maturity. This is not to say that people cannot become highly skilled at shooting--because they can. Rather, the point is, terrible damage can be done without any skill at all, which is not true of the simpler tools.

In the Eastern way, an archer can achieve such egoless unity with his surroundings as to put an arrow through a distant target he cannot even see. In the West, a neurotic eleven-year old can gun down thirty classmates in as many seconds. Which of these beings should a society try to produce? ▲