

Novelty

Our desire for novelty is far from a novel trait. Humans' quest to experience things that are unheard of is as old as time, and so is the peril that comes with it. While it is irrefutable that our innate curiosity has catalysed a splendid array of astounding achievements from those in our ordinary life to the feats in the entire history of the sapient species, novelty can, and have, spawned a number of crises that doesn't merely cause inconvenience in our daily routine, but threaten our very existence. With the hints and clues dropped by authors of well-known literature, we will behold how our many fears and worries sometimes all boil down to one word—novelty.

Advancement or findings in psychological science empower us to probe into the eccentric and dynamic universe encased in our cranium. Instead of oversimplifying our psyche as the ambiguous term 'soul', we are now presented with a much firmer grasp of how the hundreds of billions of neurons convolute with one another in a labyrinth pattern, and how a tiny electronic signal zips across your brain at near light speed, just to bring you the a sense of happiness, hatred, love, envy, etc. We now understand why we are more intelligent than the other inhabitants of the blue planet, and more importantly, how we can be cleverer still.

Lamentably, as a Nobel Laureate in Economic Science, Daniel Kahneman, illustrates in his best-seller "Thinking, Fast and Slow", significant discoveries in social science are often exploited for monetary gain. Go no further than the supermarket nearest to your house, and you will see, first-handed, how our minds are tweaked. Everyone is well aware that a supermarket is laden with a plethora of 'mental traps', yet seldom are we aware how subtly potent they can be. For instance, Prof Kahneman coined the term "Anchoring Effect" to elaborate how "anchors", deliberately inserted by brand owners, cloud our judgement. Admit it, when you notice a medium bag of chips sold at \$9 (the "anchor"), and a jumbo one at \$9.5, you more often than not jump to the conclusion that the latter is a bargain—this is the anchoring effect at work.

In fact, the psychology as we know it today is an innovation itself. The modernisation of psychological experiments and researches only began in the mid-1800s, which is a mere flash vis-à-vis other branches of science. Yet, no sooner has the mesmerising wonder of our mind been unmasked than all those income-hungry entrepreneurs seek to take advantage of our mental loopholes. An innovative study intended to help us better comprehend ourselves now backfires to render us even more irrational, unwise and imprudent—this is novelty, corrupted.

A modern science misused may merely arouse our inner shopaholic, but a new idea misplaced in the wrong mind will do much more than that. Each external idea is no different from an egg. Driven by curiosity, we hatch it without knowing whether the creature that pokes out is an adorable chick or a formidable T. Rex. Promethean ideas may harm our minds instead of inspiring it.

"The Picture of Dorian Gray", by Oscar Wilde, exactly revolves around this fear. Being a melancholic and somewhat creepy account of how a green, innocent mind is gradually tinted with various twisted values, the whole plot radiates an infectious evilness through every chapter, every sentence and every word. The young, timid protagonist, Dorian Gray, befriends the innately wicked character, Lord Henry, and soon opens the floodgates to unscrupulousness and immorality. "The

only way get rid of a temptation is to yield to it”, this is but one of the numerous elegantly-phased poison that Lord Henry inculcated into Gray’s susceptible mind. In the end, not only does Gray murder his closest companion, Basil Hallward, he even seeks to put his conscience, however little there remains, to death.

Unusual ideas possess an irresistible allure particularly to adolescents, when their curiosity is budding rapidly but their vigilance and discerning ability not along with it. Weed, sex, beer, how wonderful they had all seemed when they first made themselves known! Perhaps the ultimate paradox of human nature is: we are as unnerved by novelty as we are attracted to it.

At its worst, an idea may adversely affect not merely an individual, but a society as a whole. Most of the time, our skepticism and resistance to a current trend rest on shaky grounds. The preaching of Jesus Christ had initially appeared to the ancient Roman authorities as heresy, yet it is now accepted by two and a half billion people; when Nicolaus Copernicus first proposed heliocentrism in “De revolutionibus”, the hypothesis was also, ironically enough, rejected by the Christian church. However, in some cases, taking a wide-spread and unconventional idea with a pinch of salt may still have its worth. For we will never find out how exactly it will impact on our society until it has made the blow.

One of the most acclaimed political sarcasms, “Animal Farm”, addresses the crux of the above issue. Most, if not all, are acquainted with the plot: A human-owned farm turns communist due to an animal rebellion, with the four-legged residents soon become disillusioned about president comrade Napoleon’s ‘all-animals-are-equal’ way of ruling. Isn’t it the unheard-of concept of communism that drags the animals into a cul-de-sac of endless suffering? Granted, the whole novella is built upon a hypothetical world, and the menace of the USSR’s style of ‘communism’ is all but gone, yet it is not time we let our guards down.

A more straightforward and practical examination of how unfamiliarity influences us collectively is the non-fiction, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. His renowned and nerve-racking warning “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” serves to remind us that, under the irreversible force of globalisation, an influx of alien foreign ideas can just be as deadly as a foreign intercontinental ballistic missile. Born and raised in Hong Kong, an international city that prides itself on its cultural diversity, I witness clashes of civilisations in a micro-scale almost every day. When my classmates fancy a meal, McDonald’s pops up in their heads, while all the traditional eateries that the older generation holds dear lie dying at unnoticed corners of the streets. Moreover, our customary festivals such as the Ghost Festival are gradually fading out, which forms an ironic contrast with foreign celebrations like Halloween, when most citizens indulge themselves in a very foreign bacchanalia. Eating habits and festivals that were unbeknown to us half a century ago is now dominating our day-to-day life, to the extent it starts to displace our original ones. Not that I am a cultural bigot, but it terrifies me every time I envisage the day when the traditions and customs of my home city, which has been etched in our DNA since some 5000 years ago, forever fade out of existence. Cultural invasion is a living example of the detrimental effect of novelty on a society.

An idea, no matter how sinful, is rather abstract and perhaps unreal. Yet a concept materialised, that is, an invention, is something totally different. Every invention is a gamble between the betterment of human race and the destruction of it. Fortunately for us, up to now no artificial objects have inflicted major damage to human, though a number of them, from nukes to the Internet(no kidding!)

certainly have the potential to do so. Despite this, our fear of being wiped out by our own brainchildren never wane, and only manifest themselves more frequently and intensely in fictional works.

Arguably no other sci-fi pieces so far have defeated Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" in terms of how they have pushed our dread for novel things to the very peak. Frankenstein is first struck by the belief that "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world." He then pores over anatomy painstakingly for two years, and ends up breathing the fire of life to a "wretched, miserable monster". The malicious creature eventually puts an end to the life of everyone Frankenstein cares, either directly or indirectly. The book's less popular name, "The Modern Prometheus", demonstrates just how reckless we may be when it comes to our inventions. Times after times, we do the job of Prometheus, from cloning endangered species to altering our landscapes, without realising the fact that we aren't, and will never be Prometheus. Our livers do not regenerate at a neck-breaking speed, and in case our inventions backfire, no Hercules will come and lift us from torment.

Tick, tick, tick, and the Doomsday Clock goes on, now a mere three minutes before the apocalypse. It was born amid an overwhelming fear of the then lethal and revolutionary weapon—atomic bombs, and has now evolved into an indicator which includes the newly-arisen challenge of climate change and every modern technology that may annihilate us. It reflects, naked, our primal fright for unfamiliarity. Albert Einstein captures the essence of this phenomenon in saying that, "It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity." As human's intellect starts to outgrow our cautiousness and conscience, so will the threat of novelty outstrip its worth.

Abundant examples have been listed to emphasise the potential hazard of novelty, but by no means are they here to discourage innovation. On the contrary, it is all those Promethean ideas, courageous trials and creative inventions that lay the foundation of our unprecedented prosperity. Knives are indispensable yet capable of great harm, so we are prudent enough to keep it out of children's reach. Then, a fortiori, we should be equally wise in realising that a catastrophe will likely erupt should our intelligence and creativity be misused. I, more than anyone else, yearn to see we continue to flourish and shine, battling in the frontier between knowledge and ignorance. Nonetheless, if one day the novelty we created is to turn against us, then, after all, it might have been better if we had continued our humble existence as those dull and unambitious cavemen.