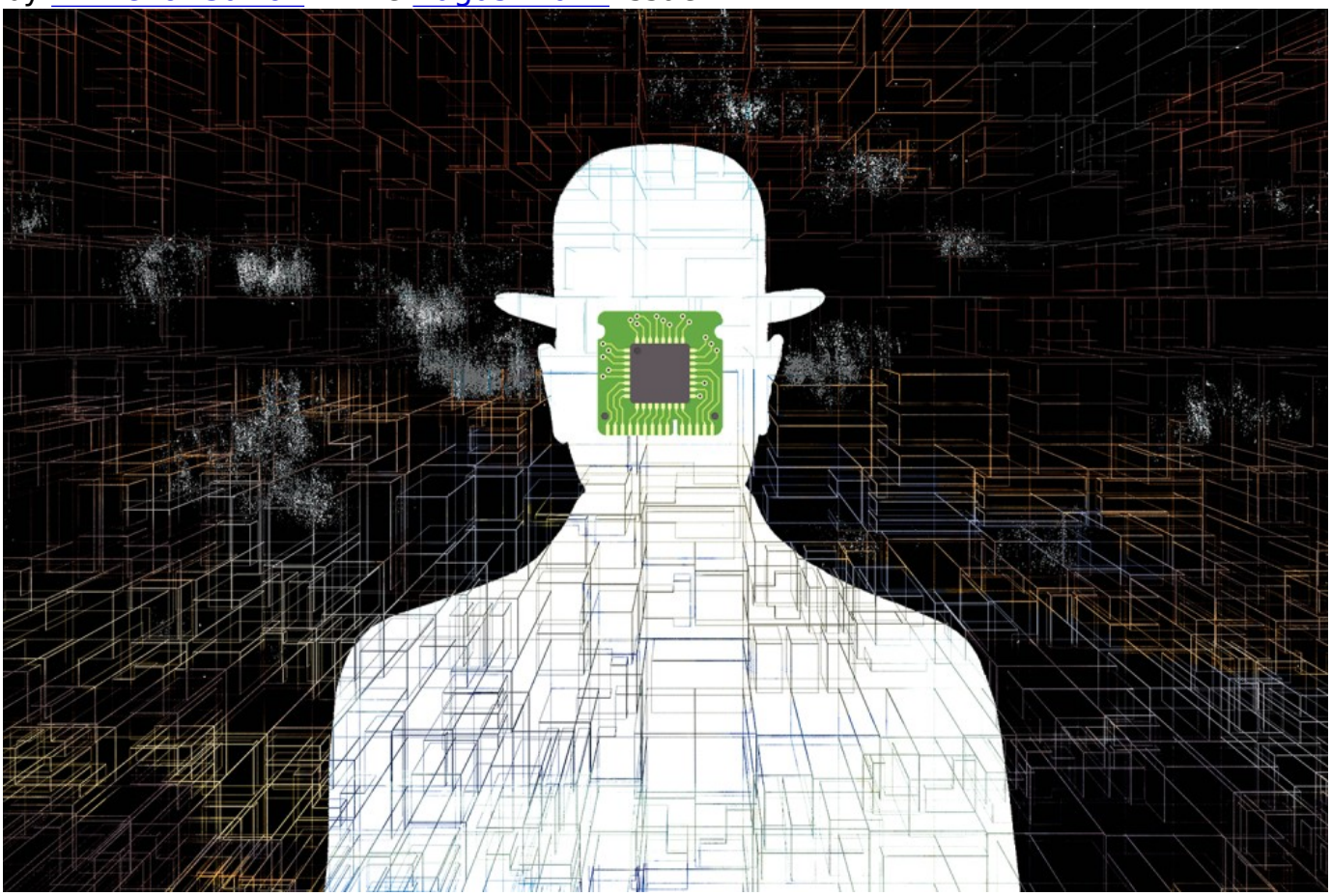
Can we build our own future?

Elon Musk’s techno-optimism needs something to temper it. Maybe the dimmer outlook of a companion named Hobbes.

by A. Trevor Sutton in the August 2024 issue



(Century illustration)

In 1995, with the help of his brother and a friend, the young inventor Elon Musk started his first tech company, Zip2 Corp., in Palo Alto, California. The company offered searchable business directories and maps to online newspaper subscribers. While a business directory may seem inauspicious for the Elon Musk we know today, the eventual sale of Zip2 Corp. made way for more ambitious inventions. When Compaq Computer bought the company in 1999, Musk netted $22 million in

proceeds. This initial capital helped Musk to become the richest inventor of our day. Musk's spacecraft company, SpaceX, is working to make humans into an interplanetary species. If life on earth becomes uninhabitable, Musk's machines could take people back in time to an unblemished planet.

Perhaps even more remarkable, another one of Musk's companies, Neuralink, is working to turn the human brain into a supercomputer. The company recently implanted its first human subject with a microchip that enables direct brain-computer interface by gathering signals from neurons and sending the data to a computer that processes it in real time. The subject, a 29-year-old quadriplegic, can move the cursor on a computer screen using only his brain. While Neuralink isn't the first to develop this kind of neural implant, the company is also working on reversing the process to allow a computer to transmit information directly into the brain. According to Musk, Neuralink's implants will allow for human symbiosis with artificial intelligence.

The same year that Musk founded Zip2 Corp., one of America's most beloved daily comic strips published its last strip. Cartoonist Bill Watterson put a tempestuous child named Calvin in conversation with a mild-mannered stuffed tiger named Hobbes. *Calvin and Hobbes* thrives on the tension between its two main characters. Whenever Calvin comes up with a wild idea to build a time machine or a transmogrifier, Hobbes expresses concern about the consequences of the invention. When Calvin's imagination and intelligence outpace his restraint, Hobbes's dim view of human nature leads him to utter a warning of some sort.

Musk's neural implants are a far cry from Calvin's transmogrifier, but they will transform the human brain and body in significant ways. Given the potential consequences of this technology, we may wish that Musk had an interlocutor like the tiger Hobbes, someone to temper his wildest impulses.

In fact, philosopher Thomas Hobbes would serve as a helpful counterbalance for Musk. By putting the two in conversation with one another, we can better understand Musk's technological aspirations and their implications. While Musk dreams up technological innovation that will propel humanity into a better and brighter future, Hobbes argued that the only thing keeping humans from the anxious state of perpetual war was a delicate social contract. Musk wants to concentrate power in tech companies; Hobbes wanted power concentrated in the hands of a

sovereign.

But despite their radically different outlooks, Musk and Hobbes also share plenty of similarities. For one thing, both were born on the verge of civil war.

Musk was born in 1971 in Pretoria, South Africa. The nearly two decades that he lived there involved constant strife. Nelson Mandela was in prison, and the Soweto riots in the summer of 1976 resulted in thousands of Black South Africans being killed or injured. Just days before Musk celebrated his fifth birthday, a five-year-old girl named Monica Makundayi was shot dead near Cape Town in the melee around the uprisings. Apartheid policies had South Africa ever on the brink of civil war.

According to biographer Walter Isaacson, a tumultuous childhood left an indelible mark on Musk as he experienced bullying at school, verbal abuse at home, and a traumatizing experience at a youth survival camp. The siege mentality of his childhood continues to animate him and his work. Musk told Isaacson, “Fighting to survive keeps you going for quite a while. When you are no longer in a survive-or-die mode, it’s not that easy to get motivated every day.”

Hobbes too was born amid strife and civil war. In his autobiography, composed in verse, Hobbes writes:

> For Fame had rumour’d, that a Fleet at Sea,
> Wou’d cause our Nations Catastrophe;
> And hereupon it was my Mother Dear
> Did bring forth Twins at once, both Me, and Fear.

In this telling, the approach of the Spanish Armada in 1588 prompted Hobbes to have a timorous disposition. However, it was the English Civil War (1642–1651) that brought fear and survival to full gestation within him. Fear of civil unrest and a survive-or-die world influenced Hobbes’s bleak outlook on humanity. Strife and war also motivated him to write *Leviathan* (1651) as a blueprint for preserving life and order. Like Musk, Hobbes came into an unstable world and was wired to see things in terms of survival and self-preservation.

Further, Musk and Hobbes can both be described as square pegs ill fitted for the round holes of society. Musk routinely makes headlines for odd behavior that defies that of the typical CEO. In 2018, he smoked marijuana during a video interview with

Joe Rogan. He regularly sleeps under desks at his factories and has delayed company meetings in order to finish playing a video game. The eccentric entrepreneur has even recorded his own dance track called “Don’t Doubt Ur Vibe.” (The song has more than 6 million plays on Spotify.)

The world was not sure what to make of Hobbes, either. King Charles II described him as “the oddest fellow he’d ever met,” writes Anthony Gottleib in *The Dream of Enlightenment*. And Voltaire deemed Hobbes to be both profound and bizarre. Like Musk, Hobbes tried his hand at singing. Hobbes, however, sang songs in bed, under the peculiar notion that it would prolong his life. (He ended up living to age 91, so maybe he was on to something.) He was also known for drawing triangles on his bedsheets as an homage to geometry, which he loved.

Even more importantly, Musk and Hobbes hold similar views of the human body: they both see it as a machine. Neuralink is attempting to install computer chips into human brains, thereby treating the body like a machine and the brain like a computer. Musk’s efforts in the realm of neuroprosthesis assume that the human body is a machine in need of occasional updates to keep pace with other technological developments.

Calvin’s time machines were cute because they were impossible. Musk’s neural implants are unsettling because they are imminent.

While we can’t say what Hobbes would think about neural implants, they appear to be congenial with a Hobbesian view of the human body. In *Leviathan*, he describes humans in machinelike terms: “For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels.” Hobbes understood the human body as a very intricate machine capable of responding to external stimuli. Given this anthropology, it is hard to fathom Hobbes objecting on principle to brain implantation.

Deeper yet, both Musk and Hobbes fear a destructive penchant within humanity. Hobbes thought that without a social contract and a sovereign, humanity would be caught in endless violence and warfare. Without intervention, life will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” This is because “in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory.” Humans will do unthinkable things in the name of self-preservation, Hobbes believed, and this quarrelsome streak could lead to a war of all against all.

Musk also fears human self-destruction. According to Bill Gates, Musk's desire to make humans into an interplanetary species drives his work with SpaceX. Gates told Isaacson, "He's overboard on Mars. I let him explain his Mars thinking to me, which is kind of bizarre thinking. It's this crazy thing where maybe there's a nuclear war on Earth and so the people on Mars are there and they'll come back down and, you know, be alive after we all kill each other." If a war of all against all broke out on earth, human Martians could wait it out and eventually return to earth.

Fear of destruction also drives Musk's work with Neuralink. He has repeatedly warned that artificial intelligence poses a threat to humanity, even calling it "our biggest existential threat." Evoking religious imagery, Musk has said, "With artificial intelligence, we are summoning the demon. In all those stories where there's the guy with the pentagram and the holy water, it's like yeah he's sure he can control the demon. Didn't work out." Musk fears that artificial intelligence may someday make humans extinct or devoid of purpose. He hopes that neural implants can help human brains stay one step ahead of this so-called demon.

Both Musk and Hobbes are driven by the conviction that humanity poses a hazard to itself. Hobbes feared the war of all against all, while Musk fears a future in which nuclear war, artificial intelligence, or climate change wage war against humanity.

Hobbes was pessimistic that unchecked human interactions could lead to positive outcomes. He believed that the bleak state of nature could only be overcome by a social structure whereby humans exchange freedom for security. In order to bring an end to perpetual backbiting, Hobbes envisioned a king or sovereign creating a power differential that could ensure that life was not just nasty, brutish, and short. For Hobbes, a king was the best salvation humanity could hope for. This is a radically pessimistic view; the most it aspires to is keeping humanity from the gutter.

Musk is far more optimistic about humans evading our self-imposed predicaments. An unabashed techno-optimist, he has described his philosophical views as a sort of effective altruism. In a 2022 tweet, Musk said that his philosophical views closely resemble those of William MacAskill in *What We Owe the Future*. MacAskill, like other proponents of effective altruism, seeks the best and most enduring ways to benefit others over the long term.

Musk's technological optimism seeks to be a positive force for preserving the world's existence. Technological innovations like neural implants and multiplanetary

habitations will, he believes, propel humanity to a brighter future. According to Neuralink's mission statement, neural implants have the power to "unlock human potential." Musk hopes that augmenting the brain will rescue us from this nasty, brutish, and short life. Or, at minimum, that this technology will enable humans to keep pace with the machines we are creating.

SpaceX is also propelled by Musk's techno-optimism. Its website proudly quotes Musk as saying, "You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great—and that's what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It's about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past." According to Musk's logic, the same species that created the existential threats of nuclear war and climate change is also capable of creating salvific technologies that will preserve human life indefinitely.

A Hobbesian view of the world, however, makes Musk look hopelessly naive. Consider the myriad ways that neural implants or interplanetary habitation may lead to conflict, strife, and quarrel. One can only imagine the conflict that will arise in sorting out who gets to have and control neural implants. The same could be said for determining who gets to inhabit a Martian colony and who has to remain on a war-torn and environmentally unstable planet Earth. You don't have to be a science fiction writer to imagine how Musk's technological ambitions may result in conflicts between wealthy cyborgs and unaugmented plebs, or between spacefaring travelers and mere earthlings. Hobbesian pessimism invites us to ponder how malfunction or hacking could result in human automatons or how symbiosis with artificial intelligence could bring about war between humans and computers.

We need Hobbes's dim outlook to temper Musk's techno-optimism. Aiming for effective long-term altruistic gains is a noble endeavor, but so is figuring out how to keep humanity from war. If Hobbes is right, then we should not underestimate how nasty and brutish humans can be. (Unless, of course, neural implants can fix that human defect as well.)

Musk and Hobbes prescribe very different remedies for what ails humanity. While Musk looks to human ingenuity and technological progress, Hobbes looked to social contracts and the power of a sovereign. Musk looks to entrepreneurial overlords rather than a Hobbesian sovereign. And Hobbes would be suspicious of wealthy technocrats like Musk usurping the power of governing authorities. Musk and Hobbes each point out the other's blind spots.

And yet, both are blind to a failure they share: their reliance on a pretension of autonomy. They both assume that human hope can only and ever come from humans, especially individuals endowed with superhuman power. Musk and Hobbes assume that the very same humans who have a penchant for conflict and destruction can create new technologies or social arrangements capable of overcoming their problems. Whether optimistic or pessimistic, Musk and Hobbes share the assumption that we alone are our hope.

In *Technology and the Future*, Dutch philosopher of technology Egbert Schuurman warns against the pretension of autonomy and truncation of hope within thinkers like Musk and Hobbes. Both techno-optimists and techno-pessimists possess a fatal sense of absolute autonomy, Schuurman believes: “Both set up their own laws, and neither acknowledge any suprasubjective laws or normative principles.” Schuurman argues that humanity goes astray when it seeks to determine its own absolutes and believes that it is only self-willed.

Musk and Hobbes are equally guilty of this way of thinking. Musk assumes that humanity is entirely free to pursue any endeavor that preserves human consciousness for the future. On the other hand, Hobbes thought that an earthly sovereign should have the unlimited power to establish any and every law. Schuurman would suggest that both thinkers overlook a higher authority—and a higher hope. He proposes an alternative vision, a “philosophy fed by the springs of christian faith” that comprehends technology, human freedom, and progress as being answerable to the Divine.

Schuurman sees human freedom as existent but not absolute. In *Faith and Hope in Technology*, he writes, “reality as it exists from, by, and for God is a reality full of meaning. This brings reverence, respect, admiration, gratitude, appreciation (valuing a thing at its true worth) and caution.” There is nothing wrong with pursuing technological advancements to improve the future—but humility is essential.

The time machines and transmogrifiers that the cartoon Calvin devised were cute because they were impossible. The neural implants and interplanetary habitation that Musk proposes are unsettling because they are both possible and imminent. While a dose of Hobbesian pessimism may be helpful, something more is needed. The future will be very bleak as long as humanity understands itself as being a law unto itself. If we are the only higher authority—or higher hope—then we are in trouble.

This insight is hardly novel. Decades ago, Watterson sketched a Sunday cartoon strip that depicts Calvin imagining himself to be God. It begins with, “First there was nothing . . . then there was Calvin!” Exercising absolute power, Calvin “creates the universe with pure will” and brings about life and order from the void. Before long, however, it takes an ominous turn: Calvin uses his godlike power to doom humanity to writhe in agony.

Still, Watterson offers a glimmer of hope. In the end, it’s all just Tinkertoys in the living room of Calvin’s house. Calvin thinks he is God, but thankfully he is not. He believes he has absolute self-sufficiency and autonomy, but he is deluding himself. He thinks that the fate and hope of human life rest on him, but they don’t. Musk—and all of us in this brave new world of war, neural implants, and interplanetary habitation—would do well to learn this.