

[Ten reasons to be cheerful, part 7: Ideas](#) [1]

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Some people, including Tyler Cowen in [The Great Stagnation](#) [3], think we are running out of big ideas that can improve things. I disagree.

7. Ideas

The pessimist's thesis is that we are wringing smaller and smaller gains from our past breakthroughs in science and technology. Tyler Cowen says we picked the low-hanging fruit of things like education, putting into universities those who previously might have been out in fields. There are no similar future gains to be had, he suggests.

I think we are actually just at the beginning of what the communications revolution will bring us. The fact that we can communicate rapidly on a global basis multiplies the number of interactions we can have. If we look at the Enlightenments and Renaissances of previous ages we find a pattern in which relatively isolated societies were thrown into sudden contact with many others. It was the silver empire of Athens, the merchant princes of Italy, or the Scottish traders given access to the British Empire by the Treaty of Union.

That relatively sudden extensive contact brought comparison and contrast with other cultures, which proved fertile ground for creativity, and an explosion of talent followed. The communications revolution brings that on a wider scale than previously, and it is happening quickly.

For creatures who evolved to run and throw things and occasionally to shout at each other, we have done some pretty cool stuff like sending machines down through the clouds of Titan or landing roving laboratories on Mars. Our brains have moved further to understanding how the universe works than nature might have intended us to.

We do not know what insights and ideas we might have in future. They are among Donald Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns." I doubt if anyone before Newton realized that they didn't know about gravity. Nor do we know what conceptual breakthroughs and insights might come. What we do know is that the conditions in which they flourish are advancing.

We can also be reasonably confident, for example, that biotechnology and nanotechnology will bring great

advances in our ability to target and fine-tune our abilities in such areas as medicine and materials. We know, too, that advances in artificial intelligence will enable us to attempt tasks hitherto thought impossible. It took decades to apply the fruits of our previous industrial revolutions, and we are only at the beginning of this one.

I am optimistic that the planet's greatest resource, human creativity, will not fail or fall short.

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