



The Tyranny of Cybernetics in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) illustrates people who become enslaved to a controlling system of cybernetics that enhances its power through computer, consumer culture, and advertising industry in postwar America. In this study, I investigate *Player Piano* through the idea of cybernetics that reduces human beings into intelligent machines and mindless bodies. *Player Piano* constitutes an effort to make sense of powerful systems through the metaphors of the machine. It is a struggle to illustrate a deterministic attitude of the universe that leaves human with no choice.

Keywords: Cybernetics, Dystopia, 1950s America, Advertising Industry, Consumer Culture

1. Introduction

1950s Americans is defined as the "good life" of Americans in economic terms. In this era, Americans thought the good life would be permanent and they would enjoy automobiles, televisions, and a luxurious and comfortable life forever. In fact, they were in quest of the American Dream that, according to Lawrence Samuel, promised every American citizen "a family, car, and suburban home full of modern appliances" (xi). Thus, after WWII, mass-production industry turned to the American public who seemed to be eager to gain the advantages of the American Dream. Also, manufacturers seemed to be happy to convince these consumers to purchase more and more commodities.

However, many critics and writers found this good life of the 1950s embraced a capitalistic tendency. Antonio Gramsci's observation of this system is,

A given socio-historical moment is never homogeneous; on the contrary, it is rich in contradictions. It acquires a personality and is a moment of development in that a certain fundamental activity of life prevails over others and represents a historical peak: but this presupposes a hierarchy, a contrast, a struggle (93).

Also, several authors of this culture employed literature as a means to criticize the consumer capitalist society of 1950s America. Vonnegut's *Player Piano* criticizes 1950s American culture of mechanization and consumerism that controlled human mind through advertising industry and information and communication technologies that emerged after WWII. The present study explores *Player Piano* in the cybernetic environment of 1950s America that controls people through unemployment, advertising industry, and consumer culture.

2. *Player Piano*: a Criticism of 1950s America

Although many critics have found *Player piano* a futuristic novel, in this study I agree with John Tomedi who sees "Player Piano was [relevant] to the 1950's" (x) in which "managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women" (*Player Piano* 1). In fact, they "had found that the bulk of secretarial work could be done - as could most lower-echelon jobs - more quickly and efficiently and cheaply by machines" (*Player Piano* 2). In the society of *Player Piano* people are waiting for the invention of new technologies that tell them what to do. They have lost the feeling of "being" that is the essential foundation of human dignity. According to Robert Tally, Vonnegut's *Player Piano* illustrates "what happens to the soul of man in the world of machines" (21).

While "machines take over routine human labor in *Player Piano*, leaving people feeling useless and outmoded," (Farrell ix) advertising industry and consumer culture employ people for the consumption of their products. Thus, the society controls its people in two ways; first by making them unemployed, and then by making them consumer individuals. In the following, I discuss on the theory of cybernetics as a controlling system that turns human beings into intelligent machines and mindless bodies.

3. The Tyranny of Cybernetics

Historically, when human beings stopped questioning the conditions, and forgot the significance of thinking, they have opened themselves up for external control. Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, justifies the condition for himself: "Objectively, Paul tried to tell himself, things really were better than ever. For once, after the great bloodbath of the war, the world really was cleared of unnatural terrors - mass starvation, mass imprisonment, mass torture, mass murder" (6-7). Paul thinks, "Objectively, know-how and world law were getting their long-awaited chance to turn earth into an altogether pleasant and convenient place in which to sweat out Judgment Day" (7). Human's invention of machine created an automated world quite void of any meaningful life. Paul himself, the most important engineer in Ilium, spent his time in the office reading adventure fiction and sometimes checking the switchboard to be sure that the factory was working well. Any signs of actual work were eliminated from the society, and the human was doomed to live in an automated society that attempts to persuade the obsolete bodies to purchase more mass-products. Vonnegut's *Player Piano* illustrates a post-war America where machines have replaced almost all human labor and a central computer makes all the decisions. According to Donald Morse,

In *Player Piano*, the world, having passed through the First Revolution where machines took over man's manual labor, and the Second Revolution where machines took over all human routine work, is now about to undergo a Third Revolution where machines will do all the thinking (304).

Similarly, Paul Proteus, the protagonist of *Player Piano*, states, "the First Industrial revolution devalued muscle work, then the second one devalued routine mental work" (14). Paul continues: "In a way, I guess the third one's been going on for some time, if you mean thinking machines. That would be the third revolution, I guess - machines that devalue human thinking. Some of the big computers like EPICAC do that all right, in specialized fields" (14). By the third revolution, Vonnegut refers to and warns about cybernetics as a system of mind control.

Vonnegut's *Player Piano* is a direct reference to Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics. Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, states: "Norbert Wiener, a mathematician, said all that way back in the nineteen-forties. It's fresh to you because you're too young to know anything but the way things are now" (*Player Piano* 14). Vonnegut shows that 1950s America is too young to understand the technological changes.

Dani Cavallaro observes Wiener divides the history of machines into four phases: "the golemic age (a pre-technological world), the age of clocks (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the age of steam (late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) and the age of communication and control (the era of cybernetics)" (12). For Wiener the body acts "as a magical clay shape, as a clockwork mechanism, as a heat engine, and finally as an electronic system" (ibid). The body as an electronic system acts like a communications network that absorbs "information through the senses and of subsequently acting upon the information received" (ibid). Cybernetics considers the notion that

if the human body can be conceived of as a machine, it is also possible to design machines that simulate the human organism. This is effected by using as a working model the nervous apparatus, a graded system of control governed by the brain. A machine so designed is a *cybernetic organism*, a technological construct that replicates the human body on the basis of an understanding of the structural similarities between machines and living organisms. (ibid)

Cybernetics affects human's mind to control his/her behavior. Vonnegut criticizes a cybernetic environment in which "people stuck in one place all day, just using their senses, then a reflex, using their senses, then a reflex, and not really thinking at all" (*Player Piano* 14). He sees that in the third revolution people will be replaced by "thinking machines" that "devalue human thinking" (*Player Piano* 15). In fact, Vonnegut warns us about a third revolution that machines will think and decide for humans. He reminds us of the first and the second revolutions to talk about a more threatening revolution that would control all aspects of our life.

Player Piano depicts a planned society based on production, consumption and profit (Morse 304). In this society everything is decided by computers, thus efficiency and production are maximized, regardless to the effects this process might have on humanity and personal fulfillment. According to Peter Freese, *Player Piano* is "the first prophetic depiction of "tyranny by computer" in American literature, which in 1952 was a highly speculative anticipation of coming developments but assumes a surprising topicality in our computer-governed times" (90). Postwar American society of *Player Piano* believes when the individuals are free to enjoy the goods offered by machine production, then they can fulfill their utopian desires of happiness and prosperity. But, in reality, people are dissatisfied, disappointed, and displaced with feelings of obsolescence. People have forgotten the dynamic function of their bodies and lost their mind capacities, because they become quite passive minds that are significant for the consumer culture and automated society that needs them for more consumption. Vonnegut criticizes the cybernetic society that supplies the means of organizing social existence according to abstract principles that can be represented as data and translated into tangible products for public consumption" (Cavallaro 19).

Postwar society of *Player Piano* is very young to remember life before the machines. The people "couldn't remember when things had been different, could hardly make sense of what had been, though they didn't necessarily like what was." The older generation, who had been "the rioters, the smashers of machines" before society changed, is no longer violent but filled with churning resentment (*Player Piano* 29). Common people do not know what to do, what to wear, or what to purchase. Engineers and managers of this society enjoy the consumer culture by purchasing new products, while most of the society suffered from unemployment and depression. All the inhabitants are trapped in a cybernetic society in which there is no real place or need for human. Norbert Wiener, in *Cybernetics: Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, argues on a theory of communication and control that considers people send messages

within a system to control their surrounding environment. Through this theory, Wiener makes a comparison between human and machine to demonstrate that human communication is similar to the way a machine functions to complete a task by a given order. In *Player Piano* not only are people machine-like, but also machine provides them with whatever they need in their life. Paul Proteus is unhappy with the present society because machines are not controlled by the human but by other machines. The novel satirizes the typical home life of the average people in America. Vonnegut illustrates Edgar Rice Burroughs Hagstrohm and his family who live in a self-cleaning M-17 house. He has equipment, furniture, car, and automatic pay roll deduction payments in the house controlled by the advanced computer or machine God EPICAC XIV. The computer EPICAC XIV can do hundreds of work or even thousands simultaneously without any confusion. As a result of it, human beings have no work to do. The perfection of machine has made human imperfect and machine-like.

Wiener also argues that human operates in a machine-like manner which is based on information processing that desire to monitor our environment as well as the environment of those around us. In *Player Piano* the citizens are controlled by advertising industry that is based on information processing in a consumer society. Wiener, in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, states:

society can only be understood through a study of the messages and communication facilities which belong to it; and that in the future development of these messages and communication facilities, messages between man and machines, between machines and man, and between machine and machine, are destined to play an ever increasing part. (15)

The main function of communication is to control our environment. Wiener argues, “information is a name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world as we adjust to it, and make our adjustment felt upon it” (16). He believes that the purpose of human communication is to get familiarized with an especial environment while at the same time influencing aspects of it. For Wiener, information is the means that preserves organization within an environment (20). Thus, information becomes a form of control. Consumer culture uses information to control its people. In a consumer culture, advertising becomes a form of communication that can be seen through the application of principles drawn from the field of cybernetics that “is the discipline which has made the mechanisms of feedback its primary concern and therefore, it will be argued, offers the tools and perspectives to successfully model the highly complex and dynamic interactions that typify advertising communication” (Miles 308). Cybernetics considers the idea of advertising communication as an observing system that controls the environment. In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut criticizes the logic of advertising industry as a controlling system. In fact, Vonnegut sees that advertisement- a way of communication between companies and consumers- attempts to persuade the consumers to more consumption. In such a culture, people become thoughtless bodies by advertising industry that controls their mind and reduces them to mere consumers.

Wiener, in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, considers the study of messages as a tool of controlling “machinery and society.” For him, cybernetics is the theory of messages. The control of machinery and society is a significant idea in the study of technology and society. It is impossible to separate technology and society. In advertising communication, we can imagine customers as society and the communication process as technology. Communication is the device through which companies can persuade the consumers to purchase their products.

In *The Human use of Human Beings*, Wiener broadens the idea of cybernetics to emphasize on human as a part of the communication system. He considers consumer behavior deals with the role of the human in marketing communications process and the consumer response to advertising. Consumer behavior considers messages and communications, and produces the communications models, the attempt of marketing scholars to decode the codes persuading customers to move from the reading of advertisements to the purchase of products. In fact, advertising industry uses images to convince people to consume more.

The advertisements of 1950s America represented the trappings of utopian thoughts such as abundance, success and equality. These advertisements pervaded into radio and television, cinema, and magazine to sustain the consumer culture. In fact, they represent images of an ideal world but no means through which to achieve that ideal world. According to William Leiss:

Advertising ideology is a set of false and misleading concepts about reality, and in two major dimensions this ideology actually works: the stress on satisfaction through consumption rather than work and the Hollywood set, where the world is portrayed as free from racial and class conflict, idyllic and false (29).

It is the function of advertisements to persuade the audience that they can achieve the feelings offered through the images by purchasing the goods being advertised. In this regard, advertising industry reduces the importance of human life to a stereotype of consumption. In fact, the rising power of the advertising industry is concurrent with the fall of utopian ideal, and the rise of dystopian hell.

Such dominant culture becomes omnipresent to persuade the consumers to consume more. Advertising industry conceals the historical process to manipulate the consumers’ mind and encourage them for more consumption without questioning the process of production. In fact, advertising disconnects the commodity from the world of worker that produced it. The image represents no idea about the process of production, or about the impacts of the product in society. According to Janice Winship, in *Sexuality for Sale*:

Despite its glorifying display of commodities, advertising represents a moment of suspension in their production and circulation: production – the sweat and exploitation of work – is over and

hidden in its verbal and visual persuasion: the consumption of someone else's (or your own) objectified labour, to which you, the as-yet-passive spectator, are invited, has not begun. Yet in monopoly capitalism advertising has become integral to these circuits of production and circulation: it sustains the movement of commodities, from their social production to their individual but socially repeated consumption, which eventually ensures the reproduction not only of the individual but of capital too. (217)

Consumers are regarded as passive receivers of information from the market, with the message at the center of the model. Advertising industry focuses on the message and on what to put into an advertisement to convince the consumer minds to more shopping. Here, the communication considers how information is handled between the advertisers and the consumers.

In cybernetic model of advertising communication, although consumers can participate in the creation of the message, they are trapped and controlled by the advertising agency that bombards them with information. Advertising agency does not let the consumer constructs its own information in virtual and cybernetic metaphysics that reduces human to commodity. In cybernetics, human has lost its subjectivity and just become a mindless body in the service of consumer culture.

4. Intelligent Machines and Thoughtless Consumer Bodies

Player Piano opens in Ilium, New York. Ilium is a fictional Schenectady, New York, headquarters to General Electric (G.E.), a city and firm which Vonnegut was very familiar with. He worked for G.E. from 1947 to 1951. Using G.E. is quite relevant to the theme of the story due to Vonnegut's familiarity with the company and G.E. as the symbol of the consumer capitalism in 1950s America. G.E. was known as the largest company in the 1950s and the leader in developing technology towards mass-production.

In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut depicts the features promoted by G.E. as profitable to every American. He illustrates advertisements that represent consumer comfort, happiness and progress. According to Moylan, in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, the plot of *Player Piano*, as it is common in dystopian novel, considers revelation of conflicts within Vonnegut's mock 1950s America. The main conflict that the story considers is that between what is promised by industrial production and the conditions that Paul Proteus practiced. *Player Piano* narrates the story of Paul Proteus who "was the most important, brilliant person in Ilium, the manager of the Ilium Works, though only thirty-five" (1). But "he didn't feel important or brilliant at the moment" (ibid). In spite of his comfortable life, he feels discontent, trapped, isolated, fatigued, and deindividuated.

Although the mass commodities provide Paul with ease and comfort, they do not give him the same feeling of satisfaction that is represented by the advertisements. Paul feels discontent since he sees the loss of human dignity in the consumer society. He wants to create a new society, in which human beings are more significant than machines and consumer goods, a society that elevates the worth of humanity. Paul is dissatisfied with the society that makes humans almost useless and reduces them to mere consumer objects.

Vonnegut shows human physical and mental labor has become obsolete, and "computers and efficient machinery have eliminated the need for the vast majority of workers" (Simmons *New Critical Essays* 119). Thus, the society is moving towards a gradual conditioning, robbing dignity from human beings and devaluing human capacities. Paul feels unhappy to live in a world void of human values. He is in a dilemma whether to accept this consumer culture and automated society as a utopia or to leave it.

In the middle of this automated system, there is a movement that desires to erase the machines from the face of the society and restore humans to their rightful position. The Ghost Shirt Society is the movement led by Reverend James J. Lasher who talks in support of human dignity and considers the behavior of displaced people. He notes, "For generations they've been built up to worship competition and the market, productivity and economic usefulness, and the envy of their fellow men - and boom! it's all yanked out from under them" (*Player Piano* 90). These people have moved from usefulness to uselessness, and become obsolete in the society. Paul decides to leave his job and joins the Ghost Shirt Society that encourages people to revolt against the worthless values of the contemporary world. Paul believes that The Ghost Shirt Society is a tool for changing the machine-dominated society.

Through The Ghost Shirt Society, Vonnegut illustrates the ambivalent tendency towards technology. The rebels are not able to decide which machine should be destroyed and which should not. Ironically the rebels themselves look for undamaged parts of machines among the destructions. Paul sees a member of their society "was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they liked to do best . . . replacing men like himself with machines" (*Player Piano* 338). Vonnegut shows humans are "eager to recreate the same old nightmare" that they were against before (295). In fact, through the new technology the consumer culture promises to replace the old items with the new ones. Dr. Ned Dodge, the manager of the Proteus Park, observed this system as "simplified planning and production all the way round" (*Player Piano* 163).

Dodge's evaluation of the life, offering Americans facilities, is in tune with the 1950s advertising industry. He describes the "radiant heating," that "cooks by high frequency" and enables its users to have "perfect control" over food preparation, the "ultrasonic dishwasher" that uses "high-frequency sound" in cleaning, and "matter of seconds" the drier needs to give the "clothes a spanking-clean outdoors odor," this is the lifestyle that family can "live," Ned states, and "get a little fun out of life" (*Player Piano* 164).

Dodge praises the advertising industry and promotes consumer goods as the way to improve and define a person's lifestyle. His language is quite persuasive, and encourages excitement and emotions. He does not say anything about the process of production. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, it is the function of advertising industry that just tries to convince the reader without presenting a history about the process of production or explaining conditions of the factory. In fact, advertising industry represents "the state of being" and ignores the historical process in order to replace real with unreal. J. Fisher Solomon, in *The Signs of Our Time*, argues the function of advertising industry that "substitutes signs for things, framed visions of consumer desire for the thing itself. The success of modern advertising, its penetration into every corner of American life, reflects a culture that has chosen illusion over reality" (76). In the cybernetic environment, advertising creates an illusory atmosphere in which unreal is represented as real through new technologies such as computer, advertising industry, and information and communication. Then, new values are introduced to people. Monica Brasted observes that advertising industry defines the cultural values of the modern time including "leisure, style and success, and luxury and comfort.... Each of these values was framed as being mediated through consumption of the goods" (239). Vonnegut truly recognizes this new system of exploitation and satirizes it in *Player Piano*.

Undermining Dodge's evaluation of the function and benefit of the mass-products, Vonnegut represents the Shah and Wanda Hagstrohm. The Shah of Bratpuhr, the spiritual leader of the Kolhour, takes a tour to America to see "what he could learn from the most powerful nation on earth for the good of his people" (19-20). The Shah is a figure of wisdom that sees Americans cannot realize how human can become simpleminded. On his tour to America, the Shah observes the actions of the Reeks and Wrecks, and asks who is the owner of these slaves. Doctor Ewing J. Halyard, "of the United States Department of State, a heavy, florid, urbane gentleman of forty," explains that they are not slaves, they are "citizens employed by government. They have the same rights as other citizens - free speech, freedom of worship, the right to vote. Before the war, they worked in the Ilium Works, controlling machines, but now machines control themselves much better". He continues, "Less waste, much better products, cheaper products with automatic control" (20).

In the cybernetic environment, individuals become superfluous and their life becomes meaningless. The Shah is curious to know about reasons for such developments and that why things should be done "so quickly"? Why human "mustn't waste any time on these things?" (164). Although the Shah admires the technological developments and states this is best America that can be offered, later he questions the system and sees the emptiness of the cybernetic consumer society. The Shah observes that humans are reduced to the status of thoughtless bodies in American consumer society. Before leaving the nation that is the pioneer of technology, the Shah asks his host "what people are for?" (320) in this consumer automated society. Through this question Vonnegut asks his readers to reconsider the value of humanity in the cybernetic world.

Vonnegut also illustrates that Wanda, the housewife who possesses all the appliances, becomes indifferent towards using her "ultrasonic washer" and she "has been doing the washing in a tub for a month now." Her indifference can be seen in her words: "Oh, I don't mind. Really, I like doin' 'em that way. It's kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don't mind. Gives me something to do" (*Player Piano* 165). Wanda sees the emptiness of advertising industry that promises human being a prosperous and happy life. She finds herself trapped in the automated life. What Vonnegut expresses is the significance that human life should not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption. Human should not be treated as a machine. He believes that we should not allow human dignity and values be replaced by machines.

Tired of the cybernetic environment, Paul attempts to create a new society, in which people are more important than machines and a society that upholds the worth of human beings. He is not satisfied with the society that has made human beings almost obsolete. He attempts to reassert his message to humanity. Leonard Mustazza, in *Forever Pursuing Genesis*, explains that Paul is in quest of utopia. But his search is not among the utopian ideals that advertisements created for him. In fact, he wants to escape from this reality. According to Mustazza Paul is in quest of Eden:

Immediately, however, this envisioning of an Eden will have residual effects on Paul's way of thinking, though the Eden he will pursue has little in common with the one he considers prior to his drunken oration. . . . Ironically, though, the reader recognizes something about Paul's initial plans that he himself does not—that the new way of life he has chosen is hardly new at all; indeed, it is quite conventional. What Paul decides to make for himself is a little Eden, a decidedly personal rural paradise and not the large-scale one he conceived of in the bar. (37)

Paul wants to escape to somewhere far from the materialistic world. He desires to live in "the fantasy of the new, good life ahead of him. Somewhere, outside of society, there was a place for a man and wife" (146). He buys the Gottwald Farm, but his wife makes him disappointed by refusing to live there:

Paul had gone to his farm once, and, in the manner of a man dedicating his life to God, he'd asked Mr. Haycox to put him to work, guiding the hand of Nature. The hand he grasped so fervently, he soon discovered, was coarse and sluggish, hot and wet and smelly. And the charming little cottage he'd taken as a symbol of the good life of a farmer was as irrelevant as a statue of Venus at the gate of a sewage-disposal plant. He hadn't gone back. (*Player Piano* 259)

By this farm Paul wants to create utopia far away from the materialistic consumer society, but he fails since his material experiences are not in tune with his ideal desires. Vonnegut expresses his attitude towards the materialistic society through professor von Neumann whose name alludes to John von Neumann who along with Norbert Wiener worked on the theory of cybernetics. Fictional von Neumann, "who had taught political science at Union College in Schenectady," states: "Man has survived Armageddon in order to enter the Eden of eternal peace, only to discover that everything he

had looked forward to enjoying there, pride, dignity, self-respect, work worth doing, has been condemned as unfit for human consumption” (301). He sees human has been deprived of pride, dignity, and self-respect by the materialist world. Professor Neumann notes in the war time:

the right of technology to increase in power and scope was unquestionably, in point of national survival, almost a divine right. Americans owe their lives to superior machines, techniques, organization, and managers and engineers. For these means of surviving the wars, the Ghost Shirt Society and I thank God. But we cannot win good lives for ourselves in peacetime by the same methods we used to win battles in wartime. The problems of peace are altogether more subtle. (ibid)

Vonnegut finds Americans in debt to technological developments that were “used to win battles in wartime.” But in peacetime these technologies reduced human dignity by replacing humans with machines. As fictional Neumann suggests:

men and women be returned to work as controllers of machines, and that the control of people by machines be curtailed. I propose, further, that the effects of changes in technology and organization on life patterns be taken into careful consideration, and that the changes be withheld or introduced on the basis of this consideration. (302)

The automatic machine promised to free humanity from drudgery, and yet was a common metaphor for the nightmare of human annihilation. Vonnegut illuminates marginalization of humanity in the machine dominated society. Vonnegut shows that if machine replaces human beings, it will end in human destruction.

Through his dystopian novel, Vonnegut represents a thirst for change and attempts to persuade us to think more deeply about how we can redirect our lifestyle before dystopian fiction comes to reality; as Paul concludes, “machines, organization and the pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (314).

5. Conclusion

Player Piano criticizes 1950s cybernetic America in which humans become marginalized by machines and advertising industry that created a materialistic valueless world that superficially offered abundance and an ideal life for all. The novel reveals the tendency of 1950s American society towards turning humans into consumer objects. Vonnegut sees discontent in 1950s America, and criticizes the post-WWII automated society, advertising industry, and consumer culture that reduced their inhabitants to intelligent machines and mindless bodies.

Vonnegut depicts the unstable foundation of the consumer culture and shows although 1950s America was economically powerful, this strength was based on a fragile foundation that needed constant and satisfied demands for its commodities and if the demands were not satisfied, the system would fall. He criticizes automated society, advertising industry, and the consumer culture that control people’s minds and turn people into intelligent machines and thoughtless bodies. Vonnegut sees that people are told what and how to think, wear, buy, and do, with no permission for their individual ideas about or possible participations to that society.

What Vonnegut expresses is the significance that human life should not be reduced to stereotypes of production and consumption. Human should not be treated as a machine. He believes that we should not allow our dignity and values be replaced by machines. He asks us to protect our sense of dignity in our life and work if we want to prevent of dystopia.

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