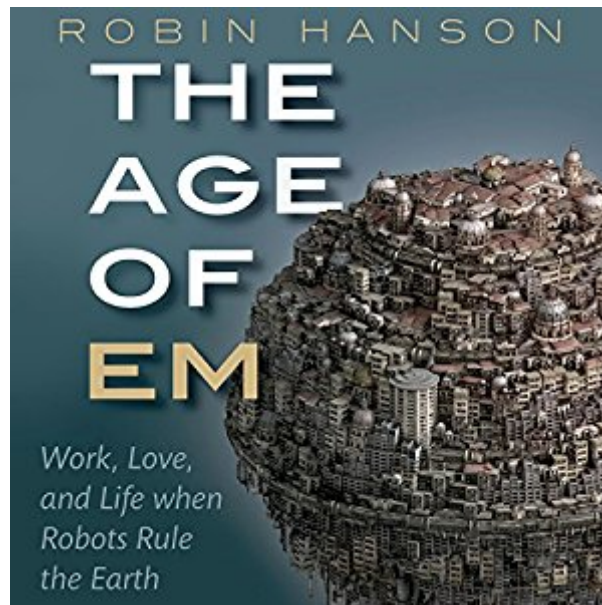


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The Age Of Em: Work, Love, And Life When Robots Rule The Earth



Synopsis

Robots may one day rule the world, but what is a robot-ruled Earth like? Many think the first truly smart robots will be brain emulations, or ems. Scan a human brain, then run a model with the same connections on a fast computer, and you have a robot brain, but recognizably human. Train an em to do some job and copy it a million times; an army of workers is at your disposal. When they can be made cheaply, within perhaps a century, ems will displace humans in most jobs. In this new economic era, the world economy may double in size every few weeks. Some say we can't know the future, especially following such a disruptive new technology, but Professor Robin Hanson sets out to prove them wrong. Applying decades of expertise in physics, computer science, and economics, he uses standard theories to paint a detailed picture of a world dominated by ems. While human lives don't change greatly in the em era, em lives are as different from ours as our lives are from those of our farmer and forager ancestors. Ems make us question common assumptions of moral progress, because they reject many of the values we hold dear. Read about em mind speeds, body sizes, job training and career paths, energy use and cooling infrastructure, virtual reality, aging and retirement, death and immortality, security, wealth inequality, religion, teleportation, identity, cities, politics, law, war, status, friendship, and love. This book shows you just how strange your descendants may be, though ems are no stranger than we would appear to our ancestors. To most ems, it seems good to be an em.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book analyzes a possible future era when software emulations of humans (ems) dominate the world economy. It is too conservative to tackle longer-term prospects for eras when more unusual intelligent beings may dominate the world. Hanson repeatedly tackles questions that scare away mainstream academics, and gives relatively ordinary answers (guided as much as possible by relatively standard, but often obscure, parts of the academic literature). Hanson's scenario relies on a few moderately controversial assumptions. The assumptions which I find most uncertain are related to human-level intelligence being hard to understand (because it requires complex systems), enough so that ems will experience many subjective centuries before artificial intelligence is built from scratch. For similar reasons, ems are opaque enough that it will be quite a while before they can be re-engineered to be dramatically different. Hanson is willing to allow that ems can be tweaked somewhat quickly to produce moderate enhancements (at most doubling IQ) before reaching diminishing returns. He gives somewhat plausible reasons for believing this will only have small effects on his analysis. But few skeptics will be convinced. Some will focus on potential trillions of dollars worth of benefits that higher IQs might produce, but that wealth would not much change Hanson's analysis. Others will prefer an inside view analysis which focuses on the chance that higher IQs will better enable us to handle risks of superintelligent software. Hanson's analysis implies we should treat that as an unlikely scenario, but doesn't say what we should do about modest probabilities of huge risks.

This book is about the "Em", a virtual human mind with no physical body. Remember The Matrix (1999)? It's like that, but there's no hairless Keanu Reeves in a pink goo pod. Instead, Neo is just a file on a computer, in a server rack somewhere. If we need Neo to do two things at once, we can just copy him (just like movie-Neo copied all those guns). If we decide Neo is 'the best of the best' at something, we might copy him a trillion times, and erase his competitors. The copies are just as human as you or I. The book is important for two reasons. The first is that it directly concerns the welfare of trillions of future lives (who may suffer under slavery, total dictatorship, torture, and constant genocide, or who alternatively may live in a paradise of comfort, meaningful work, and total fulfillment). Small actions, taken early enough, could have a big impact on the Age of Em; this book gives us that head start. Secondly, the book is important in its focus on values. Hanson demonstrates that values are a biological adaptation like any other (the bird's wings, or the fish's scales) and that nature and nurture conspire to ensure that animals end up with productive values. While you may value "family" or "free time", your decedents might be workaholics with no family at all (for reasons beyond their control). As a result, if EMs could meet their ancestors, they might be

confused or disgusted. In other words, this Age threatens to erase, from the world, everything that you believe is important. This book is essentially an encyclopedia of predictions about the future. These predictions are derived using mainstream social science, and they are clear and concise.

Robin Hanson has written the best book I've ever read on what the future may hold. Rather than explore many alternative possibilities, he deliberately picks a single future scenario to explore in great depth. Then leaves to others to work out alternates, building from his baseline. Hanson's chosen scenario is one where humans upload their minds to computers to create human emulations or ems. He uses standard social and physical science to grind out the details of what this world might look like. As ems are zero marginal cost to copy, this means ems live megacities which look like giant server farms gone mad, where billions, possibly trillions of copies of ems work. While some have robot bodies, most live in virtual reality in pleasant but malthusian conditions. Since these ems can run 1000x faster than regular humans, the economy doubles in months(!). While this phase might last hundreds of years in em subjective time, in calendar time it'll only be a few years. During those few years, humans can retire. Sticking to his guns, Hanson keeps his deep focus only on his core scenario, and doesn't spend time on what regular humans think or do. Or on what comes next. Though he does suggest the em era is followed by one dominated by new types of artificial general intelligence invented by the ems themselves. That said, while Hanson writes in solid straightforward prose, he tends towards a jargon heavy, highly footnoted style. The book has no strong narrative. As I saw elsewhere, think *The Silmarillion*, not *Lord of the Rings*. Since I'm a long time reader of Robin Hanson's overcomingbias.com blog I'm familiar enough with his oeuvre to avoid getting bogged down with terms like ems, near/far mode, farmers/forager lifestyles, status signaling, coalition politics, etc.

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