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in the Digital Age?

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical investigation of possible sources of long-run economic growth in the future. Historically, in the industrial era and during the ongoing digital revolution (which began approximately in the 1980s) the main engine of global economic growth has been R&D, translating into systematic labor-augmenting technological progress and trend growth in labor productivity. If in the future all essential production or R&D tasks will eventually be subject to automation, though, the engine of growth will be shifted to the accumulation of programmable hardware (capital), and R&D will lose its prominence. Economic growth will then accelerate, no longer constrained by the scarce human input. By contrast, if some essential production and R&D tasks will never be fully automatable, then R&D may forever remain the main growth engine, and the human input may forever remain the scarce, limiting factor of global growth. Additional studied mechanisms include the accumulation of R&D capital (particularly important under partial or no automation), and hardware-augmenting technical change.

Keywords: long-run economic growth, factor accumulation, technical change, automation, asymptotic dynamics.

JEL codes: O30, O40.

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1 Introduction

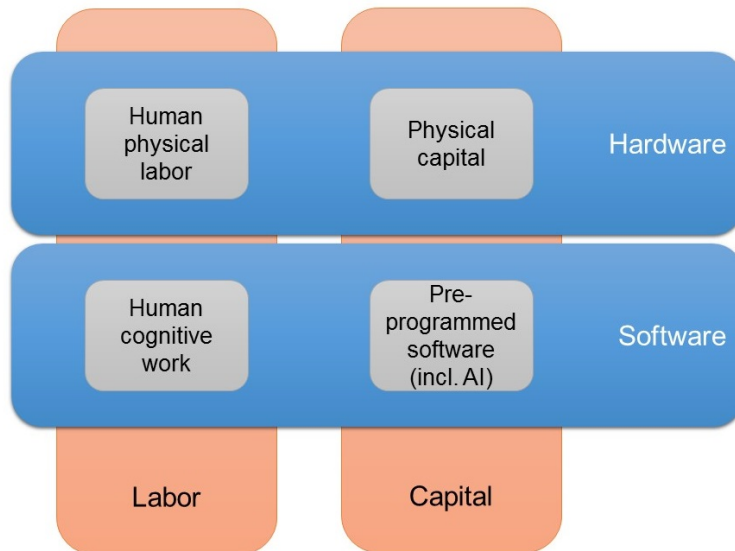
Expansion in the digital sphere is now an order of magnitude faster than growth in the global capital stock and gross domestic product (GDP): data volume, processing power and bandwidth double every 2–3 years, whereas global GDP doubles every 20–30 years. Since the 1980s “general-purpose computing capacity grew at an annual rate of 58%. The world’s capacity for bidirectional telecommunication grew at 28% per year, closely followed by the increase in globally stored information (23%)” (Hilbert and López, 2011). The costs of a standard computation have been declining by 53% per year on average since 1940 (Nordhaus, 2017). The processing, storage, and communication of information has decoupled from the cognitive capacities of the human brain: “less than one percent of information was in digital format in the mid-1980s, growing to more than 99% today” (Gillings, Hilbert, and Kemp, 2016). Preliminary evidence also suggests that since the 1980s the efficiency of computer algorithms has been improving at a pace that is of the same order of magnitude as accumulation of digital hardware (Grace, 2013; Hernandez and Brown, 2020). Corroborating this finding, in the recent decade we have witnessed a surge in artificial intelligence (AI) breakthroughs based on the methodology of *deep neural networks* (Tegmark, 2017), from autonomous vehicles and simultaneous language interpretation to self-taught superhuman performance at chess and Go (Silver, Hubert, Schrittwieser, et al., 2018).

However, the jury is still out on how (if at all) these tendencies will affect global long-run economic growth in the coming decades. Some economists such as Jones (2002); Gordon (2016) have documented that the trend growth rate of labor productivity and total factor productivity (TFP) has been in fact slowing down since the 1980s and formulated a hypothesis that the global economy is therefore heading towards secular stagnation. Other economists, such as Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014); Brynjolfsson, Rock, and Syverson (2019), put forward an alternative hypothesis that the recent slowdown in productivity growth is only temporary and represents a transition phase between the industrial and the digital era, which – not quite coincidentally – just took off in the 1980s. Once the transition phase is over, the trend growth rate in productivity, fueled by the rapidly increasing capacity of digital technologies, will rebound and perhaps even surpass the one observed in the 1950s–1980s. Beyond economics, futurists and AI researchers have pointed out the likelihood of an upcoming technological singularity (Kurzweil, 2005; Hanson and Yudkowsky, 2013) – which would imply even greater growth acceleration.

In an attempt to formally structure this discussion, in my recent paper (Growiec, 2019) I have presented the synthetic *hardware–software model*. My key proposition there is to replace capital and labor as key macroeconomic factors of production with two alternative aggregates: hardware (“brawn”) and software (“brains”), orthogonal to the traditional distinction (see Figure 1). I start off from the basic observation

that output is generated through purposefully initiated physical action. Generating output requires both some physical action involving energy – carried out by *hardware* – and some information describing the action – provided by *software*.¹ This underscores that physical capital and human physical labor are fundamentally substitutable inputs, contributing to *hardware*; analogously, human cognitive work and pre-programmed digital software are also substitutes, contributing to *software*. In turn, both hardware and software are complementary and essential² in the process. Furthermore, programmable hardware, such as computers, smartphones or robots, similarly to the human body has double duty: as means of performing physical action and as a container for software – stored information and working algorithms. In such a framework, technological progress represents increases the stock of available codes and is thus generally viewed as *software-augmenting*.

Figure 1: Factors of production in the hardware–software model.



In the current paper I study the prospective sources of global economic growth in the long-run future. Based on the hardware–software model I formulate a range of predictions conditional on certain key assumptions regarding automatability of production and R&D tasks and structure of the R&D process. Each studied scenario places our global future somewhere along the axis: secular stagnation – continued growth at the current pace – growth acceleration – technological singularity. Specifically I consider the following research questions.

- **Full vs. Partial Automation.** *How are long-run growth predictions affected whether or not all essential tasks can be automated? (Growiec, 2021)*

¹This approach is well grounded in physics. As a frank summary, Michio Kaku said: “I’m a physicist. We rank things by two parameters: energy and information.”

²An essential input is such an input that if it is not used in production, output is zero.

I find that when all essential production and R&D tasks are subject to automation, the long-run growth engine, determining the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit, is the accumulation of programmable hardware. This scenario is consistent with a (potentially massive) growth acceleration in the future. If some essential tasks cannot be automated, though, both in production and R&D, a dual long-run growth engine emerges, consisting of R&D (generating labor-augmenting developments) and the accumulation of programmable hardware (used as R&D capital). Then the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit is constrained by the rate of R&D which uses the essential and scarce human input.

- **Automation of Production vs. R&D.** *How are long-run growth predictions affected if only production, but not R&D tasks can be automated? And conversely, what if only R&D, but not production tasks can be automated?*

I find that if all essential production tasks are subject to automation, the long-run growth engine, determining the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit, is the accumulation of programmable hardware. Whether or not R&D tasks can be automated as well, is irrelevant for long-run growth. Analogously, if all essential R&D tasks can be automated, automation of R&D has the potential of accelerating and sustaining long-run growth by creating a positive feedback loop in the R&D sector. Then the long-run growth engine, determining the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit, is again the accumulation of programmable hardware, and whether some essential production tasks may not be automated, becomes irrelevant for the long-run growth rate. All these scenarios are consistent with a substantial growth acceleration in the future.

- **R&D Capital.** *How are long-run growth predictions affected whether or not machines (physical capital) can be used in the R&D process?*

I find that when all essential production tasks are subject to automation, presence or absence of R&D capital in the R&D process is irrelevant for the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit, which is determined by the pace of accumulation of programmable hardware. If some essential production tasks cannot be automated, though, accumulation of R&D capital has the potential of accelerating and sustaining long-run growth by creating an additional positive feedback loop in the R&D sector. A dual long-run growth engine emerges then, consisting of R&D (generating labor-augmenting developments) and the accumulation of programmable hardware (used as R&D capital). In turn, if neither production nor R&D tasks can be fully automated and R&D capital is not used in the R&D process, the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit is driven exclusively by the R&D sector producing labor-augmenting technical change. With R&D output being critically constrained by the supply of the

scarce human input, this is the only scenario consistent with declining GDP growth rates over the long run (secular stagnation).

- **Hardware-Augmenting Technical Change.** *How are long-run growth predictions affected whether or not technical change can be (at least partly) hardware-augmenting?*

I find that when all essential production or R&D tasks are subject to automation, hardware-augmenting technical change leads to explosive growth with unboundedly increasing GDP growth rates (technological singularity). This occurs due to the creation of a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop between hardware accumulation and hardware-augmenting technical change. If some essential tasks both in production and R&D cannot be automated, though, hardware-augmenting technical change matters only insofar as it accelerates the R&D process itself.

These results are intuitive. The key variable to observe is the relatively scarce factor of production in the long-run limit. Is it hardware or software? In the pre-1980 industrial economy, where production processes were increasingly mechanized but not automated (capital was gradually replacing human physical labor in performing physical actions, i.e. in *hardware*, but instructions for the actions were provided exclusively by people), the scarce factor was human cognitive work, which is not accumulable per capita. Then the key source of long-run growth was labor-augmenting technological progress, provided by R&D (Romer, 1990; Jones, 1995; Acemoglu, 2009).

In the post-1980 economy, though, following the dawn of the digital era production processes increasingly get automated (instructions for physical actions are increasingly stored and run on programmable hardware). Labor is replaced with capital in *software*. By increasing the supply of the scarce software factor, automation contributes to economic growth alongside labor-augmenting R&D. As of 2021, R&D remains the key growth engine among the two because there is a wide range of tasks which – with today’s technology – cannot be automated. However, if eventually all essential tasks will be automated, labor (specifically, human cognitive work) will be replaced and thus give way to capital (specifically, programmable hardware) as the scarce factor of production. Then the key source of growth will be the accumulation of programmable hardware (Jones and Manuelli, 1990; Growiec, 2019). Such a scenario is associated with a potentially massive acceleration in the GDP growth rate: following the digital revolution, growth in data volume, processing power and bandwidth is an order of magnitude faster than growth in global GDP (Hilbert and López, 2011).

If, in contrast, some essential production and R&D tasks will never be automated, human labor employed in these tasks will remain the scarce factor of produc-

tion, and labor-augmenting technological progress which improves its productivity will remain the key engine of long-run growth. The pace of GDP growth will then remain tied to the dynamics of R&D output, which may be temporarily affected by the accumulation of R&D capital but ultimately will remain constrained by the effective supply of R&D labor, most likely subject to a secular slowdown or stagnation in the coming decades (Bloom, Jones, Van Reenen, and Webb, 2020).

On top of that, the hypothetical force of hardware-augmenting technical change – understood e.g. as increases in energy efficiency of computers and other programmable machines – can alleviate the scarcity of programmable hardware. Its effects will therefore be particularly notable in the scenarios where hardware really is relatively scarce, i.e., in the scenarios where production and/or R&D can be fully automated.³ This possibility lends some justification for the hypothesis of an upcoming technological singularity.

The paper is related more broadly to studies focusing on automation and its impacts on productivity, employment, wages and factor shares (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011; Autor and Dorn, 2013; Graetz and Michaels, 2018; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018; Andrews, Criscuolo, and Gal, 2016; Arntz, Gregory, and Zierahn, 2016; Frey and Osborne, 2017; Barkai, 2020; Autor, Dorn, Katz, Patterson, and Van Reenen, 2020; Jones and Kim, 2018; Hemous and Olsen, 2018). It also touches the nascent literature on macroeconomic implications of development of “digital/robotic/machine labor”, AI and autonomous robots (Yudkowsky, 2013; Graetz and Michaels, 2018; Sachs, Benzell, and LaGarda, 2015; Benzell, Kotlikoff, LaGarda, and Sachs, 2015; DeCanio, 2016; Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018; Aghion, Jones, and Jones, 2019; Berg, Buffie, and Zanna, 2018; Caselli and Manning, 2019; Benzell and Brynjolfsson, 2019).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the key assumptions of the hardware–software model. Section 3 deals with the role of partial vs. full automation. Section 4 covers the mixed cases where full automation is possible only in production or only in R&D. Section 5 discusses the role of R&D capital. Section 6 covers hardware-augmenting technical change. Section 7 summarizes the results and concludes.

2 The Hardware–Software Model

The hardware–software model (Growiec, 2019) begins with the observation that all output is generated through purposefully initiated physical action. In other words, producing output requires both some physical *action* and some *code*, a set of instructions describing and purposefully initiating the action. Based on this premise

³One could also consider positive R&D spillovers which multiplicatively augment the entire R&D output (Jones, 1995), and thus indirectly augment also accumulable R&D capital. In this roundabout way, R&D spillovers can give rise to hardware-augmenting technical change.

I posit a general production function (for whatever output) featuring some physical *hardware* X , able to perform the action, and some disembodied *software* S , providing the information:

$$\text{Output} = \mathcal{F}(X, S). \quad (1)$$

I assume furthermore that $\mathcal{F} : \mathbb{R}_+^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ is increasing and concave in both factors and such that hardware X and software S are essential (i.e., $\mathcal{F}(0, S) = \mathcal{F}(X, 0) = 0$) and mutually complementary in production (the elasticity of substitution between X and S is below unity). One natural way to instantiate this assumption is to take a CES specification with an elasticity of substitution $\sigma \in (0, 1)$, cf. [Klump, McAdam, and Willman \(2007, 2012\)](#). The particular CES form of the \mathcal{F} function is however not necessary for the results.

Hardware X (“brawn”) includes physical actions performed by both humans and machines. Hence, X encompasses both the services of physical capital K and human physical labor L , where the latter variable excludes any know-how or skill of the worker.

Software S (“brains”), in turn, encompasses all useful instructions which stem from the available information, in particular the practical implementation of state-of-the-art technologies. Hence, it includes the skills and technological knowledge employed in human cognitive work, H , as well as pre-programmed software Ψ , which is essentially a task-specific list of instructions to be performed by the associated programmable hardware (e.g., computers, robots, smartphones, etc.). Pre-programmed software Ψ may in particular include artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, able to learn from data as well as potentially self-improve and self-replicate.

Within hardware X , capital and labor are inessential and substitutable as agents of physical action (elasticity of substitution above unity). This reflects the idea that whatever performs a given set of actions, if the actions are the same then the outcome should be the same, too. The same logic applies to software S : regardless of whether a set of instructions comes from a human brain or a mechanical information processing unit, if the actual information content of instructions is the same, then the outcome should be the same, too. An important caveat for the case of software, though, is that we don’t know yet if all types of instructions can be provided by both people and machines, that is whether all essential tasks can be potentially automated in the future. As it turns out, if certain essential cognitive tasks will never be automated, then the reduced form production function will feature complementarity of human cognitive work and pre-programmed software within software S (elasticity of substitution below unity, see the derivation and detailed discussion in [Growiec, 2021](#)).

Formally, I represent these assumptions as:

$$X = G_1(L, K), \quad S = G_2(H, \Psi), \quad (2)$$

where the elasticity of substitution in G_1 is above one, and in G_2 – above one in the full automation scenario, and below one in the partial automation scenario. The functions $G_1 : \mathbb{R}_+^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ and $G_2 : \mathbb{R}_+^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ are assumed increasing and concave in both inputs. The replacement of L with K within hardware X will be referred to as *mechanization*, whereas the replacement of H with Ψ within software S will be called *automation*.

Each of the four factors of production has its unique properties.

- *Human physical labor* L is rivalrous and given in fixed supply per worker and unit of time, $L = \zeta N$ where $\zeta \in [0, \bar{\zeta}]$ denotes the supply of physical labor per worker in a unit of time, expressed in physical capital units, and N is the total number of workers.
- *Physical capital* K is rivalrous but can be unboundedly accumulated in per-capita terms. Physical capital K may be non-programmable or programmable. The share of programmable hardware in total physical capital is denoted by χ (so that $\chi \in [0, 1]$).
- *Human cognitive work* H consists of three components, technological knowledge A , the average skill level h , and the number of workers N , as in $H = AhN$. Technological knowledge A , also interpreted as the size of the repository of task-specific codes, is non-rivalrous (Romer, 1986, 1990) and accumulable. Per-capita skill levels h are rivalrous and bounded above.
- *Pre-programmed software* Ψ also consists of three components, technological knowledge A , algorithmic skill level ψ which captures the degree to which pre-programmed software is able to perform the tasks collected in A , and the stock of programmable hardware χK on which the software is run, as in $\Psi = A\psi\chi K$. Technological knowledge A is the same as above.⁴ The algorithmic skill level ψ is assumed to be bounded above by the optimal code for performing a given task (i.e., perfect accuracy), though there may be in fact a much lower upper bound $\bar{\psi}$ (Hanson and Yudkowsky, 2013). Because digital software can be virtually costlessly copied, it is assumed that it can scale up to the level of all available programmable hardware χK .

All in all, the general production function takes the form:

$$\text{Output} = \mathcal{F}(G_1(\zeta N, K), G_2(AhN, A\psi\chi K)). \quad (3)$$

Finally, following Romer (1986, 1990), the synthetic hardware–software model envisages technological progress (growth in A) as expansion of the “repository of

⁴If in reality the sets of codes available to humans and digital algorithms are different, the discrepancy between the measures of both sets can be captured by the ratio ψ/h .

codes”, i.e., as the development of new, better instructions allowing to produce higher output with given hardware. Whether these new instructions take the form of new abstract ideas, scientific theories, systematically catalogued facts, codes specifying certain actions, or blueprints of physical items, they are all *information* and not actual *objects* or *actions*, and it is precisely this informational character that makes technologies non-rivalrous and a source of increasing returns to scale (Romer, 1990). In contrast to Paul Romer’s seminal contributions, though, here these instructions can be applied to the tasks at hand both by humans and machines. Thus all technological progress is naturally modeled as *software-augmenting*.

In the following sections I derive long-run growth predictions from the baseline hardware–software model and its several variations. I represent the baseline case as the following reduced-form two-sector economic growth model with a production and R&D sector:

$$Y = F(G_1(\zeta N, K), G_2(AhN, A\psi\chi K)), \quad (4)$$

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(G_1(\zeta N, K), G_2(AhN, A\psi\chi K)), \quad (5)$$

$$\dot{K} = sY - \delta K, \quad (6)$$

where the term A^ϕ (with $\phi \in [0, 1]$) captures the potentially positive “standing on shoulders” effects in R&D (Jones, 1995). The aggregate production function $F: \mathbb{R}_+^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ and the idea production function $\Phi: \mathbb{R}_+^2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$ are assumed to have the properties of the general production function \mathcal{F} discussed above.⁵ I additionally assume that F, G_1, G_2 and Φ are characterized by constant returns to scale. Finally, I posit that bounded variables (s, h, ψ, χ) will eventually stabilize, and so will global human population N . Thus I concentrate solely on the dynamics of two state variables of the model, K and A , in the long-run limit, treating s, h, ψ, χ and N as given constants (Solow, 1956; Jones, 2005).

In the following analysis I will use the following approximations as $K/N \rightarrow \infty$:

$$X \approx \alpha K \quad \text{where } \alpha = G_1(0, 1) = \lim_{x \rightarrow 0} G_1(x, 1), \quad (7)$$

$$S \approx \beta A\psi\chi K \quad \text{where } \beta = G_2(0, 1) = \lim_{x \rightarrow 0} G_2(x, 1), \text{ full automation,} \quad (8)$$

$$S \approx \gamma AhN \quad \text{where } \gamma = G_2(1, \infty) = \lim_{y \rightarrow \infty} G_2(1, y), \text{ partial automation.} \quad (9)$$

These approximations are valid thanks to the assumption of constant returns to scale as well as above unitary elasticity of substitution in G_1 (equation (7)) and in G_2 (equation (8)), and alternatively, below unitary elasticity of substitution in G_2 (equation (9)).

⁵Using a CES ideas production function specification, Mućk, McAdam, and Growiec (2021) demonstrate empirically for the US that R&D capital and R&D labor are gross complements also in R&D ($\sigma_{R\&D} < 1$).

I will also use the following asymptotic notation:

$$a_K = F(1, \infty) = \lim_{y \rightarrow \infty} F(1, y), \quad b_K = \Phi(1, \infty) = \lim_{y \rightarrow \infty} \Phi(1, y), \quad (10)$$

$$a_N = F(\infty, 1) = \lim_{x \rightarrow \infty} F(x, 1), \quad b_N = \Phi(\infty, 1) = \lim_{x \rightarrow \infty} \Phi(x, 1). \quad (11)$$

By the assumptions of constant returns to scale and less than unitary elasticity of substitution in F and Φ , limits in (10)–(11) exist and are finite.

3 Full vs. Partial Automation

I am now in the position to study the prospective sources of global economic growth in the digital age. I first observe that the answer depends crucially on whether all essential tasks can be potentially automated in the future (the *full automation* case), or some of them will always have to be performed by humans (the *partial automation* case).

Full Automation of Production and R&D. In the long-run limit, $K/N \rightarrow \infty$ as all tasks eventually get mechanized and automated in this scenario. Then for computing the long-run dynamics we may approximate $X = G_1(\zeta N, K) \approx \alpha K$ and $S = G_2(AhN, A\psi\chi K) \approx \beta A\psi\chi K$. As $K \rightarrow \infty$ and $A \rightarrow \infty$, asymptotically

$$Y = F(\alpha K, \beta A\psi\chi K) = \alpha K F(1, A\psi\chi \cdot \beta/\alpha) \rightarrow \alpha a_K K, \quad (12)$$

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\alpha K, \beta A\psi\chi K) = A^\phi \alpha K \Phi(1, A\psi\chi \cdot \beta/\alpha) \rightarrow \alpha b_K A^\phi K, \quad (13)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s\alpha a_K - \delta)K. \quad (14)$$

This means that when all essential tasks are subject to automation, the GDP growth rate will converge to $g = g_K = s\alpha a_K - \delta$, and the long-run growth engine will be the accumulation of programmable hardware (Jones and Manuelli, 1990). Because hardware is accumulated in proportion to K , whereas software – in proportion to AK , the stock of software will grow systematically faster than hardware, and therefore (programmable) hardware will eventually become the scarce factor of production. The pace of technical change (growth in A), while important over the transition, will eventually become irrelevant for growth.

Partial or No Automation of Production and R&D. In the long-run limit, all tasks will eventually get mechanized in this scenario while a fraction of essential production and R&D tasks will forever remain immune to automation, making human cognitive work and pre-programmed software complementary (elasticity of substitution below one in G_2 , cf. Growiec, 2021). As $K/N \rightarrow \infty$, for computing the long-run dynamics we may approximate $X = G_1(\zeta N, K) \approx \alpha K$ and $S = G_2(AhN, A\psi\chi K) \approx \gamma AhN$.

There are two sub-cases to consider here, either $\phi = 0$ or $\phi \in (0, 1]$. If $\phi = 0$ then an asymptotical balanced growth path is attained as $K \rightarrow \infty$ and $A \rightarrow \infty$, with K/A approaching a constant and

$$g = g_K = g_A = \Phi\left(\alpha\frac{K}{A}, \gamma hN\right) = sF\left(\alpha, \gamma\frac{A}{K}hN\right) - \delta. \quad (15)$$

In this case, the long-run GDP growth rate is determined by the pace of R&D, which is in turn sustained by the accumulation of R&D capital. This is a dual growth engine, and both hardware and software grow asymptotically at the same rate g , limited and determined by the scarce supply of human cognitive work hN .

In contrast, with positive R&D spillovers (“standing on shoulders”, [Jones, 1995](#)), asymptotically A will grow faster than K . When $\phi \in (0, 1]$, in the long-run limit

$$Y = F(\alpha K, \gamma A hN) = \alpha K F\left(1, \frac{\gamma A}{\alpha K} hN\right) \rightarrow \alpha a_K K, \quad (16)$$

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\alpha K, \gamma A hN) = A^\phi \alpha K \Phi\left(1, \frac{\gamma A}{\alpha K} hN\right) \rightarrow \alpha b_K A^\phi K, \quad (17)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s\alpha a_K - \delta)K. \quad (18)$$

Hence, in the presence of R&D capital accumulation, positive R&D spillovers reinstate the [Jones and Manuelli \(1990\)](#) dynamic even if production and R&D tasks are only partially automatable or not at all. This is because positive R&D spillovers are a multiplicative factor in the R&D equation and thus also partially augment the hardware factor employed in this sector, including accumulable R&D capital. The long-run growth engine is then again the accumulation of programmable hardware, setting the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit as $g = g_K = s\alpha a_K - \delta$, i.e., in particular de-coupling it from the supply of the scarce human input.

4 Full Automation Only in Production or R&D

Existing literature suggests that routine tasks, both manual and cognitive, are relatively easiest to automate, while automation gets harder for tasks which are more complex and carried out in a less structured environment. Among all tasks, cutting-edge R&D tasks requiring sophisticated reasoning and out-of-the-box thinking are probably among the least susceptible to automation ([Acemoglu and Autor, 2011](#); [Autor and Dorn, 2013](#); [Frey and Osborne, 2017](#)). It is therefore natural to expect that production tasks may – if at all – become fully automatable earlier than R&D tasks.⁶ In order not to miss any viable scenario of the future, however, in the following paragraphs I discuss both the scenario in which production eventually becomes

⁶This said, we also see that AI algorithms are already entering research tasks, such as scanning astronomical photographs, sequencing genomes, or predicting patterns of protein folding (AlphaFold), while some seemingly easy motor tasks remain notoriously difficult to automate – so perhaps we should be cautious with such “natural” predictions.

fully automatable, whereas R&D does not (in line with the implicit assumptions made by, among many others, [Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2018](#)), and the opposite scenario where eventually R&D becomes fully automatable, whereas production does not.

Full Automation Only in Production. In the long-run limit, as all production tasks eventually get mechanized and automated, while human cognitive work remains essential for R&D, asymptotically (with $K \rightarrow \infty$ and $A \rightarrow \infty$) I obtain:

$$Y \approx F(\alpha K, \beta A \psi \chi K) = \alpha K F(1, A \psi \chi \cdot \beta / \alpha) \rightarrow \alpha a_K K, \quad (19)$$

$$\dot{A} \approx A^\phi \Phi(\alpha K, \gamma A h N), \quad (20)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s \alpha a_K - \delta) K. \quad (21)$$

Hence, once all essential production tasks are automated, the long-run GDP growth rate will converge to $g = g_K = s \alpha a_K - \delta$, and the long-run growth engine will be the accumulation of programmable hardware ([Jones and Manuelli, 1990](#)). Because hardware is accumulated in proportion to K , whereas pre-programmed software used in production – in proportion to AK , the stock of production software will grow systematically faster than hardware, and therefore (programmable) hardware will eventually become the scarce factor of production.⁷

Full Automation Only in R&D. In the long-run limit, as all R&D tasks will eventually get mechanized and automated, while human cognitive work will remain essential for production, asymptotically A will be growing faster than K , implying (as $A \rightarrow \infty$ and $K \rightarrow \infty$):

$$Y \approx F(\alpha K, \gamma A h N) = \alpha K F\left(1, \frac{\gamma A}{\alpha K} h N\right) \rightarrow a_K K, \quad (22)$$

$$\dot{A} \approx A^\phi \Phi(\alpha K, \beta A \psi \chi K) = A^\phi \alpha K \Phi(1, A \psi \chi \cdot \beta / \alpha) \rightarrow \alpha b_K A^\phi K, \quad (23)$$

$$\dot{K} = (s \alpha a_K - \delta) K. \quad (24)$$

It turns out that full automation of R&D tasks is sufficient for generating the [Jones and Manuelli \(1990\)](#) dynamic with a long-run GDP growth rate $g = g_K = s \alpha a_K - \delta$ even if production tasks are only partially automatable or not at all. The long-run growth engine is then again the accumulation of programmable hardware. Compared to the scenario where neither production nor R&D tasks are fully automatable, full automation of R&D creates an additional positive feedback loop, accelerating and sustaining long-run growth. Compared to the scenario with full automation in production and R&D, though, the GDP growth rate is probably

⁷Comparing equations (13) and (20), one can infer that along the transition, the pace of technical change (growth in A) will be probably markedly lower than in the scenario where R&D tasks are automated as well. This should drag also on GDP growth. In the long-run limit, though, the role of R&D will vanish and its pace will eventually become irrelevant for the pace of GDP growth.

markedly lower over the transition and only converges to the same rate in the long-run limit.

5 R&D Capital

Nowadays R&D processes increasingly use sophisticated machinery. 21st century science would not be possible without sophisticated lab equipment, not to mention the personal computers on researchers' laps. Economic growth theory thus far has however rarely acknowledged this fact, focusing almost exclusively on the other crucial R&D input – researchers' skilled work. Hence, to bring the current paper closer to the established R&D-based growth literature (Romer, 1990; Jones, 1995; Barro and Sala-i-Martin, 2003; Acemoglu, 2009), I will now ask the question if the long-run predictions of the hardware–software model would be affected if the role of R&D capital were disregarded. Therefore in the following paragraphs I consider a version of the hardware–software model without R&D capital, i.e., without ever allowing R&D processes to be mechanized. To this end I fix $X = \zeta N$ in the R&D sector. I separately discuss the cases of partial vs. full automation in production and R&D.

No R&D Capital, Full Automation in Production. In the long-run limit, as all production tasks eventually get mechanized and automated in this scenario ($X \approx \alpha K, S \approx \beta A\psi\chi K$) while human physical work remains essential for R&D tasks ($X = \zeta N, S \approx \beta A\psi\chi K$), asymptotically I obtain as $A \rightarrow \infty$ and $K \rightarrow \infty$:

$$Y = F(\alpha K, \beta A\psi\chi K) = \alpha K F(1, A\psi\chi \cdot \beta/\alpha) \rightarrow \alpha a_K K, \quad (25)$$

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\zeta N, \beta A\psi\chi K) = A^\phi \zeta N \Phi\left(1, A \frac{\beta\psi\chi K}{\zeta N}\right) \rightarrow b_K A^\phi \zeta N, \quad (26)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s\alpha a_K - \delta)K. \quad (27)$$

Alternatively, with partial or no automation of R&D tasks ($S \approx \gamma AhN$ in R&D), the R&D equation becomes $\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\zeta N, \gamma AhN) = A^\phi \zeta N \Phi\left(1, A \frac{\gamma h}{\zeta}\right) \rightarrow b_K A^\phi \zeta N$, with exactly the same asymptotic result for the GDP growth rate.

Hence, I observe that with full automation of production tasks, the accumulation of programmable hardware is the key growth engine over the long run, and the GDP growth rate converges to $g = g_K = s\alpha a_K - \delta$ in the limit. While important over the transition, under full automation of production the presence or absence of R&D capital in the R&D process is irrelevant for the asymptotic results.

No R&D Capital, Full Automation Only in R&D. In the long-run limit, as all production tasks eventually get mechanized but not automated in this scenario ($X \approx \alpha K, S \approx \gamma AhN$) while human physical but not cognitive work remains essential for

R&D tasks ($X = \zeta N, S \approx \beta A \psi \chi K$), asymptotically ($A \rightarrow \infty, K \rightarrow \infty$) technology A grows at a faster rate than K , implying:

$$Y = F(\alpha K, \gamma A h N) = \alpha K F\left(1, \frac{\gamma A}{\alpha K} h N\right) \rightarrow \alpha a_K K, \quad (28)$$

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\zeta N, \beta A \psi \chi K) = A^\phi \zeta N \Phi\left(1, A \frac{\beta \psi \chi K}{\zeta N}\right) \rightarrow b_K A^\phi \zeta N, \quad (29)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s \alpha a_K - \delta) K. \quad (30)$$

It turns out that full automation of R&D tasks suffices to make accumulation of programmable hardware the key growth engine over the long run. Asymptotically, the economy follows the [Jones and Manuelli \(1990\)](#) dynamic and the GDP growth rate converges to $g = g_K = s \alpha a_K - \delta$. In the short to medium run, though, the failure to fully automate production processes most probably provides a major drag on the pace of growth.

No R&D Capital, Partial or No Automation. In the long-run limit, as all tasks eventually get mechanized in this scenario but a fraction of essential production and R&D tasks is immune to automation ([Growiec, 2021](#)), for computing the long-run dynamics (where $K/N \rightarrow \infty$) we may approximate $X \approx \alpha K$ in production and $S \approx \gamma A h N$ in production and R&D. For the latter sector we consequently obtain as $A \rightarrow \infty$ and $K \rightarrow \infty$:

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(\zeta N, \gamma A h N) = A^\phi \zeta N \Phi\left(1, A \frac{\gamma h}{\zeta}\right) \rightarrow b_K A^\phi \zeta N. \quad (31)$$

Hence, with constant population N technology progresses sub-exponentially if $\phi \in [0, 1)$ ([Jones, 1995](#); [Groth, Koch, and Steger, 2010](#)), or exponentially if $\phi = 1$ ([Romer, 1990](#)). In the absence of R&D capital and automation, the hardware–software model reproduces the well known scenarios of R&D based growth in the industrial era: either semi-endogenous ($\phi < 1$, Jones) or fully endogenous growth ($\phi = 1$, Romer). The ultimate source of growth, determining the long-run GDP growth rate, is R&D. In the absence of automation, software (in this case synonymous with human cognitive work) forever remains the scarce factor of production, limiting the pace of economic growth.

Specifically in the linear case of $\phi = 1$, the GDP growth rate converges asymptotically to:

$$g = g_A = g_K = b_K \zeta N, \quad (32)$$

and thus is proportional to the “weakest link” in the economy, unaugmentable physical labor employed in R&D. If $\phi < 1$, without population growth the rate of technological progress g_A , and consequently the GDP growth rate g , is bound to systematically slow down over time ([Jones, 1995](#)), in line with the secular stagnation hypothesis.

6 Hardware-Augmenting Technical Change

In [Growiec \(2019\)](#) I have argued, grounding my points in Romer’s seminal contributions, that technical change should be generally modeled as software-augmenting. After all, technological progress (growth in A) represents expansions of the “repository of codes”, i.e., the development of new, better instructions allowing to produce higher output with given hardware. These instructions are *information* and not actual objects or actions, and it is precisely this informational character that makes technologies non-rivalrous and a source of increasing returns to scale ([Romer, 1986, 1990](#)).

Hardware, by contrast, performs physical actions which require expediting energy. With this in mind, against the spirit of Romer’s theory one could tentatively conjecture that certain improvements in energy efficiency of physical actions could potentially count as hardware-augmenting technical change. In the following paragraphs I will entertain this possibility. In so doing, I must emphasize that hardware-augmenting technical change has the potential to resolve the scarcity of programmable hardware in production over the long run limit, thereby accelerating growth beyond the limits set by the constant-returns-to-scale, asymptotically linear character of the aggregate production function. When accumulation of programmable hardware is accompanied with R&D which is at least partly hardware-augmenting, these two forces have the potential of mutual reinforcement, creating self-reinforcing feedback loops that may lead to explosive, super-exponential growth.

Technically, the key modification of the framework is that the hardware factor in production and R&D is now technologically augmented: $X = G_1(A^\kappa(\zeta N + K), A(hN + \psi\chi K))$, with $\kappa \in (0, 1)$ representing the assumption that technological progress is partly hardware-augmenting but nevertheless remains biased towards software. Furthermore, to make an even stronger case for the importance of hardware-augmenting technical change, I will ignore possible positive R&D spillovers (“standing on shoulders” effects) by setting $\phi = 0$. The remaining assumptions remain in place. The results are as follows.

Hardware-Augmenting Technical Change with Full Automation. In the long-run limit, as all tasks will eventually get mechanized and automated in this scenario, for computing the long-run dynamics we may approximate $X \approx A^\kappa \alpha K$ and $S \approx \beta A \psi \chi K$. As $A \rightarrow \infty$ and $K \rightarrow \infty$, asymptotically:

$$Y = F(A^\kappa \alpha K, \beta A \psi \chi K) = A^\kappa \alpha K F(1, A^{1-\kappa} \psi \chi \cdot \beta / \alpha) \rightarrow \alpha a_K A^\kappa K, \quad (33)$$

$$\dot{A} = \Phi(A^\kappa \alpha K, \beta A \psi \chi K) = A^\kappa \alpha K \Phi(1, A^{1-\kappa} \psi \chi \cdot \beta / \alpha) \rightarrow \alpha b_K A^\kappa K, \quad (34)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx (s \alpha a_K A^\kappa - \delta) K. \quad (35)$$

Hence, when all essential production tasks are subject to automation and technical change is partly hardware-augmenting, the long-run GDP growth rate $g =$

$s\alpha a_K A^\kappa - \delta$ is ever increasing over time. The self-reinforcing dual long-run growth engine – the accumulation of programmable hardware plus hardware-augmenting technical change – generates explosive growth with an unbounded growth rate.

Quick algebra proves that this result remains intact also when automation happens only in production or only in R&D, or if there is no R&D capital.

Hardware-Augmenting Technical Change with Partial or No Automation.

In the long-run limit for this scenario, as all tasks will eventually get mechanized but a fraction of essential production and R&D tasks will forever remain immune to automation (Growiec, 2021), we may approximate $X \approx A^\kappa \alpha K$ and $S \approx \gamma AhN$.

I find that as $A \rightarrow \infty$ and $K \rightarrow \infty$, asymptotically K grows faster than $A^{1-\kappa}$. It follows that:

$$Y = F(A^\kappa \alpha K, \gamma AhN) = \gamma AhN F\left(\frac{\alpha K}{A^{1-\kappa} \gamma hN}, 1\right) \rightarrow \gamma a_N AhN, \quad (36)$$

$$\dot{A} = \Phi(A^\kappa \alpha K, \gamma AhN) = \gamma AhN \Phi\left(\frac{\alpha K}{A^{1-\kappa} \gamma hN}, 1\right) \rightarrow \gamma b_N AhN, \quad (37)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx s\gamma a_N AhN - \delta K. \quad (38)$$

The economy converges to a balanced growth path where the long-run GDP growth rate is determined by the pace of technical change:

$$g = g_A = g_K = \gamma b_N hN. \quad (39)$$

Comparing this result to the corresponding case without hardware-augmenting technical change (equation (15)), I find that now we do not have a dual growth engine anymore. This is because hardware-augmenting technical change, coupled with the accumulation of R&D capital, resolves the scarcity of hardware, and thus the only remaining scarce factor of production is software (human cognitive work). In such circumstances, the pace of hardware-augmenting technical change, as long as it is positive, is not relevant for the long-run GDP growth rate, which remains constrained by the scarce supply of human cognitive work hN . The fundamental engine of growth is then R&D, generating labor-augmenting technical developments.

If there were also positive R&D spillovers (“standing on shoulders” effects) on top of hardware-augmenting technical change, though ($\phi \in (0, 1]$), then the R&D equation would have been explosive again. To see this, take

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(A^\kappa \alpha K, \gamma AhN) = A^{1+\phi} \gamma hN \Phi\left(\frac{\alpha K}{A^{1-\kappa} \gamma hN}, 1\right) \rightarrow \gamma b_N A^{1+\phi} hN. \quad (40)$$

This equation implies an ever increasing growth rate of technology, $g_A = A^\phi \gamma b_N hN$, which – given that output Y is proportional to A – implies explosive, super-exponential economic growth.

Hardware-Augmenting Technical Change with Partial or No Automation and No R&D Capital. Let us now check how potent hardware-augmenting technical change is for generating long-run growth under the relatively most adverse circumstance: when there is partial or no automation and no R&D capital. In this scenario, in the long-run limit there will be full mechanization but no automation in production ($X \approx \alpha K, S \approx \gamma AhN$). With $K \rightarrow \infty$ and $A \rightarrow \infty$ I obtain that K grows faster than $A^{1-\kappa}$ and thus:

$$Y \approx F(A^\kappa \alpha K, \gamma AhN) = \gamma AhNF \left(\frac{\alpha K}{A^{1-\kappa} \gamma hN}, 1 \right) \rightarrow \gamma a_N AhN, \quad (41)$$

$$\dot{A} \approx \Phi(A^\kappa \zeta N, \gamma AhN) = A^\kappa \zeta N \Phi \left(1, \frac{\gamma h A^{1-\kappa}}{\zeta} \right) \rightarrow b_K A^\kappa \zeta N, \quad (42)$$

$$\dot{K} \approx s \gamma a_N AhN - \delta K. \quad (43)$$

In this scenario, due to $\kappa < 1$ technology A grows sub-exponentially (Jones, 1995; Groth, Koch, and Steger, 2010), and so does capital and output. The pace of hardware-augmenting technical change, while important over the transition, becomes irrelevant for the GDP growth rate in the long-run limit.

If there were also sufficiently strong R&D spillovers (“standing on shoulders” effects) on top of hardware-augmenting technical change, though ($\phi > 1 - \kappa$), then the R&D equation would have been explosive again. To see this, take

$$\dot{A} = A^\phi \Phi(A^\kappa \zeta N, \gamma AhN) = A^{\phi+\kappa} \zeta N \Phi \left(1, A^{1-\kappa} \frac{\gamma h}{\zeta}, 1 \right) \rightarrow b_K A^{\phi+\kappa} \zeta N. \quad (44)$$

This implies an ever increasing growth rate of technology, $g_A = A^{\phi+\kappa-1} b_K \zeta N$, which – given that output Y is proportional to A – implies super-exponential, explosive economic growth.

In the case of positive but weak R&D spillovers ($\phi \in (0, 1 - \kappa)$), the aforementioned sub-exponential growth result remains intact.

In the intermediate knife-edge case $\phi = 1 - \kappa$, economic growth becomes exactly exponential in the limit, and the GDP growth rate converges to $g = b_K \zeta N$, determined by the pace of R&D, and in turn set by the supply of human physical labor in the R&D sector, ζN .

7 Summary and Concluding Remarks

In the current paper I have provided a theoretical investigation of the prospective sources of long-run economic growth in the future. I have formulated a range of predictions conditional on certain key assumptions regarding automatability of production and R&D tasks and structure of the R&D process. The results follow from observing the dynamics of the relatively scarce factor of production in the long-run limit. When the scarce factor is human cognitive work, which is not accumulable per

capita, then the key source of growth is labor-augmenting technological progress, provided by R&D. However, when all essential tasks production or R&D tasks are subject to automation, then labor (human cognitive work) will eventually give way to capital (programmable hardware) as the scarce factor of production. Then the key source of growth will be the accumulation of capital (Jones and Manuelli, 1990; Growiec, 2019). If, in contrast, some essential production and R&D tasks would never be automated, and if there would be no accumulation of R&D capital constantly feeding into R&D productivity, human labor employed in these tasks will remain the scarce factor of production, and R&D driven labor-augmenting technological progress will remain the key engine of long-run growth. Each of the considered scenarios places our global future somewhere along the axis spanning from secular stagnation to technological singularity. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of results

Scenario	Growth engine	Growth rate
BASELINE (WITH R&D CAPITAL)		
Full Automation in Production and R&D	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Full Automation in Production	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Full Automation in R&D	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Partial or No Automation, $\phi = 0$	K acc + LATC	equation (15)
Partial or No Automation, $\phi \in (0, 1]$	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
WITHOUT R&D CAPITAL		
Full Automation in Production and R&D	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Full Automation in Production	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Full Automation in R&D	K acc	$g = s\alpha a_K - \delta$
Partial or No Automation, $\phi \in [0, 1)$	LATC*	secular stagnation
Partial or No Automation, $\phi = 1$	LATC**	$g = b_K \zeta N$
WITH HARDWARE-AUGMENTING TECHNICAL CHANGE		
Full Automation in Production and R&D	K acc + KATC	explosive growth
Full Automation in Production	K acc + KATC	explosive growth
Full Automation in R&D	K acc + KATC	explosive growth
<i>... With R&D Capital ...</i>		
Partial or No Automation, $\phi = 0$	LATC	$g = \gamma b_N h N$
Partial or No Automation, $\phi \in (0, 1]$	K acc + LATC	explosive growth
<i>... Without R&D Capital ...</i>		
Partial or No Automation, $\phi \in [0, 1 - \kappa)$	LATC	secular stagnation
Partial or No Automation, $\phi = 1 - \kappa$	LATC	$g = b_K \zeta N$
Partial or No Automation, $\phi \in (1 - \kappa, 1]$	LATC	explosive growth

Notes: LATC – labor-augmenting technical change; KATC – capital-augmenting technical change; * semi-endogenous R&D-based growth; ** fully endogenous R&D-based growth.

The big remaining question is, which of these scenarios is most likely to happen in reality? Let me try to cautiously answer this question by ruling out – or, to phrase it in the Bayesian spirit, by reducing the prior probability of – the scenarios which appear *least* probable given their theoretical underpinnings and historical evidence. First, in my opinion the scenarios with hardware-augmenting technical change are dubious because of their shaky theoretical foundations. I do admit, however, that something akin to hardware-augmenting technical change may occur in the event of a new technological revolution in hardware, amounting to the emergence of new, much more efficient ways of performing physical action (and in particular, computation) compared to the ones we know today (e.g., nanotechnology, quantum computing, etc.). For this reason I would not entirely dismiss these scenarios but rather treat them with due caution, paying attention particularly to the ones involving also full automation, which would make the hardware factor scarce in production, thus making a potential technological breakthrough in hardware exceptionally rewarding. Second, I also think that both anecdotal and systematic econometric evidence speaks in favor of presence of capital (in particular, programmable hardware) in the R&D process. This narrows down the set of most likely scenarios to the five baseline cases.

To further discriminate among these five scenarios, one needs to assess whether full automation of all essential tasks is technologically feasible (and economically viable). This is a deep question related to the possibility of creating a range of AI algorithms covering all essential domains in which the human brain is used, and indeed possibly unifying their functions in an overarching superhuman artificial general intelligence (Bostrom, 2014). Discussions on these issues are ongoing and stretch far beyond the domain of economics. If the answer to this question turns out to be positive (which, as Bostrom documents, is commonly expected by AI researchers), we will be realizing the top-most scenario in Table 1, discussed also in Growiec (2019). On the one hand, this scenario expects a (potentially massive, order of magnitude) acceleration in GDP growth. On the other hand, though, this growth acceleration is achieved only as the human contribution to overall production and R&D output falls towards zero in percentage terms, marginalized or outright replaced by the productive contribution of programmable machines and their software. The human labor share of output tends to zero, opening the door to broad-based technological unemployment.⁸

And if furthermore the global R&D sector, run either by people or the superhuman AI, finds a way to ease the growing scarcity of programmable hardware by the means of hardware-augmenting technical change, we may well be heading towards

⁸However, the final outcome regarding technological unemployment will be shaped also by the wage elasticity of labor supply and the institutional setup. For example, it may be possible for most people to stay employed despite all the progress in automation and even observe growing wages over time, only that growth in wages would be systematically slower than growth in output (Growiec, 2021).

technological singularity.

If full automation of all essential tasks turns to be impossible, though, then the most likely scenario will be the one in lines 4-5 in Table 1. In this scenario an acceleration in global GDP growth is also possible, but only provided that there are lasting “standing-on-shoulders” effects in R&D ($\phi > 0$). Otherwise, output growth will be always constrained by the pace of labor-augmenting technical change, the only force able to systematically increase the effective supply of the scarce factor of production: human cognitive work. In this scenario, GDP growth rates will probably remain in the same ballpark as the ones observed currently (with doubling times of the order of 20–30 years). The declining supply of human R&D labor will be then counteracted by the accumulation of programmable R&D capital and its software, creating a dual growth engine (i.e., labor-augmenting technical change plus R&D capital accumulation). Factor shares (including the human labor share) will eventually stabilize and there will be no threat of broad-based technological unemployment.

In sum, this study has drawn the span of potential long-run growth outcomes in a digital economy where production and R&D processes can be potentially automated, pointing to a likely growth acceleration as more and more processes become fully automated in the future. What remains for further research is a quantitative, numerical assessment of relative importance of the considered mechanisms over the coming decades – which must necessarily involve a fair amount of speculation. How long is the long run? How long is the transition period going to be? At which point will we realize that human cognitive work and pre-programmed software, previously complementary because many tasks required the human input, have already become broadly substitutable? When will – if at all – the accumulation of programmable hardware overtake labor-augmenting technical change as the key engine of growth? As Niels Bohr used to say, “it is difficult to predict, especially the future”. And especially the future that may feature ground-breaking technological breakthroughs, I would add, conveniently leaving this task for future research.

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