THREE THOUSAND YEARS AGO,
a young Greek entrepreneur named Icarus came up with an idea for a truly disruptive new technology: a set of wings, fashioned out of bird feathers and held together by wax, which could be worn on the human arm. Icarus hesitated before testing his new device: didn’t the Gods warn against human arrogance? But he quickly dismissed his doubts: didn’t the sages who gathered in the marketplaces every day warn about fear of failure? In a flush of excitement he decided to dispense with beta testing and go straight for a hard launch.

The exhilaration was incredible. Icarus flew ever higher into the bright-blue Aegean sky—and as he flew he thought about selling his new product in the marketplace and becoming as rich as Croesus. The wings would surely disrupt
old industries and create new ones in an instant. Sailboats and oxcarts would be put out of business! Argonauts would carry Greek products and culture to distant lands! Even the Gods would have to rethink their business models as men began to rule the skies as well as the land! But as he soared toward the sun things began to go wrong. The heat began to melt the wax. The feathers fluttered off into the air. And poor Icarus fell to earth. Sometimes failure is more than just a learning experience.

The device that has attracted most attention so far is Google Glass: a combination of high-tech eyeglasses and head-mounted computers that allow their wearers to see a world of information floating in front of their eyes. But there are hundreds of other clever devices that are either already in the shops or about to be launched. These products come in three main forms.

The first is “quantified self” products that allow people to measure (and therefore improve) everything that they do. Fitbit and Jawbone make wrist devices that track physical activity and sleep patterns. MC10 is developing a wearable patch that measures everything from blood pressure to heart rate. One subcategory of quantified-self products is medical devices that give people the power to monitor their health. MC10’s patch will be able to deliver medicine as well as decide whether you need it. Another subcategory is surveillance devices: Narrative makes a tiny camera, designed to be worn on a lapel, that automatically takes photos every 30 seconds so that you can blog your life.

The second area is enhancement technologies. In many ways Google Glass is the most basic of these. Prosthetic devices and exoskeletons allow the elderly or the handicapped to overcome their disabilities. Oscar Pistorius, a double amputee since infancy, was able to run the 400 meters at the 2012 Summer Olympics in 45.44 seconds, thanks to artificial legs. Cyberdine, a Japanese company, produces an artificial limb ironically named HAL (for hybrid assistive limb) that can help disabled people learn to walk. Researchers at M.I.T. have produced exoskeletons that allow people, such as soldiers, firefighters and removal workers, to carry super-human loads.

The third product form is virtual-reality devices. Oculus Rift is one of a new generation of companies that are producing headsets that are far more user-friendly than anything we have seen before. Facebook bought the company in July 2014 for $2 billion. Leap Motion has developed a way of controlling your computer with a wave of the hand. Virtual-reality headsets will enable movie watchers or game players to enter video paradises. But they also have more practical applications. Executives will be able to get the feeling of attending meetings without the need to travel. Architects will be able to slip on headsets to see what their designs will look like in practice.

Sports clubs have already incorporated wearable technology into athletic equipment in order to monitor the athletes’ performance and reduce the chances of injury. Premier League football players have sensors in their boots to monitor their movements and kicking styles. N.F.L. players have sensors in their helmets to detect concussion. Police officers are
beginning to wear cameras that film everything they do, thanks to a spate of suspicious deaths of young black men in the United States. Luxury carmakers such as Infiniti, Mercedes-Benz and Volvo are equipping their cars with computerized steering systems that keep them centered in their lanes, computerized brakes that automatically slam on in an emergency and computerized parking systems that allow you to navigate even Britain’s tiny parking spaces.

These digital devices arrive pre-loaded to change the world thanks to a combination of four developments: the relentless improvement in the power of computing; the increasing speed of broadband access; the dramatic spread of sensors; and the birth of cloud computing. The combination of these four developments is giving us a new kind of world—a world that is hyperconnected and data saturated, a world in which the Internet of everyone is linked to an Internet of everything. Entrepreneurs have produced clever devices such as virtual-reality headsets and pedometers before to little effect. But today these devices are being launched into a world where they can immediately plug themselves into a universe of information.

LIKE THE SMARTPHONE revolution before it, the smart device revolution will do an enormous amount to change the world for the better. Quantified-self devices can encourage us to exercise more, making it easier not only to measure our performance but to compete with distant friends. Smart glasses can help surgeons with their work. Exoskeletons can give the disabled the gift
A SIMPLE WALK DOWN THE STREET USED TO PROVIDE A BREAK FROM THE ELECTRONIC CACOPHONY. WE COULD FOCUS ON OUR SURROUNDINGS RATHER THAN OUR SCREENS AND INTERACT WITH OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS RATHER THAN THEIR DIGITAL AVATARS.
The hyperconnected world is also a hyperdisturbing world: the Web has an extraordinary capacity to shrink our focus and scatter our attention. Rings and buzzes interrupt our thoughts. Screens suck away our time. Everybody is always half-present and half-absent—keeping half an eye on the phone as they talk, texting under the table at meetings. No wonder the National Safety Council said that phones were involved in a quarter of all American road accidents in 2012.

Digital devices will make distraction far worse. A few years ago we had respite from electronic stimulation when we went for a walk or dropped into Starbucks. Now we are constantly tempted to check our mobile devices as we walk along and stand in line. But at least we can put them in our pockets. In a world where we are wearing, rather than merely carrying, our information-rich devices, the buzzing and twittering will be in our heads rather than in our pockets.

But distraction is a monster. It drowns thought. It kills creativity. It undermines performance. It creates the worst of all worlds—a world in which we are constantly stretching ourselves to the maximum but never performing to our full potential. We hop from project to project. We jump from stimulus to stimulus. We are always starting things but never finishing them, always present but never really there.

The glory of the Web—that it puts the world’s information at our fingertips—is also its curse: information is so omnipresent that we don’t know what to do with it. Even successful people mistake information for knowledge. Less successful people are lost in what Linda Stone, a former Microsoft employee, calls a world of “continuous partial distraction.” The Information Overload Research Group estimates that information overload wastes 25 percent of information workers’ time and costs the U.S. economy $997 billion annually. The good people at IORG have not seen anything yet: digital devices will take data overload to entirely different levels. We will have data staring us in the face and draped over our clothes. We will have data informing our most casual interactions.

It is one thing to be able to consult a comparison shopping site when you are sitting in front of your computer. It is quite another to have figures pop up on Google Glass when you reach for a bottle of milk in a corner shop.

The argument for putting up with this intrusion into our lives is that digital devices empower us. But do they? In his book “The Glass Cage,” Nicholas Carr documents numerous ways in which the advance of technology leads not to an engorgement of our powers but to their atrophy. Pilots become so dependent on autopiloting technology that they lose the ability to respond in an emergency. Writers become so dependent on spelling-and grammar-checking tools that they lose the ability to proofread. Drivers become so dependent on GPS devices that they forget how to read maps.

Obstacles are the grit in the human oyster: we can only become great writers if we spend years learning foreign languages and committing great literature to memory. Allow digital devices to remove that grit and you end up not with H.G. Wells’s “men like gods” but with men like consumer zombies. Carr points out that policy makers are beginning to recognize that overdependence on technology can be fatal: in January 2013 the Federal Aviation Administration issued a warning to pilots to spend less time flying on autopilot and more time flying the planes manually. Even Google is beginning to worry about the world that it is creating. Vivek Haldar, a veteran software developer at the Internet giant, warns that sharp tools can produce dull minds.
The wearable revolution will amplify all this. A simple walk down the street used to provide a break from the electronic cacophony: we could focus on our surroundings rather than our screens and interact with our fellow human beings rather than their digital avatars. But wearable devices will mean that we take the electronic bubble with us. In 2013 Sergey Brin delivered an advertising pitch for Google Glass at a TED conference that inadvertently highlighted the device’s dangers: thanks to its ability to personalize information and track users, he argued, Google Glass will allow the company to automate the flow of information into people’s minds. “You’d just have information come to you as you needed it.” Tech industry heavyweight Marc Andreessen likes to say that “software eats everything.” With Google Glass and company, the danger is that software will eat what Adam Smith called “human sympathy”: the capacity to engage in a free-flowing exchange with our fellow human beings.

As well as autism, self-abortion can lead to existential angst: the more we give in to selfie-obsession, the more we lose our self-confidence. Søren Kierkegaard spoke of “the despair of infinite possibility.” The Web can be disorienting precisely because it makes so many things available to us. Sherry Turkle, director of M.I.T.’s Initiative on Technology and Self, speaks of people being “alone together.” They crowd together but are locked into their own Internet-enabled universes. Psychiatrist Edward Hallowell refers to “connected isolation.” Tech columnist Andrew Keen’s phrase, “I update therefore I am,” is a good summary of people’s desperate attempt to prove that they matter in a world where everything is clickable and nothing really has significance.

The biggest problem with digital enhancement, however, lies not in the side effects but in what economists might call the opportunity cost: they get people to look in the wrong place for competitive advantages. Google’s Michael Jones argues that “people are about 20 I.Q. points smarter now” thanks to his company’s mapping tools and other online services. If so, the history of the past decade and a half is proof that very smart people can do very dumb things.

Think of the great business problems of the last few years—the implosion of Enron and WorldCom in 2001 and 2002 and the economic crisis of 2007 and 2008. These problems did not result from a lack of data or an insufficiency of brainpower. Enron and Lehman Brothers were two of the most brainy companies in the world. Jeff Skilling, the CEO of Enron, was the quintessential “smartest guy in the room,” a superstar at both Harvard Business School and McKinsey. Lehman was stuffed full of digital geniuses from M.I.T. Their problems resulted from a lack of judgment. Better judgment would have told these business geniuses that houses of cards invariably collapse. They would also have told them that, like jealousy, greed usually ends up mocking the flesh that it feeds upon. Think of the great existential problems that face us every day—the profusion of choices and the saturation of data. These problems cannot be solved by putting on Google glasses. Once again we need to make better decisions to distinguish significant data from the dross—to know when to turn off and tune out. The smarter machines become at processing data, the more human beings will have to distinguish themselves by demonstrating better judgment—that is, the peculiar combination of qualities that come from human reason and human empathy.

Some clever businesspeople are beginning to realize that technology is not always the answer—and indeed may well be the problem. “Mindfulness” is all the rage in some big corporations, which have hired coaches to teach the mix of relaxation and meditation techniques. A growing number of books teach us how to unplug from the Web and focus on the task at hand. Daniel Goleman’s 2013 offering was called “Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence.” The subtitle of Edward
Hallowell’s “Driven to Distraction at Work” is “How to Focus and Be More Productive.” There is a fashion for “digital detoxes” and “technology Sabbaths.” A slow Web movement tries to provide us with the advantages of the Web without the disadvantages. Tim Armstrong, CEO of AOL, has introduced a policy of giving his employees 10 percent think time to combat the scourge of what he calls “nanothinking disease.”

But wise businesses need to go further—and put ancient wisdom along with new technology at the heart of their business strategies. The best way to thrive in a hyperconnected world is to forget about the latest device and release your inner philosopher—immerse yourself in the great books that have defined human civilization and meditate on the great questions that have echoed down the centuries. Immersing ourselves in great thinkers will help us to overcome our obsession with status symbols. It is difficult to measure your worth in terms of how many toys you accumulate when you have immersed yourself in Plato. It will also help us to overcome the problem of distraction: it is difficult to measure your life in e-mails, tweets and LinkedIn connections when you have meditated on Wittgenstein. Icarus’s start-up would have been a lot more successful if he had been less infatuated with technology and more willing to listen to the ancient philosophers.