

Sketches of a Future Society

Art / Earth / Tech: the Logic of our Purpose and the Reason for our Existence

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Why? Why What?

Why Art / Earth / Tech?

This will take us on a much deeper journey

Asking Good Questions

SCQA = Situation, Complication, Question, Answer

Situation

We've never had it so good!

Things have got a lot better materially; and science and technology mean we know a lot more about the material world.

- A good portion of humanity no longer want for food or shelter.
- Consequence of dramatic material and technological growth of the last few centuries

Complication

But we're still not that well/happy [even when rich].

Plus, progress is very unevenly distributed and we may even be going backwards (global warming, inequality etc).

- Many remain poor and without basic security of sustenance or thought
- Benefits of material abundance for the well-off seem relatively meagre – the Buddhist monk is happier than the billionaire
- Greater wealth and power has not come with greater wisdom. Our errors now play out on a larger scale – from aggression exaggerated by biological and nuclear weapons to the tragedy of commons threatening the entire biosphere
- Things may even be going backwards: ecological damage, inequality, decline of community etc
 - though one must always be sceptical – “everything is going to the dogs” is an old complaint

Complication II

Additionally: "end of vision / end of hope / end of utopia"

Many traditional sources of hope for progress seem to have faded whether in religion and politics.

- Decline of hopeful religion ~150y since “death of god”
- Decline of hopeful politics ~30-40y since “death of socialism”
 - Politics reduced to managerialism for growth (but growth of what)
 - Postmodern disdain for vision and values (just leave me alone to choose, triumph of the “dispassionate” market)
 - Resurgence of a “selfish”, resentful rightwing and reactionary fundamentalism

Question

Why is this? Specifically:

- If you're so rich, why aren't you so happy ...?
- Why can't we cooperate better (especially to solve existential risks like climate change)

And: What is to be done?

- Is there a powerful, unifying vision for humanity – both personally “the good life”, and societally “the good society”?
- How would we achieve that?
 - What is our theory of change?
 - How do we get started?

Summary

- Situation: You've never had it so good!
- Complication: But we're still not that well/happy. Plus, progress is unevenly distributed and we may even be going backwards
- Complication II: death of god, death of socialism aka "end of utopia" — many traditional sources of hope for progress have faded whether in religion or politics
- Question: Why is this? And what is to be done?

Answers ...

Taken as hypotheses and suggestions

Why

Why are we not that happy and why do we struggle to cooperate and love one another?

Spiritual version: We are all Buddha, but our minds are encrusted with delusion, hatred and anger.

Scientific version: evolution did not select for wellness or wisdom, but for survival fitness. Extraordinarily, and accidentally, we ended up with consciousness, self-reflection and enough cognitive capacity to develop language, culture and complex abstract thought — and meditation. But these are accidents and they have to cope with our reptilian, amygdala core.

Why II

Lots of stuff encrusts our mind that is tough to remove, for example:

- Impulsivity (thinking fast), heuristics, envy, greed etc
- Illusion of permanent self, that self is distinct from others, that "I" am my thoughts etc =>
 - attachment to views — I *am* my views => experiencing disagreement as existential threat => I'm right, you're wrong e.g. I'm a man, you're a woman so I'm better than you; I'm white, you're black etc
- fear of death and craving for survival (think of Voldemort!)

Why IIB

And this creates and is reinforced by culture allowing us to get locked into self-reinforcing bad equilibriums ...

- Institutionalized patriarchy — men *are* better than women
- Ritualized warfare — we *are* better than them, they *are a threat* to us
- Guilds — in groups that exclude others to retain economic and social power
- Wearing suits and high heels ;-)

Why III

Four kinds of problem

- Problems of science
- Problems of self knowledge
- Problems of self control
- Problems of the collective

All our techno-scientific advance in recent centuries has only helped with first one.

What

Transformation of being

- Wellness ourselves
- Solve: collective action problems etc

But society/culture helps create being =>

transformation of being is interdependent with transformation of society.

Plus material sustenance matters =>

transformation of being is interdependent with transformation of production.

What II

We believe there is a powerful unifying vision for humanity.

- A. High level ends: Joy, freedom, love, wisdom, creativity, balance, peace, contribution ...
- B. Conditions for that as well!

*Roots in many spiritual traditions esp secular Zen Buddhism
— four noble truths are correct.*

However, for reasons just discussed this is hard to achieve individually as we are formed and supported by our societies so ...

What IIB

We need to transform culture and society but ...

Hard culturally since a variety of other successful, maladaptive cultures that you need to compete with e.g. competitive, individualistic, capitalism

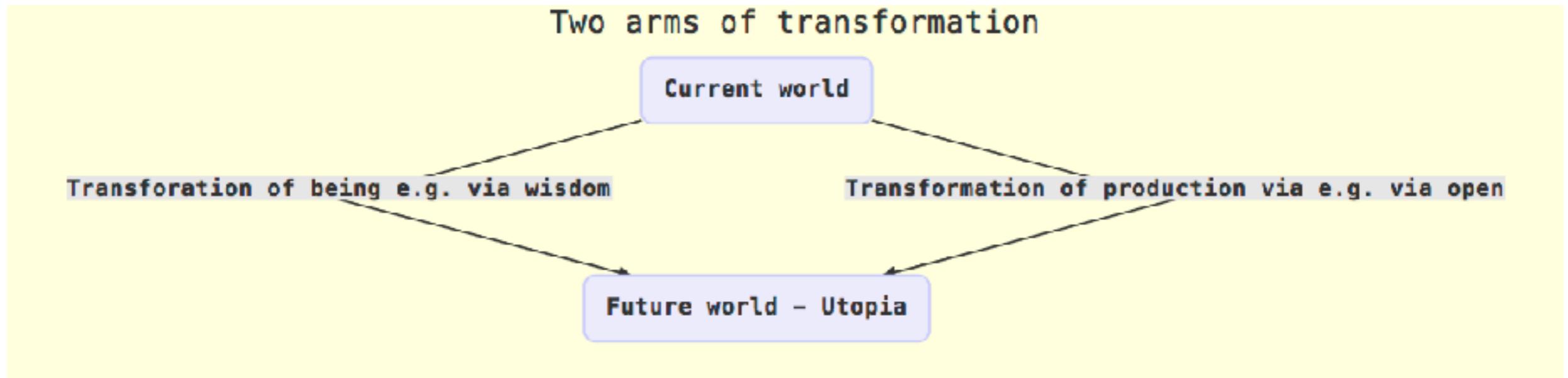
[Why do you need to compete? Can't you just “do your own thing?”. Unfortunately not, other systems will exist and will compete both materially and “spiritually”. Concretely, suppose we all decide to prioritise family time more and work less then this could work because prices of key goods like housing will fall too. But if you just do this on your own and every stays working hard in the competitive, individualistic competitive system you'll be in trouble. Similarly, we are strongly influenced by those around us. If everyone else regards material success as the basis for status it is hard to be different but if everyone thinks that other qualities are important — being a good person, being a loving parent etc — then those can succeed]

So we need to think deeply about how to achieve this transformation ...

How ...

How then is transformation to come about?

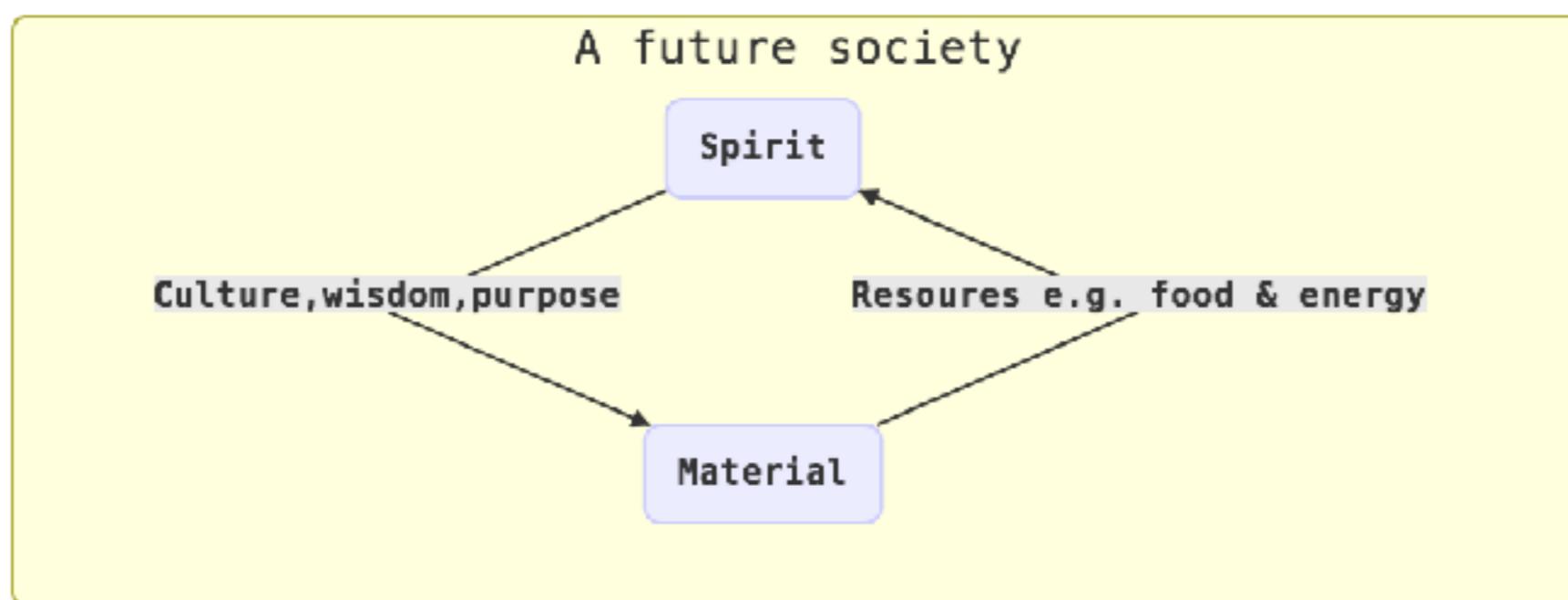
Two Arms of Transformation



Culture and Ecosystem

A sustainable cultural ecosystem
depends on
well-functioning and interdependent
material and spiritual economies

Spiritual = being, emotion, consciousness — nothing specifically religious



Culture

To realise a wiser, weller world requires:

A Culture

- Personally: a self-sustaining community that support self-development and material sustenance => a culture
- Societally: a self-sustaining group dedicated to bringing about change on a long-term basis with a clear vision and strong values (resistance to corruption) => a culture

Culture II

A culture consists of:

Values (and Vision)

Norms

Behaviours

*Sketches of a Future Society provides
a detailed picture of what this looks like*

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We are such a community committed to creating that culture and that society.

- Being: living well and wise lives ourselves, developing our being
- Research: work out where we need to go (in detail) and how to get there
- Business: making a living, generating resources for investment
- Politics: (not necessarily electoral) structured effort to effect change in the collective

Part of wisdom is to avoid sacrificing means to ends. Thus, all activities are themselves part of the practice i.e. we must do them wisely and well themselves (and not end up working 14h days to “save the world”!).

Conclusion

Need for change

Deep transformation needed

Opportunity

Culture

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A New Culture

We need a new culture and economy

To develop a different way of being you need a culture, an ecosystem, a community. You can't do it on your own: take a dedicated zen monk and remove him for a few months from the monastery and you will find his practice weaken even to the point of dissolution.

A new culture is fragile, at least initially

Cultures create a system of psychic and material reward for doing what is aligned with that culture (crudely: you get respect and you get paid). Current dominant culture (in e.g. the US) focuses on material success. To move beyond this you need to create a subculture of sufficient critical mass to a) be self-sustaining b) resist the dominant culture

Weller behaviours and values are fragile because humans have self-control issues and cognitive and behavioural biases to behaviours and thoughts that are non-well long-term but have short-term payoffs. Examples, include taking drugs, checking your Facebook feed, watching boxsets, gossiping, sleeping in rather than meditating, eating that doughnut (when you are on your diet). In addition, much of our internal thought dialogue is negative and oriented to fear-based survivalism. Put crudely: our default setting is fear-based survivalism rather than opportunity-based wellness.

Our new culture needs material and psychic sustainability

In fact, we want more than material sustainability — we want to outcompete the current dominant culture. Why?

- A. Just to be sustainable we have to be competitive otherwise "they'll have bought all the land"
- B. We want to attract people over — show we can do just as well
- C. We want to accumulate capital: natural capital to protect it and other capital for investment purposes be that in research or otherwise

Appendix

Opportunity and Context

Metaphor of scientific revolution

... and possibility of psychic revolution

1600-1800 = scientific revolution. Started to look at natural world with open-mindedness => ask questions, do experiments, build theories (that are always just an approximation)

600 BC psychic revolution with Buddha and pre-socratic philosopher: started to look at consciousness and reality in a similar way — with open-minded enquiry. Buddha: “Please examine my teachings for yourself, test them against your own experience, don’t take my word for it”.

Buddhist and other wisdom traditions have been developing via self-reflective meditation for 2000 years (but only recently discovered in the west in last ~50 years). These wisdom traditions also now get to combine with modern neuroscience etc => opportunity for a psychic revolution similar to scientific revolution.

One important reservation to this analogy: scientific knowledge and skills are transmissible rapidly by imitation — seeing you use a rock to hammer something allows me to do the same. However, ontological knowledge (“enlightenment”) seems much less transmissible and has to be discovered by deep practice person by person. You being enlightened does not immediately enable me to become enlightened.

Put aphoristically: knowledge is transmittable but wisdom is not (knowledge can transfer by imitation and language but wisdom requires self-discovery and practice as wisdom requires experiential learning whilst knowledge is informative learning. At the same time, the culture in which people exist and the people they interact can make a big difference — being taught by a Buddha is useful! In fact, culture is probably more important for wisdom development than it is for knowledge.

Opportunity and Context

On material side we have the opportunity of digital technology => abundance is natural, sharing is natural

Compare: bread vs bits

Miracle of loaves and fishes vs gangnam style 2bn youtube views

A ferrari for everyone is an impossibility, but everyone having shakespeare is not.

What's new about this? (Hasn't this been done before?)

Yes and no ... — almost nothing here is new.

But ... most utopian visions in the past were either:

- Religious — salvation beyond this world (and any material or spiritual transformation existed in that context)
- Materialist — for example, marxist communism. Here the belief was that transformation of the “structures of production” would lead to human liberation.

We differ in thinking that you need both spiritual and material transformation and in having a secular spirituality.

We differ in thinking about culture as a central concept in transformation of being — and economy.

Comment: (e)utopian visions by their nature are about society not just the individual — they are not about individual salvation beyond this world but transformation here and now.