

Humanity's Transition

What you need to know to consciously participate

Blurb

Our global civilisation is undergoing the most profound transition in human history - environmental, technological, economic, social, psychological, and more. Its nature - dystopian, transformational or both - will largely depend on how many people understand it and choose to participate consciously.

Drawing on insights from brilliant thinkers across disparate domains, I've attempted to synthesize an understanding of, and a way to respond to, humanity's transition. In the process my thinking has been fundamentally changed. Disconcertingly so.

I offer neither pragmatic proposals nor certainties. Given the hubris of humanity and the quirkiness of the cosmos, uncertainty is almost the only certainty. Instead, I recommend a martial arts approach: use your opponent's movement to identify vulnerabilities, then tackle them head-on. And those vulnerabilities are - the core assumptions upon which our society has developed.

My approach is to rationally undermine the unconscious, unquestioned assumptions that define both our understanding of the world and our sense of purpose - from the normal (economics, education etc.) to the paranormal and metaphysical. This doesn't resolve the uncertainties, but replaces them with deeper ones. And here's the key: in the process, we find new perspectives from which new options emerge.

My hope is that this book will help you challenge your assumptions and find your own way to consciously participate in the coming transition. You'll be part of it anyway, so you may as well help yourself and humanity by doing it consciously.

Alex Goodall

Oxford

alex@alexgoodall.com

Introduction

What this book is about

You could think of this book as dealing with the question:

“What on earth is happening on Earth?”

If we're so smart and if we've made so much 'progress', how come we can't get our act together to fix climate change? Nuclear war aside, it's the most blatantly obvious threat to civilization since civilization started.

And how come we're smart enough to figure out we're getting so dystopian that we need 17 Sustainable Development Goals; smart enough to have them formulated by the United Nations and adopted in 2015 by 193 countries; smart enough realise they need to be achieved by 2030 — and yet we're so incompetent that we're failing abysmally at getting anywhere close to actually reaching those goals? Current estimates push the completion of many SDGs to 2100 or beyond. This glaring disparity between awareness and action is just one of countless examples where we've failed to address obvious civilizational flaws. What's wrong with us?

It's all very weird and worrying. Much of the book is about that.

But what hasn't changed since forever is that the world is full of awe-inspiring wonders. The fact of billions of gigantic galaxies in the cosmos. The fact that nearly all life on earth depends on the synthesis of biomass mediated by photons of sunlight: otherwise known as photosynthesis. The fact that a single cell can replicate into thirty trillion cells, each performing the correct function in the correct location - and end up being your neighbour asking if you'd like to pop over on Sunday for a barbeque (with vegan options). The fact that I can write these words and you can understand them. The fact of music - vibrations of air particles that can generate intense emotions. The fact of love - the mysterious driver of so much of life. The fact of consciousness - arguably the most awe-inspiring of all since without it, there is no understanding, no emotions, no love. And no awe.

Somewhere along the way we've become desensitised to this awe, despite constantly being

subjected to wonders that should trigger it. This book has to be about that as well.

These two perspectives onto the world may not seem related, and initially much of the material will be about the mess we're in. But the second perspective will start infiltrating into the discussion when we look at Question 3.

The three questions

So how do we go about analysing and thinking about it all? A good starting point is the concept of "humanity's transition" - the idea that we are going to go through an epochal change. This is nothing new (Ref: 1), although the thousands of people who discuss it may use different terminology. With that as a starting point, I've divided the book into three parts, each focused on one of these three questions:

Q1: What is humanity's transition?

Q2: What are the drivers of the transition?

Q3: How might we respond appropriately to knowing about the transition?

To get us off the ground, here are high-level answers to and analyses of these questions. They provide a summary of the overall narrative of the book. You'll notice that each questions has a particular temporal focus - but it won't be exclusively so. Q1 will be mostly historical, Q2 will be mainly about the present, and Q3 will be predominantly about the future.

You should assume that at the end of almost every paragraph there is a comment to the effect that "I'll be saying more about this, and giving examples, later."

Q1: What is humanity's transition?

The transition of humanity consists of new instances of two distinct, but related, historical patterns: civilizational collapse and cultural transformation. The new instances of both have already started, but with significant differences from the past. These differences make their consequences unknowable.

Collapse

All past civilizations have collapsed, so there's no reason to suppose ours will persist indefinitely. The difference today is that we have a global civilization. The implications of a global collapse are unknowably consequential. (Climate is just one of many, highly inter-related contributing factors.)

Since you're reading this book, it's unlikely you are noticing any signs of a collapse and you may feel this analysis is mere doom mongering - a fad or meme that it's cool to adopt. Maybe it is, but that doesn't mean it's not going to happen. Many communities would argue that a local collapse has already happened to them, and some analysts argue that the global collapse is unstoppable underway.

Transformation

Observation One: Cultural theorists have identified that, over time and across civilizations, five clearly identifiable stages of cultural and psychological transformation have emerged (think 'the start of agriculture and cities' and 'the scientific/industrial revolution' as examples). These stages define the very essence of how our societies and psyches have developed. The latest such stage - the sixth - started to emerge towards the end of the 20th century.

Observation Two: The timeframes between these transformations have been getting shorter and shorter - from tens of thousands, to thousands, to hundreds of years and now to decades... In fact, some say that the seventh stage has already started. Such constant shortening will end up with a new cultural stage emerging every Tuesday afternoon, and then every tea-time and so on. This is blatantly ridiculous, making it obvious that the whole pattern of such transformations is coming to an end - the implications of which are unknowable.

So - the transition is an interplay between collapse and some unprecedented form of transformation.

Q2: What are the drivers of the transition?

The most obvious drivers of the transition are the negative consequences of the principles underlying earlier cultural transformations.

Don't be seduced by the implicitly positive implications of the word 'transformation'. A cultural transformation doesn't simply mean that bad stuff gets fixed. It's more that new ways of thinking and doing emerge. Although this is likely to mean that some bad stuff does get fixed (or simply goes away), it also means that a new type of bad appears. That's what I mean by "the negative consequences of the principles underlying earlier cultural transformations".

So, the core drivers of our current civilizational collapse are primarily - and perversely - the principles underlying the amazingly wonderful cultural transformation we call modernity (triggered by the scientific and industrial revolutions), which started in the 15th-ish century. Its negative consequences include:

- that we understand the world materialistically through science, and so find no fundamental meaning to existence
- that we manufacture meaning by assigning it to money and power, and so are driven to increase finance rather than flourishing
- that we have become as powerful as gods through our technology, whilst remaining as foolish as infants in our wisdom
- that we have become so obsessed with progress and growth that we've destroyed the "off" switch, forgetting our planet has finite resources, and
- that our understanding of the world is derived from reducing it into parts and discrete domains, so we miss the bigger, systems-wide, holistic picture.

The above is the core analysis of what is driving the transition.

The cultural stage following modernity (imaginatively referred to as post-modernity) also has major dysfunctions (alongside its wonders) that are also contributing to our collapse.

Q3: How might we respond appropriately to knowing about the transition?

[The framing of this question is important. It's not that we have problems for which we need to find solutions. It's that we are in a predicament for which we need to find responses. Ref 2)]

Ultimately, an appropriate response to knowing about the transition requires us to DO something - but not based on the old ways of being and thinking. We need to understand ourselves and the world from new perspectives, based on new ways of being and thinking. Out of this, our individual and collective roles in the transition can emerge - and this is how we respond appropriately.

There is no formulaic approach to finding new perspectives and new ways of being and thinking. However, almost by definition, new ways of thinking require changing our assumptions, so that's what I'll focus on: challenging - and usually dismantling - our fundamental assumptions about... well, just about everything. From this, we gain deeper understanding, insights and perspectives which, combined with our personal skills, knowledge and predilections, allow our individual and collective roles in the transition to emerge.

In the next two sections I'll say more about assumption dismantling and perspective-taking, but first, let me summarise the case for why we need new ways of being and thinking.

As is often the case, Einstein has something useful to say about this: “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them”. So if we try to ‘do something’ about the transition based on our old ways of thinking, we will fail. In fact, we will likely make things worse.

Our old ways of thinking are based on the principles of earlier cultural stages - primarily modernity. As I outlined above in Q2, these are precisely what got us into this mess. Despite this, we keep trying, and failing, to fix our problems using this old thinking. The SDGs, which I talked about at the start, are a paradigmatic case in point. These are proposed solutions based on the old ways of thinking - and it’s evident they are not working. We cannot even understand the true nature of the problems using the old ways.

So, to try and develop these new ways of being, thinking and perspective-taking, I’m going to challenge the fundamental assumptions that underlie the old ways of being, thinking and perspective-taking.

Within the book, the assumption challenging and perspective-taking will sometimes be head-on-explicit, and sometimes it will be implicit within the discussions.

Taking different perspectives

Adopting new ways of thinking in order to participate in Humanity’s Transition has nothing to do with adopting positions within currently established polarities (conservative vs. liberal, religious vs. secular, meat-eating vs. veganism, privacy rights vs. national security, public vs. private, capitalist vs. socialist, nationalism vs. globalism etc.). Instead, it requires us to move above and beyond these established dichotomies. It requires us to take different perspectives.

A simple example will make this clear.

On the one hand, we have the Circlists. They believe that everything should be based on circles. Circles are beautiful, smooth, encompass the full 360 degrees and have infinitely many lines of symmetry.

On the other hand, we have the Rectanglists. They believe that everything should be based on rectangles. Rectangles are fundamental; are perfect building blocks; you’re not constantly changing direction as you walk round them; and you can unambiguously define just two lines of symmetry.

The Circlists and Rectanglists argue and debate interminably. The Circlists attempt to roll over the arguments of the Rectanglists, who, in turn, tend to simply block those of the Circlists. And

each stays stuck in their dogmatic position.

If we're lucky, a very insightful Cylinderist appears on the scene, and if the Circlists and Rectanglists are open-minded enough, they will listen to the arguments and see a third, integrative perspective. Look at a cylinder from an end, and you see a circle. Look at it from the side and you see a rectangle. Both perspectives are true, but partial. When viewed from the new 3-D perspective, there is no conflict.

Here's another simple example.

Can you draw four straight, connected lines that go through all nine of these dots?



If you've not seen this before you could easily conclude that it's impossible. Most people (not you, of course) take a perspective based on an implicit assumption: the lines have to remain within the box defined by the dots. Once you undermine that assumption you can, literally in this case, think outside the box. The problem then becomes solvable.

The ability to take other, or even multiple, perspectives is a big factor in developing wisdom (see Wisdom). This isn't something that can be taught, as far as I know: if it could, I'd be taking the course myself! But, perhaps, it's something that can be absorbed by exposure.

To see the challenges in adopting different perspectives, think of a polarity that you feel particularly strongly about. Try out these questions about your own points of view:

- Have you examined how you came to take your current perspective, or considered how and why the other side came about theirs?
- How much antipathy do you feel for the other side?
- Is there any possibility at all that you got it wrong and the other side is right?
- Or, at least, can you see the world from their point of view? Is there at least some truth in their perspective?
- How open are you to the possibility that both perspectives are partial, and that there is a higher, integrative perspective?

Systematic dismantling of assumptions

We're not going to transform humanity by simply reconfiguring the status quo. What's needed is something much, much deeper, and possibly dangerous.

It's going to require us to play around with the very fabric of our society and civilization; with the accepted norms and established institutions that hold it together; with our sense of ourselves and all of our many roles; with our notion of reality, meaning and purpose.

We need to challenge our assumptions about everything related to how our society operates, such as assumptions about:

- the nature, purpose and length of education;
- the purpose of employment and jobs
- the role and nature of money, debt, capital and investment;
- the net benefit of a market economy;
- the relationship between economics, ecology, sustainability and growth;
- the nature and role of health care, mental care and social care
- our ability to continue using energy at the same per capita rate, even with renewables;
- ... and more

Going deeper, we need to challenge our assumptions about our history, our continuity, and our civilizational structures. For example, about

- the story of how we (humanity) got to be what we are;
- the very notion of the continuity of our civilization;
- the future of our societal structures;
- the adequacy of nation states and cities;
- the way we allocate power and govern ourselves

And finally, at the deepest levels, we need to challenge our most fundamental assumptions. For example, our assumptions about:

- the nature of reason - how we think logically
- the very nature of reality and causation;
- the nature of the paranormal;
- the relationship between science, religion and philosophy;
- our sense of our own selves and identities;
- the meaning of meaning and purpose;

You see what I mean about it being a bit more than simply reconfiguring the status quo.

At this point, it's worth making reference to the two core sources of inspiration for the approach I am taking in this book. Whereas I have drawn ideas and perspectives from many truly wonderful sources, the core drivers behind my approach are Metamodernism and Analytic Idealism. I will provide some background to both of these later on, but the reason I highlight them here is because they provide much of the rationale for dismantling many of the assumptions. Neither Metamodernism nor Analytic Idealism is a mainstream academic topic, and some might regard these topics as being lunatic fringes. Which is precisely why they are perfect for helping us dismantle the assumptions that have been put in place by the establishment.

(In case this is starting to worry you, both topics are regarded as being exceptionally powerful 'philosophies' by an increasing number of very well-regarded thinkers - both inside and outside academia. And it's not unusual for the most influential thinkers to be barely recognised in their lifetimes. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are good examples.)

Triggering emotions

I hope that this introduction has provided you with a good sense of my agenda for this book. But I have one other agenda item.

The very nature of the content I'll be covering could have an emotional impact on you. In fact, if I've done my job even tolerably well, it will have an emotional impact - and this is a critically important agenda.

As you've already seen, a central theme of the book is civilizational collapse and transformation. When I first conceived of the book, I assumed we could avoid a collapse by going through a suitably deep transformation. Over the intervening years, I've changed my mind. Like many others, I now think a collapse is all but inevitable (bad). On the other hand, it

will provide an unprecedented opportunity for a transformation deeper than anything in our history (good).

Taken together, this period we are living through is the most frighteningly terrifying and wonderfully exciting time to be alive. Inevitably, the topics I'll be covering will include:

- **A potentially soul-destroying catalogue** of civilizational dysfunctions within a self-perpetuating system that appears to have no path for their resolution.
- **A systematic deconstruction of many basic assumptions** (see above).
- **Inspirational ideas and exciting perspectives on how humanity can transformation**, along with the contours of what a transformed humanity could look like, and the astonishing potentials for humankind.

So:

I'm hoping you will be shocked, depressed (temporarily) and deeply concerned by the catalogue of dysfunctions and our default trajectory. And I'm hoping you will be deeply unsettled by the questioning of so many previously unchallenged assumptions about almost everything around you.

But most of all, I'm hoping you will feel intense excitement and a palpable potential in yourself and in others; I'm hoping the dismantled assumptions will provide awe-inspiring perspectives on the nature of the world and the potential for our society; I'm hoping you will be inspired and motivated by the prospect of humanity effecting the most consequential transformation in our 50,000 year history; and I'm hoping you will be open and intensely curious to uncover the role you will play in it.

We are all unbelievably fortunate to be alive today.

References

Ref 1: Here is just one overview of the idea based on 434 sources. "Societal collapse: A literature review" <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328722001768>)

Ref 2: Clip from The Solutions that can be Named are not the Solutions | Frankly 67 by Nate Hagens https://youtu.be/1ea4hml2xmk?si=6G_BjY-2erEQhNok&t=190