

The following 6 pages are the introductory material of a forthcoming book, which will be part of the Relevant Education project:

<http://Relevant.Education>

If you would like to provide comments or feedback, use the Google Docs Comment feature or email me on alex@relevant.education

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Re Feedback:

I'd be interested in any feedback related to the proposed overall structure of the book (described on the next page), and goals of the TL;DR version. These goals are:

1. To provide a 4-page overview of the main issues related to humanity's transition...
2. ... that is reasonably coherent and self-contained (given the complexity of the issues and the length of the document) ...
3. ... that includes meaningful 'teasers' to encourage further reading ...
4. ... that has an emotional impact ...
5. ... that can be understood by a bright 16-year old.

Thank you.

Humanity's Transition

What You Need To Know To Consciously Participate

**We are living in the most dramatic period of humanity's history:
dramatically dangerous and dramatically exciting.**

We have had dangerous and exciting times in the past.

But never on a global scale.

And never with the power of gods but the wisdom of infants.

The material in this book answers four questions.

Q1: What IS Humanity's Transition

Q2: How did we get into this situation?

Q3: Aren't there already solutions to the problem?

Q4: What can we do about it?

I discuss these questions three times, at increasing levels of detail.

Level 1 Analysis: 4 pages

An introductory TL;DR version (Too Long; Didn't Read)

Level 2 Analysis: about 30-pages

An overview Chapter with one Section per question.

Level 3 Analysis: about 250-pages

The rest of the book, with one Part per question (multiple chapters). In this third level of analysis I'll go into enough detail to help you in your journey to *consciously participate in Humanity's Transition*.

After all, that IS the point of the book.

Humanity's Transition: TL;DR Version

Q1: What IS Humanity's Transition?

We (humanity) have started a major transition whose nature is uncertain. We are in a time between worlds. A liminal time.

The default nature of the transition is a **civilizational collapse** - the drama of *danger*. In the extreme, this could lead to the extinction of humanity. There is widespread agreement on this (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328722001768>).

The most obvious likely causes of a collapse are the consequences of climate change (already underway) and potentially AI. But there are many more paths, typically triggered by events with complex second-, third- and fourth-order consequences.

Mainstream thinking implicitly sees two scenarios: either civilization collapses - to a greater or lesser degree - or we (who, exactly, is this "we"?) avoid the worst of the dangers and muddle on pretty much as before. I'll deal with this naive view in a moment.

But there are other, deeper and broader, perspectives which I try to represent in this book.

The most important perspective is this: the only alternative to a collapse is a transition consisting of a breathtaking societal **transformation** - the drama of *excitement*. The logic behind this is that the dynamics leading towards a collapse are immensely powerful and deeply embedded - so to overcome them (if that is even possible) will require transformations across all elements of our **societies** and our **psyches**.

What this means is that the only way to avoid a collapse is for us to undergo a **transformation** deeper than any that has gone before. It will be driven by segments of society that act from new, **emergent ways of thinking**. As Einstein said: "*We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them*". Inevitably, such a change cannot be sudden, nor utopian, nor globally uniform, nor right-first-time.

In fact, there are many paths we could take, including a global collapse followed by a global transformation, or geographically localised instances of both. The key is how quickly any post-collapse transformation can happen: decades, centuries, millennia... or never. Whatever the trajectory, I think the most likely path will include some form of collapse.

If you're still hankering after the 'muddling through' option and you point out that there have always been doom-mongers, I'd agree. But it's also true that every past civilization *has* collapsed. So why should our current (global) civilization be the exception? And there are specific reasons, which I cover later, why the idea of muddling through is muddled thinking.

So, the summary answer to the question: "What is Humanity's Transition?" is:

A time between worlds, leading either to a dangerous collapse of civilization, or to an exciting transformation of civilization enabled by emergent ways of thinking - or most probably (hopefully) both.

Q2: How did we get into this situation?

As with all things civilizational, there is no simple answer. But I'll give one anyway.

We (humanity) have been through several transformations, such as the change from hunter-gathering to agriculture. These past transformations changed the **organising principles** of the civilizations, affecting all elements of the **societies** and **psyches** that went through the transformations.

The most recent such transformation was triggered by the Age of Reason, aka The Enlightenment (nothing directly to do with spiritual enlightenment), which was instigated by thinkers such as Descartes and Galileo.

Starting in the 1600s in Europe, the Enlightenment created the ideals of **reason, science, humanism and progress**. These gave rise to the **industrial revolution, democracy, capitalism and human rights**, transforming the awful misery of feudal medievalism into the comfortable, well-fed, easy-going, one-click-delivered-next-day life of today's standardised urban dweller.

How wonderful! And yet, it was exactly *this* transformation that set the seeds for our current potential collapse. How could this be? Here are just three of several reasons.

First, it has screwed up our **psyches** by eliminating meaning and purpose, resulting in today's **meaning crisis**. Once science took over from religion as the arbiter of truth, *reality* came to be defined as that which can be measured and studied objectively. The universe and *reality* became cold, meaningless and purposeless. (If you're thinking 'Well, that's true, isn't it?' you're confirming my point.)

Second, it has screwed up our **societies** by creating a dynamic for increasing Finance (wealth-creation) rather than Flourishing. I'll expand on this topic from a systems-theory view later. The Enlightenment ideal of Progress came to be defined as material progress, which entailed the pursuit of wealth and its constant growth. And our psyches have become enslaved by this Fiend of Finance. And there is no OFF switch. And our planet is finite.

Many thinkers have written about a similar dynamic using different names: Moloch (Alan Ginsberg), Marketworld (Anand Giridharadas), Windigo (Jeremy Lent), What Progress Wants (Paul Kingsnorth) and The Machine (Zygmunt Bauman and others) – to name just five.

Thirdly, the **technology** that has enabled all our comforts and boons continues to increase in power exponentially, so that its negative consequences and potential also increase exponentially. We now have **the power of gods with the wisdom of infants**.

Later I'll suggest additional paths that led to where we are, but for now the simple answer to the question "How did we get into this situation?" is:

The consequences of the Enlightenment principles are: that we see no meaning to existence; that we are driven by finance instead of flourishing; that we lack the wisdom to manage our god-like technological power; and that there is no "off" switch for Progress on a planet with finite resources.

Q3: Aren't there already solutions to the problem?

The simple answer is “No, but that doesn't mean nothing can be done.” That's not of much help, but there are some very useful perspectives that arise from the underlying argument.

Much depends on the definition of a 'solution'. I'll use this loose definition: a blueprint or plan from which a collection of actions can be derived that will cause a change from an initial state to a new state - *within a context that allows it to be implemented*.

In our case, the initial state is “our current civilization” and the new state is “a transformed civilization”. The context is “the *organising principles* of our current civilization”.

One perspective is: **solution specification**. To specify a solution requires the ability to articulate the problem and the desired end state. We can do neither. The best we can do for problem definition (and later, I will do it) is to list lots of crises and risks facing our civilization. But we can't simply throw them all together and say “that's the problem!”. (Although identifying common themes, which I will also do, can be helpful.)

As regards defining the desired end state - that's also a non-starter. As I suggested in Q2, a civilizational transformation entails changing its *organising principles*. But actually it's deeper than that. As I'll explain later, we now need **organising principles that include changing our organising principles!** Under these circumstances predetermining an end-state is impossible. The best we can do is to try and define probable characteristics - the contours - of a transformed humanity (part of Q4). But its specific form can only *emerge*.

This relates to another perspective: **single-problem solution vs systemic analysis**. Although we cannot articulate the *overall* problem, it is certainly true that we can define solutions to *specific* problems. For example, the problem of climate change requires reducing CO₂ emissions, and we can attempt to define actions for this to happen. Assuming those actions are adequate (unlikely) and they would actually be widely performed (they won't - see below) and would not have disastrous side effects (they probably would) - all we've done is fix climate change. That's an exceptionally good outcome, don't get me wrong - but that still leaves all the other risks and crises - which may affect and be affected by climate change.

And then there's the perspective of the **context** - in this case, context means our *organising principles*. From Q2, my way of summarising our current principles is to say we are focussed on Finance instead of Flourishing. An example of how that perverts possible solutions is the phenomenon of *greenwashing*. Actions to help achieve the UNs Sustainable Development Goals become little more than ticking a box for PR purposes. Another is the general reluctance of philanthropic foundations to effect the deep systemic change that we need, since that would undermine the source of the wealth that created them. The same dynamic hinders the actions needed for CO₂ reduction. More on these topics in later analyses.

But perhaps the simplest perspective is this: fixing the problem vs **creating conditions** for a 'fix' to emerge. This again entails ideas of **systems thinking** and taking a **systemic approach**, which will be a major focus of the later analyses, and nicely relates to the answer to Q4.

The summary answer to the question “Aren't there already solutions to the problem?” is:

No. Blueprint solutions for avoiding a civilizational collapse are partial and non-systemic, making them ineffective or counterproductive. Which isn't to say nothing can be done.

Q4: What can we do about it?

We've already got some hints from Q1-Q3. From Q1: develop new, *emergent ways of thinking*. From Q2: be driven by *flourishing* instead of *finance*. From Q3: we need *organising principles that include changing the organising principles* and we need a *systemic approach*.

We can make this work by *conceiving, gestating and birthing a transformed humanity*.

The metaphor isn't perfect: in our case, the stages are not strictly sequential, but are overlapping, continuous processes. However, it provides us with very useful insights

Conceiving requires *conceiving of*: we first need to *conceive of* a transformed humanity. To **sense its contours** rather than design its blueprint. This starts with learning about humanity and our forthcoming transition from many perspectives (e.g. starting with this book). But it's not just **knowing**: it's also **un-knowing** - by which I mean dismantling fundamental assumptions.

So the focus of *conceiving* is **knowing (understanding)**.

Gestation requires growth and maturation: primarily of our *psychological and spiritual selves*, but also of our understanding of humanity's transition, carried over from the conception stage. Mainly, it's about changing our *being* - who we are.

So the focus of *gestating* is **being (growth)**.

Together, the new *knowing* and *being* allow the *new ways of thinking* to emerge, as identified in Q1. And the idea of being driven by *flourishing* instead of *finance* (from Q2) provides an attractor that helps with *sensing the contours* of a transformed humanity.

And finally, **Birthing!** Exactly as with biology, this cannot start until the time is right. But when the time *is* right, it *will* start. The time will be right when the conception and gestation have gone far enough for appropriate 'transformational' actions to start. When our *knowing/un-knowing* and *being* are mature enough, it's time to take action. Our own personal role will emerge. Similarly, appropriate *collective* actions will emerge from mature collective *knowing* and *being*.

So the focus of *birthing* is **doing (acting)**.

The biological metaphor can provide us with two more insights. On the plus side, the *conceiving, gestating and birthing* process happens multiple times, not just once. Which is just as well because, on the negative side, it may not always be successful. There are miscarriages; there are still-births; and there are congenital birth defects - some of which can be fatal. So - the metaphor suggests that we should expect multiple emerging transformations of humanity, not all of which will survive: as I suggested in Q1.

The summary answer to the question "What can we do about it (Humanity's Transition)?" is:

We can enable the necessary new ways of thinking: by deepening our understanding of humanity and our transition; by actively dismantling core assumptions; and by fully practising self-development techniques. This will allow our personal and collective roles - activities most appropriate for us - to emerge as part of multiple attempts at a transformed humanity. All in the service of increasing our own and others' flourishing.

Here are the topics covered under each of the four questions in the remainder of the book.

Q1: What IS Humanity's Transition?

Although this question is ostensibly about explaining what is meant by Humanity's Transition, much of the content is about the wider context: the big picture of our civilizational and cultural history, what it means to be, and to develop, as a human. There is something of an inevitability to our transition, as the wider historical context makes evident.

As well as looking back, this material also looks forward in two ways. First, it looks at what sort of paths we might take as part of the transition. Second, it begins to sense what could be the contours of a transformed humanity, based on our understanding of the historical context.

I explicitly do not include anything about the risks and crises that are leading to the transition. That is better covered under the next question.

Q2: How did we get into this situation?

This material has two main themes and a sub-theme. The first theme directly answers the question of how we got into "this situation". Rather than looking at the broad historical context (Q1), I focus down on the Enlightenment and its consequences. The second theme arises directly from the first: it's a somewhat depressing explication of what "this situation" is: the risks we face and the crises we're in.

The sub-theme is more positive: I attempt to generalise from the risks and crises to build on the contours of what a transformed humanity might be like.

Q3: Aren't there already solutions to the problem?

As I indicated in the TL;DR answer to this question, although the answer to the question is NO, there is a great deal we can learn from the underlying arguments.

The themes here are: What are the types of initiatives trying to solve our civilizational problems?; Why are they not working?; What are the commonalities behind why they aren't working? The material under Q1 and Q2 feeds into this analysis; Why "hopeless" attempts can (sometimes) also be helpful; And once more, what can we learn from this that can feed into our understanding of the contours of a transformed humanity?

Fair warning: there are some pretty scary proposals and ideologies for "fixing our problems".

Q4: What can we do about it?

In this case, there is very little to add to the summary answer to the question: it covers almost all the themes. The one refinement is defining the nature of the transformed humanity. The previous questions have been feeding into this, and under Q4, I bring it all together.

Analysis By Sectors

This is part of the book that sits outside the levels of analysis based on the four questions. It looks at specific sectors of civilizational operation but still from the perspective of the questions: what's dysfunctional and why; what are the trends and how they might contribute to a transformation or collapse.