

Transition (Part 1)

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Our world is made up of so much technology, all around us, that we are barely aware of it. Technology accommodates our existence, as nature did for our prehistoric ancestors and still does for (most) other organisms. In this series of 3, I examine the tension between technology and nature as the host of life on our planet, from a psychological perspective.

We often don't realize how much we have to adapt the world to be able to use a technical system well. Many people will answer in the affirmative to the question "Is a car faster than a human?" Apart from the fact that, of course, a car can only contribute to our mobility in the hands of a human (or rather a whole range of people, with very different disciplines, from mechanical engineers to road builders, from MBAs to marketers, and from drivers to passengers), our world must be fully adapted and prepared for a car to function. Think, for example, of road networks that must be kept free of potholes or obstacles, an infrastructure of gas stations or charging stations, maintenance services, etc. A car can therefore only be used for faster mobility than e.g. per horse, if entire regions choose to sacrifice large parts of their land and make it suitable for automobility, with extremely large investments. Automobility is an expensive choice, of which we are usually not aware. With regard to rapid mobility, we may now be too late to make drastically different choices.

Not with regard to Artificial Intelligence (AI), for example. We often read that AI will soon make computers smarter than people. Just like with cars, the following applies: not faster, not smarter, but in an extremely well-prepared world, algorithms can perform certain human partial functionalities faster and (seemingly) smarter, again of course exclusively in human hands. As human beings we can make choices regarding the world of tomorrow. For example, do we want to live in a world where seemingly autonomous devices all do seemingly smart things? International cooperation on car mobility has continued to be very successful, but unsustainable. Indebted to our planet, a transition towards sustainability is very much needed right now.

With a view to AI, in order to use artificial intelligences, we must come to understand that humans - but also all other living organisms - will eventually have to bow to the (virtual) highways that cut through the metaphorical natural forests and biotopes. We have since learned that new technology does not always provide the solution; for example, the widespread ability to live a contemporary life with rapid mobility over long distances now makes a climate and environmental transition extremely necessary. Many major problems with technology are not technological by nature but natural: more is less, less is more, less prosperity, more well-being! Some major transitions are extremely necessary. However, our success - albeit on the "wrong" highways - has proven that we can do it.

It is possible to get rid of fossil fuels, to abolish the mass farming necessary for the meat industry (we cannot live like 8 billion carnivores), to reclaim biodiversity by restoring huge forests. Thanks to international alliances, (continuous) industrial fishing is no longer allowed in large ocean areas, which in turn increases diversity. In the rich countries we see that the so-called Forest Transition (an increase in agriculture/industrialization/urbanization leads to an increase in prosperity and a decrease in forests, but in the long run to a net increase in forest land through agricultural outsourcing and industrialization) and the comparable Demographic Transition (population growth follows an increase in prosperity and eventually stabilizes due to fewer births per mother. It is important to note here that both a fair distribution of wealth over the total population, as well as a large degree of (women's) emancipation, are prerequisites for these transitions, which are necessary for a sustainable future with say 13 billion people. Leaving it to competitive forces (economy, Bigtech) is not an option. It is precisely the right to decent work that could force a turnaround here.