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GROUND RULES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
Chapter 17

FROM ME-THINKING TO WE-THINKING

One of the consequences of the technological developments, which we experience in these years, is that we will have to get used to working with a much more open approach and connected into larger contexts. And no, it's not just a matter of creating a profile on Facebook or starting a wiki for the employees of the company.
It is a deep, philosophical shift, and a radically changed perception of the individual's relation to the community. In Charles Leadbeater's words, we are moving from "me-thinking" to "we-thinking".

We-thinking is one of the basic skills of the 21-century. We have already touched on the reasons: We are closer connected to each other, we will become more inter-dependent, and we are a growing humanity on a planet with dwindling resources.
It's becoming harder and harder to insist that you don't share destiny with the rest of the system. And therefore, we need to get better at making decisions and acting with the community's interests in mind.

Each man for himself

But *me-thinking* is deeply ingrained in us. Going back through our cultural history, people have mostly generally seen society as the setting for our battle against each other to survive and secure our share of scarce resources. As individuals, as families or clans, we have fought in a zero sum game where one person's gain was another's loss.
The English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes didn't have much confidence in humans' ability to cooperate when he wrote *Leviathan* in 1651. Humanity would, Hobbes argued, resort to a war of all against all, and life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short", unless a strong, autocratic ruler led people.
Hobbes's philosophy was suited to the realities back then, when only a king with almost unlimited power over his subjects could enforce the laws and raise armies to defend the country.

Some hundred years later, the era of the absolute monarchy had expired. The world was in flux, and the rich, enterprising merchants and an emerging class of industrialists would no longer comply with his majesty. The new philosophy was *liberalism*, with its belief that if each had the freedom to use his skills and pursue its goals, it would lead to the greatest wealth for the whole community. The starting point was still the individual and the individual's self interest - but faith in the abilities of ordinary people had certainly grown since Hobbes.
By the middle of the industrialization of the 1800's it was clear that liberalism in practice meant that a few were able to seize power over the production system and thus the power over the welfare of the masses. Socialism and Communism were the philosophical response, with their emphasis on equality, solidarity and a central control that would ensure that everything was planned for the common good.

A declaration of inter-dependence

The past century in politics have basically been about finding the balance between the two philosophies; between liberalism and socialism's opposing views of the relationship between the individual and the community.
Communication technology and the increasingly tighter environmental circumstances have meant that this balance is shifting again. We have become linked to each other much closer than before, and this trend looks set to continue. It is not that we will return to the industrial era socialism and mass culture. Instead the increasing interdependence and connectivity could lead to a kind of bottom-up socialism; a collective project, in which individual responsibility and the opportunity to be co-creator grows, while the importance of hierarchy diminishes. One can consider whether this might be a whole new *-ism*, a political philosophy better suited to handle the problems of the 21st century.

When the United States seceded from the British in 1776, they signed the declaration of independence, which has had a profound influence on politics ever since, far beyond the United States. Today you often hear that we should write a new declaration: a declaration of *inter-dependence*.
The fact of the matter is that we are deeply interdependent, and we will be so more and more. It no longer makes sense to understand our self and our actions as independent of others'. From the second, when I wake up in the morning to the sound of my radio-controlled alarm clock, I am in sync and in intense interaction with the global whole. The heat in the radiators, the food on the table, the furniture, the computer's connection to the network ... my life is built on elements assembled from the whole world, and when I use them, I am myself affecting the world around me.

During the cold war the world was divided into two major blocs with surprisingly little interaction. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening of China and the World Trade Organization agreements have led to a few billion people in a few years going from being the "enemy" to becoming an integral part of a shared global political, economic and cultural system.
In an environmental perspective, we all face the same threat of climate change. Economically, the financial crisis, which is still raging as of this writing, has abundantly demonstrated that global markets are linked. No country is unaffected when one market collapses and draws the next with it.
The organization of international politics is lagging behind the nature of the issues that need to be addressed. However, the number of participants in the global political summits is an indication of the direction global governance is moving. G7 became the G8, then it expanded to the G8 +5, and now the assembly has grown into the G20. The former superpowers have realized that it no longer makes sense to attempt global governance, without giants like India, China, Brazil and South Africa taking part in the decisions.

<u>Leaps in the complexity of organisms</u>
In these years we are obviously in a transitional phase. Exactly how to define the new form of society that is emerging is still unclear. Is it the "knowledge society", the "network economy" or the "post fossil fuel economy"?
I think this change is more substantial than "just" moving to a new type of economy. I actually think that the shift taking place is at an evolutionary and biological scale. The extent of our interconnectivity and interdependence have become so large that it has become misleading to only see the individual as an autonomous, functional unit. We

are an inseparable part of the system we have built up. Our technology and our devices have become a part of who we are, and through our tools, humanity in many ways has begun to function as one coherent organism.

In the previous chapter, we discussed how information technology rapidly and at accelerating pace evolves in the direction of The One Machine, which connects all digital gadgets and all the information that flows through them, in one coherent network. We humans will be in continuous interaction with the network and thus with all others, who are also connected. We could simply not do without the connection, and our welfare is closely linked to our ability to use the opportunities that this almost universally connected system offers.

It sounds dramatic - but the world has arguably seen other changes equally radical since the first people moved about in small flocks on the African savannah. We are a very different species now, and we are rapidly evolving even further. The evolutionary mechanism is working on us, but as we saw in the last chapter, it is first of all the evolution of our culture and technologies that is transforming us.

We have become an organism at a higher level

It has occurred several times in the history of evolution that the organization level, at which reproduction and hence evolution operates, has changed. In his book *The Major Transitions in Evolution* the biologists John Maynard Smith and Szathmary Eörs described how living organisms have taken qualitative leaps upwards in complexity, when several separate but interacting organisms have become linked so closely that at some point they began to function as one.

The earliest forms of life were chemical processes in which simple nucleic acids - the kind of molecules, which the genome is composed of - could generate copies of itself. At some point, several nucleic acids joined in chains to form entire chromosomes. And thus reproduction started working at a higher level of complexity. Previously, what was reproduced, were individual molecules. Now complete chromosomes could be copied at a time.

Next step up was the transition from the prokaryotic cells (the type of cell which bacteria consist of) to eukaryotic cells, which are far more advanced. In eukaryotic cells, the genome resides in a nucleus – a separate part of the cell - and in addition, the cell contains a number of specialized, small parts, so-called "organelles", each dealing with specific functions in the cell. More importantly, eukaryotic cells evolved the ability to link together to form multi-cellular organisms.

Again, a leap upwards in organization had occurred: Even more factors were now reproduced together, and the evolutionary mechanism that allows the most suitable variations to survive, started to act in relation to an ever-larger entity. Maynard Smith and Szathmary describe a total of eight of this type of transitions. The transitions were all linked to the emergence of new ways to transmit information - from the chemical attraction between molecules, to genes as blueprints for offspring, to the development of language enabling people to form communities. Phase shift: humanity as a global organism

Using the concepts of complexity theory, one could call Maynard Smith and Szathmary's transitions a *phase shift*. The transformation from going up in complexity was so radical that it resembled the way a material changes character when it goes from gas to liquid, or from liquid to solid form.

The question is whether humanity at some point in the future will become so connected and so tightly interacting that the whole system changes phase. Like a salt solution that suddenly crystallizes and changes its properties, humanity could shift; from consisting of loosely coupled members to a new, coherent structure, with functions and purposes that go far beyond the individual's agenda.
This wouldn't necessarily mean that we lose significance or competence as individuals – in fact, the participation and responsibility is likely to be much wider dispersed in a networked age. The crucial point is that a new level of awareness and competence could emerge from the interaction between us. We would continue to be individuals that act and think independently, but we would be much more conscious of how our actions fit in relation to the interests of the whole of mankind. We would - almost as second nature – have a clear understanding of our role in the community, and it would affect how we act as individuals. One might assume that the stronger community would mean that we would build values that go beyond our own narrow and immediate interests, and that we would be more willing to subordinate our individual agenda and personal interest for the good of the whole system.

In fact, there are examples of this type of "super-organisms" in nature. Beehives and anthills are examples of advanced societies, which act as a strong cohesive whole. An anthill keeps running even as the individual ants die and are replaced. Like cells in a body, an ant is not able to survive on it own - it is totally dependent on its interaction with the rest of the organism. Therefore, it makes sense to see the community and not the individual as the defining unit.

In the case of humans, the super-organism might be something akin to what Kevin Kelly calls The One Machine (see previous chapter) - the network that connects all computing power, all data and all human. And we will be totally dependent on the processes going on in that network.

In many respects, humanity is indeed becoming a single global organism, coupled so closely that it becomes increasingly difficult to draw the line between the individual and the collective.

Physically, this has in many ways always been the case. We normally think of our own body as distinct from that of other organisms. The human body consists of our own, human cells, which are all formed from the original two cells, which united when we were conceived. But in our body there are also trillions of micro-bacteria living. In shear numbers we contain around ten times more bacteria than our human cells, and their weight is equivalent to slightly less than the weight of our liver. These bacteria digest our food, they create useful substances, they affect our development and our immune system - we couldn't function without them.
Even our "own" cells, are really only on loan. Tor Nørretranders, a Danish science writer, in his book *Green light*, describes how we are all part of the same stream of molecules that are replaced and reassembled in new shapes and contexts, again and again. 98 percent of the molecules in a human are replaced every year, yet our memories and the patterns of our personality remain - virtually - intact. The same molecules that constitute our body proceed to form other people, animals, plants, rain, mountains, clothing, washing machines, etc.

We are also ever closer integrated with our technology. We could hardly survive without glasses, dentures, clothing, cell phones, cars or our new nervous system: the Internet. And while we are at it, we are and have always been entirely and fundamentally dependent on the ecosystem of the planet.

When you look closely, it is very difficult to draw a line where each of us begins and ends. We are not quite the independent individuals, we usually think we are, and we tend to forget the degree to which we are part of a common destiny, shared with the entire surrounding system.
In the future, this community will make itself much stronger felt - another consequence of technology connecting us much closer, while the natural resources at our disposal are getting tighter.

Altruism is egoism in a larger context

So far, however, we are basically selfish. It is one of the fundamental theses in the Darwinian evolution that it works at an individual level, and therefore we all fight each other to conquer the most of the resources that can increase the likelihood that we, personally, will get to reproduce and pass on our set of genes.
In that game there's no reason to help others. Quite contrary. If I behave altruistically, if I take a loss or waive any win for the benefit of others or for the community, I will be reducing my own strength in the evolutionary race.
Seen from a Darwinian perspective, If we do something good for other people, it is either because they are our close relatives, and thus their genes are almost the same as our own - or it may be a calculated effort to achieve personal gain: doing a favor in anticipation of a return or to impress a potential mate. There is not much support for altruism in Darwin's theory.

But if the level, at which evolution works changes, so it is the entire super-organism which adapts and struggles to survive under changing conditions, then a great deal of the distance between egoism and altruism disappears.
The closer, we are interconnected, and the more interdependent we become, the more it will also be in the individual's interest that the whole community thrives.

Global consciousness

The claim here is that the rapidly increasing connectivity will lead to a fundamental change in human nature.
One could go so far as to talk about a *global consciousness*. By that I don't mean that there will be some superhuman being who thinks all our thoughts for us. Rather, the global consciousness would be a bottom-up phenomenon, which emerges as a result of our ever closer and more extensive interaction.
This consciousness would manifest itself as an almost instinctive understanding of the state of the world and of the large and small driving forces that affect the system. Its decisive new feature would be a shared awareness that we each will be guided by, when we weigh our actions as individuals.
We already have elements of global consciousness by virtue of sharing the same information. One can consider the media, and the billions of cameras, sensors and PCs as parts of a common nervous system that senses what is happening everywhere. And similarly, the Internet can be compared to a global brain that remembers, analyzes, filters and connects facts and builds up knowledge as a result of everyone's

use of the data.
This shared knowledge will become much more extensive as more sensors, devices and people get connected through the web. Our data is developing towards higher resolution and faster updates. Our data will be closer integrated, stored online, searchable and *smart*. The further, we move along those lines, the stronger the global consciousness will become. Add to this that we will be online and accessing the shared pool of data and computing power virtually all the time. Today, that connection is mainly through a PC, tomorrow it will be through our mobile terminal - and who knows, when the connection becomes even more intimately connected with our bodies?

We have certainly not arrived at the total integration yet - and I don't believe we will all just let go of our egos tomorrow. The individualistic understanding of our selves is not only hardwired in to our genes; it is also deeply rooted in our culture and upbringing. We will still pursue our own interests and ambitions in the future, and the strive for personal gain will not disappear as a driver of development. But the rationale that drives our actions will have an extra dimension. Our perspective will broaden. Today, our actions are mostly based on our assessment of what is best for our self. In the future, we will increasingly also be aware of what our actions imply for the common good.