

Pure quality!

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Yesterday I gave a neuropsychological lecture on the aging brain. During the lecture, I was struck by the fact that so far 107 billion people have lived, while now there are 7.594 billion people. These figures are very special: at the moment 7 percent of all people who have ever lived are alive. My youngest daughter has 4 very cute rats and we have a dog. If I then imagine that there are about 10 percent of the rats on our planet that have ever lived, there would be no rat-free place to stand. Despite the fact that dogs reproduce much more slowly than rats, 7 percent of all dogs that have ever lived would cover the entire surface of the Earth in abundance. We - humans - are therefore very exceptional; we succeeded to live with so many people at this time that the now living people make up a substantial number of our entire species. However, there are scholars who see humanity as a plague to the world's biotopes, and we must admit that we are certainly overburdening the planet nowadays. But how is it possible that 1 in 10 people who have ever lived is present today? Where's our evolution? What is our secret?

To start with the latter, I don't know, life is a huge miracle, and I think that from a cognitive or rational point of view we can understand only very little or perhaps even nothing at all. However, it's a fact that humans are really pure quality animals, unlike species that have to rely on quantity. Every individual counts, as shown by the absurd number ratio just mentioned. Where our biology did not provide us with a quantitative reproduction strategy (we cannot produce offspring like rabbits in quick succession), technology has given us the opportunity to fill the gap. We provided ourselves with quantitative reproduction techniques. Until 1800, there were less than 1 billion people on Earth. Population growth began with the industrial revolution, but with the art of printing much earlier, new opportunities arose to reproduce aspects of humanity, hitherto unknown quantities. Knowledge, insights and stories turned out to be very scalable through the printing technique, and the resulting practices with regard to hygiene, agriculture, animal husbandry and construction followed in its wake, with the industrial revolution thus mentioned as a result.

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A species that is purely quality-oriented has relatively little evolution. After all, there are relatively few offspring per generation, so selecting random changes that prove beneficial is very complicated. It is precisely because of this that it is easy to understand that such a species has begun to control the world. Our evolution is therefore relatively off-side, adaptations to external circumstances (a thick coat in the cold, for example) are controlled by making something, so technology (a bear's coat, for example). And those "technological" adaptations have now been scaled up, unfortunately in an economic model that requires infinite growth from finite resources, jeopardizing the viability and even survival of our planet.

Both my children, and my students (who are about the same age, by the way) seem to feel almost guilty of belonging to humanity, a species that seems to terrorize the planet. Greta Thunberg symbolizes a new consciousness in a new generation. And that's beautiful and good, but in my opinion every person is a miracle, a pure quality organism, and as such certainly worth life. That is independent of whether or not they happen to be greatly enlarged on the economic scale, they're beautiful young people, who may not have been in the right place at the right time like the great idols of their generation, but therefore have no less to offer. It is important to see that although every person is pure quality, people produce quantity. Quantity is not automatically quality. We have to learn to control (tame) the scalability - the quantity generator - without throwing that inalienable quality organism - humans - into the abyss. How do we do that? Who knows, you may say!