

Conscience and technology are condemned to each other!

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

It is remarkable to realize that special forces also bring a special responsibility. In fact, the "conscience" that humanity has had from the beginning can be seen as Mother Nature's response to evolved and evolving technologies, in that conscience serves as an emergency valve. Technology and conscience are to some extent two sides of the same coin. What about that?

With the development of instrument use (the lever and its derivatives such as the spear, hammer, wheel and pulley) and learning to use external energy sources (fire and later steam, electricity, magnetism and nuclear energy), man became much stronger than the muscle power that Mother Nature had given her. Through language, that third technology, logic arose and man was able to manipulate the environment in an abstract manner. These three technologies - leverage, fire and language - took humanity from about halfway to the top of the food chain. Since imbalances could now be remedied by a systematic technological approach, potentially destructive forces were no longer mitigated or offset by natural counterbalances (disease, scarcity, natural enemies). Over time, magic, mysticism, religion, science and wisdom went hand in hand, all nurturing insight, understanding and connection. The use of superpowers - violence, strife, war - had to serve more than personal gain, precisely because conscience gave rise to the realization that individual freedom is always limited by the lack of freedom of the others and vice versa. Negatively framed, however, it could be argued that thanks to its technology, humanity can be seen as a virus that can settle anywhere, as technology has eradicated cold, heat, and predators. This also led to the eradication of a naturally limited habitat of Homo sapiens. Natural enemies hardly exist anymore, we can even defeat dangerous viruses in the long run. Therefore conscience is essential to maintain balance and diversity.

Giving and taking must be in balance, both in the immediate environment and on a global level. Someone with a conscience is actually an "economic" person. Economic in the sense that this person does not consume more natural resources than the environment can provide. In our time, however, it is impossible to directly relate what we take - energy and electricity for our mobility, life and work - with what the planet can give (and restore). Where our conscience gnaws when we see in developing countries how crops fail as a result of both climate change, and people who have only partially incorporated 'our' Western technology into their daily practice, with the result that strife, poverty and misery have become the ingredients for their flight towards our rational "first" world. But there is little we can do. We are governed by our own "successes" in an economy where our immediate existence seems to be completely separate from the model of infinite growth from finite sources that lies beneath it, in which high-tech giants calm our global consciences extraordinarily comfortably with bread and circuses: games, social media, filter bubbles, and other new must-haves.

But that conscience may well be our life jacket, for it is older than any modern technology and given by Mother Nature herself. With our conscience, Mother Nature is stronger than human economics and technology, and I am convinced that conscience will ultimately help turn the tide. Technology can help gain insight. Get ready for a smart world means to me: listen (again) to your conscience, focus on your immediate living environment and realize that even heating your home is a superpower, which you also have to justify. For this we have at our disposal all these beautiful stories: magic, mysticism, science and wisdom, and both in our daily life, and in our dreams and art we can learn to connect them in such a way that even after our generations there will still be human existence.

I wish you a Merry Christmas and a happy new year!