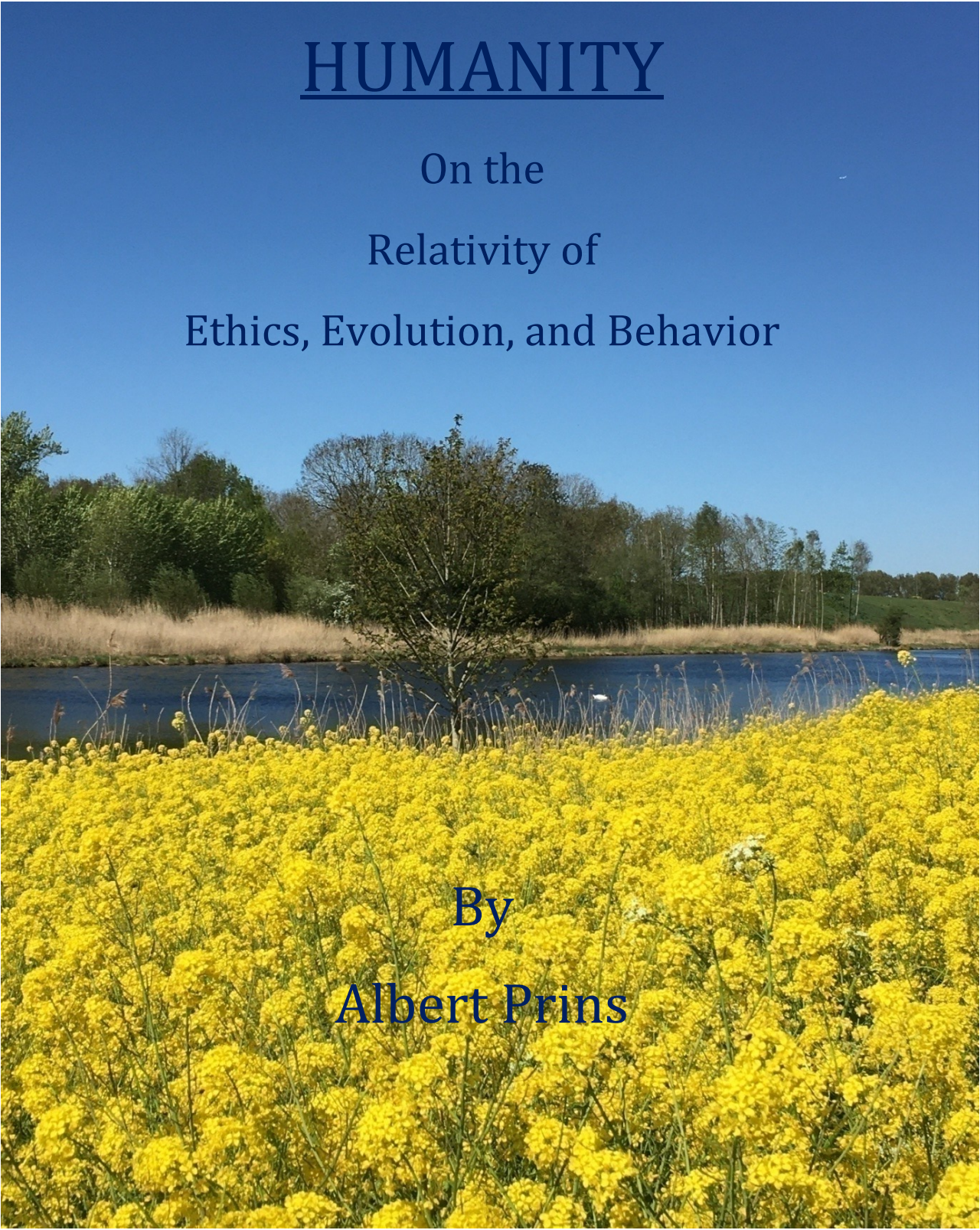




HUMANITY

On the Relativity of Ethics, Evolution, and Behavior

By
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Summary

This book explores the origin, development, and meaning of human morality through a philosophical dialogue between Alex and Trebla.

The starting point is a fundamental question: Do good and evil exist as objective features of reality, or are they human interpretations that emerge from evolution, culture, and social cooperation?

To investigate this question, Alex and Trebla step back from commonly accepted assumptions and attempt to view humanity as part of a larger system: the Earth itself. From that perspective, they examine the origins of morality, the role of religion, the relationship between the individual and the group, the meaning of inequality, the tension between freedom and responsibility, and humanity's obligations toward future generations.

Throughout this exploration, it is argued that moral systems most likely do not arise from absolute truths, but from the necessity of cooperation, adaptation, and survival within complex social and ecological systems.

The book does not advocate a dogmatic moral doctrine. Instead, it examines which values may contribute to a resilient and sustainable civilization. Among the values discussed are knowledge, the pursuit of truth, cooperation, trust, freedom, responsibility, diversity, and sustainability.

Main Themes

- Whether good and evil are objective or relative
- Evolution and the biological origins of human behavior
- Religion as a source of meaning and social cohesion
- The relationship between the individual, the group, and society
- Diversity, inequality, and social stability
- Freedom, responsibility, and free will
- Humanity as part of a larger ecological system
- Responsibility toward future generations
- The possibility of a sustainable ethics without absolute truths

Conclusion

Although absolute moral truths are difficult to demonstrate, this does not imply that all values are arbitrary. If the continued survival and development of humanity and the biosphere are regarded as desirable, certain values can be rationally defended as necessary conditions for sustainable cooperation and continuity.

The book therefore concludes not with a definitive answer, but with an invitation: to continue thinking critically, to keep asking questions, and to deepen our understanding of our place within the larger system of which we are a part.

Preface

At times I hear people speak about good and evil with a certainty that has always surprised me.

As though the boundary between them exists somewhere, fixed and waiting to be discovered.

As though moral convictions are self-evident.

That sense of wonder forms the starting point of this book.

For many years I have been fascinated by questions such as: Where do our moral convictions come from? Are they universal and timeless, or are they the products of evolution, culture, and history? Why do people regard certain actions as good and others as bad? And how should we approach these questions in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and interconnected?

This book is not an attempt to formulate a new absolute morality. Rather, it is an investigation—a search for understanding.

For that reason, the story begins not with answers, but with questions.

Through a series of conversations, Alex and Trebla explore topics such as evolution, religion, group formation, inequality, freedom, responsibility, and sustainability. Their goal is not to prove themselves right, but to gain a deeper understanding of how human values emerge and what role they play within the larger system of which we are a part.

The choice of a dialogue format is deliberate. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, dialogue has been a powerful tool for exploring ideas. Conversation makes doubt visible, allows room for different perspectives, and helps prevent the illusion that complex questions have simple answers.

Although the book begins largely as a descriptive inquiry, it gradually shifts toward a more normative question: Which values can contribute to the long-term survival of humanity, civilization, and the biosphere? I have tried to make that transition as transparent as possible.

I do not claim to possess the truth. My hope is more modest. If this book encourages readers to think, to ask new questions, or to view familiar beliefs from a different perspective, then it will have achieved its purpose.

Albert Prins

Comments and suggestions are warmly welcomed at:

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[Begin](#)

1. Relative Ethics

1.1. An Uncomfortable Question

Central Question: *Do good and evil truly exist, or do they exist only from a human perspective?*

TREBLA:

Good morning, Alex.

ALEX:

Good morning, Trebla.

TREBLA:

Take a look around you.

ALEX:

The rapeseed fields are beautifully in bloom.

TREBLA:

Indeed they are. But during our walk, I would like to ask you a question.

ALEX:

I'm curious.

TREBLA:

Do you think good and evil truly exist?

ALEX:

Of course. That seems like one of the most self-evident things there is.

TREBLA:

Is it really that self-evident?

Suppose you had been born a thousand years ago.

Or in ancient Sparta.

Or as a Viking.

Or in a society completely different from our own.

Do you think you would still hold exactly the same ideas about good and evil?

ALEX:

Probably not.

TREBLA:

And yet those beliefs would likely have felt just as self-evident to you as your current beliefs do today.

ALEX:

That's true.

TREBLA:

Which brings us to an uncomfortable possibility.

What if our moral convictions do not arise from universal truths, but from culture, history, and circumstance?

What if good and evil are less objective than we imagine?

ALEX:

That almost makes morality sound like an illusion.

TREBLA:

No. I am only asking whether we step back far enough to truly understand it.

Because before we can determine what is good, we must first understand the perspective from which we are looking.

1.2. Looking Outside the System

Central Question: *Can we understand the world without placing humanity at its center?*

TREBLA:

Imagine that an extraterrestrial civilization had been studying Earth for millions of years.

Do you think they would regard humans as the most important part of the planet?

ALEX:

Probably not.

TREBLA:

To them, we would simply be one species among millions.

No more important than wolves.

No more important than whales.

No more important than bacteria.

And yet we evaluate almost everything through a single question:

"What does this mean for us?"

We call a flood bad.

We call a rich harvest good.

We call a medical breakthrough progress.

But from the perspective of the Earth as a whole, none of these events carries any built-in moral meaning.

They simply happen.

ALEX:

So our judgments may tell us more about ourselves than about reality?

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Whenever we try to understand the world, we are always looking through a human lens.

That lens is shaped by upbringing.

Culture.

Religion.

Customs.

Personal experiences.

If we truly want to understand reality, we must try, at least temporarily, to set that lens aside.

Not to become less human.

But to see more clearly.

This is somewhat similar to the way the Stoic philosopher Epictetus viewed the world, with calm detachment and acceptance of what presents itself. Although he regarded this primarily as a way of life rather than a scientific method, he touched upon the same fundamental principle: suspending immediate judgment.

We can observe living systems in which individuals cooperate in order to survive, but also systems in which individuals kill in order to survive. If we truly want to understand these systems, we must resist the temptation to evaluate them according to our own human standards and values.

Our goal is not to praise, condemn, or intervene.

Our goal is to observe.

Only then can we begin to understand how the system developed into what it is today.

ALEX:

That sounds simple, but probably very difficult.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Because we ourselves are part of the system we are trying to understand.

Yet this mental distance is necessary.

Only when we stop treating humanity as the obvious center of existence can we begin to see reality as it truly is.

But before we can discuss good and evil, we must first understand how human beings became what they are.

1.3. How Did Humans Become What They Are?

Central Question: *Why do selfishness, love, cooperation, and competition coexist within the same species?*

TREBLA:

Let me ask you something, Alex.

Why do people help one another?

ALEX:

Because we are social creatures?

TREBLA:

That is part of the answer.

But why are we social creatures?

Why do parents feel responsible for their children?

Why are people willing to make sacrifices for their partners, families, or friends?

And why do those same people compete with one another at the same time?

ALEX:

That does seem contradictory.

TREBLA:

Yet it is exactly what we observe everywhere around us.

People can be extraordinarily generous, yet also selfish.

They can cooperate and compete.

Love and hate.

Sometimes it seems as though several different natures coexist within a single person.

ALEX:

So our emotions are part of the same evolutionary process?

TREBLA:

Most likely.

They form an essential part of the motivational system that guides our behavior.

But this leads us to a new question.

If our drives, emotions, and behaviors emerge from evolutionary processes, what does that mean for our ideas of good and evil?

Are good and evil truly properties of reality?

Or are they human interpretations of what benefits or harms ourselves and the groups to which we belong?

1.4. Good and Evil

Central Question: *Are good and evil properties of reality, or are they human interpretations?*

TREBLA:

Let us return to the question with which we began our walk.

Do good and evil truly exist?

ALEX:

It certainly feels that way.

Everyone seems to have some idea of what is good and what is bad.

TREBLA:

Most people do indeed have that feeling.

But let us examine where that feeling comes from.

Suppose a violent storm devastates a forest.

Trees are uprooted.

Animals die.

Nests are destroyed.

Would you call that a bad event?

ALEX:

For the animals that die, certainly.

TREBLA:

That seems reasonable.

But a few years later, new life often emerges in the same place.

New plants gain room to grow.

Different animal species appear.

The ecosystem changes and continues to develop.

Was the storm good or bad?

ALEX:

That depends on the perspective.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And the same applies to many of the events we judge every day.

A rainstorm is inconvenient for someone planning a picnic, yet valuable to a farmer waiting for water.

An economic crisis may be devastating for some while creating opportunities for others.

The event itself does not change.

Only the perspective changes.

ALEX:

So good and evil may not be properties of events themselves?

TREBLA:

That is precisely the question.

When physicists study a stone, they can identify properties such as mass, volume, or temperature.

But can you demonstrate in the same way that a stone is good or evil?

ALEX:

No. That seems impossible.

TREBLA:

Perhaps because good and evil are not properties of reality itself, but evaluations that living beings assign to reality.

Evaluations that arise from their interests, needs, and expectations.

What is good for one may be bad for another.

What appears beneficial today may prove harmful tomorrow.

What one culture regards as moral may be considered immoral elsewhere.

ALEX:

But that does not mean everything is relative, does it?

Murder is still wrong.

TREBLA:

That is an understandable reaction.

But let us proceed carefully.

We are not yet investigating which rules a society should adopt.

We are first trying to understand where our moral judgments come from.

Why do we regard murder as wrong?

Why do we praise honesty?

Why do we admire courage?

Perhaps because such behaviors contribute to the functioning of the groups in which people live.

Perhaps because they increase our chances of survival.

Or perhaps for other reasons.

That is something we still need to explore.

ALEX:

So you are not saying that good and evil do not exist?

TREBLA:

I am only saying that we do not yet know exactly what they are.

Perhaps they are not universal properties of reality.

Perhaps they are human interpretations of what benefits or harms individuals and groups.

That does not make them unimportant.

Quite the opposite.

But before we can understand what good and evil mean, we must first understand how they arise.

ALEX:

Can we find an example?

TREBLA:

Yes.

In fact, nature provides us with a particularly instructive one.

An example in which life and death, cooperation and conflict, are constantly intertwined.

Let us look at the annual wildebeest migration on the Serengeti.

Perhaps it will help us understand how differently the same reality can be experienced.

1.5. The Migration of the Wildebeest

Central Question: *Can something be necessary at the level of a system and tragic at the level of an individual?*

TREBLA:

One of the most impressive natural phenomena on Earth is the annual migration of the wildebeest across the Serengeti in East Africa.

Have you ever seen footage of it?

ALEX:

Yes. Vast herds that seem to stretch on forever.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Every year, millions of wildebeest, zebras, and other grazing animals travel hundreds of miles in search of fresh grass and water.

It appears almost like an endless river of life.

But anyone who watches closely sees something else as well.

Danger is everywhere.

Lions.

Hyenas.

Crocodiles.

Disease.

Exhaustion.

Thirst.

Many animals do not survive the journey.

ALEX:

That is what sometimes makes those documentaries difficult to watch.

TREBLA:

Why is that?

ALEX:

Because you witness suffering.

A calf losing its mother.

An animal being seized by a crocodile.

It evokes sympathy.

TREBLA:

And that is entirely understandable.

We naturally identify with the individual animal.

We share in its fear and its struggle to survive.

But let us try to view the same phenomenon from another perspective.

What would happen if all predators suddenly disappeared?

ALEX:

Then many more wildebeest would survive.

TREBLA:

Initially, yes.

But what happens afterward?

ALEX:

The herds would probably continue to grow.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And larger herds consume more food.

The grasslands would be depleted more quickly.

Famine would follow.

Diseases would spread more easily.

Eventually, even more animals might die than before.

ALEX:

So the predators serve a function within the system.

TREBLA:

Yes.

Not because they consciously protect the ecosystem.

A lion does not hunt to preserve ecological balance.

It hunts because it is hungry.

Yet its behavior contributes to the functioning of the larger whole.

Predators keep the herds moving.

The herds prevent certain areas from becoming overgrown.

Nutrients are distributed across the landscape.

New vegetation is given opportunities to emerge.

In this way, a dynamic equilibrium develops—one that has existed for thousands of generations.

ALEX:

So what is a tragedy for one animal can be part of a stable process for the ecosystem.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And here we encounter an important distinction.

The perspective of the individual.

And the perspective of the system.

For a wildebeest being caught by a lion, there is no higher purpose.

No harmony.

No beauty.

There is only fear and loss.

But for the ecosystem as a whole, the same event is part of a process that contributes to the continuation of the larger system.

ALEX:

So both perspectives can be true at the same time.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

And much confusion arises when we mix those perspectives together.

What benefits an individual is not always beneficial for the system.

And what benefits the system is not always beneficial for every individual.

ALEX:

That seems true of human societies as well.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Human societies also consist of individuals with their own interests, desires, and concerns, while simultaneously forming part of larger systems.

Families.

Communities.

Nations.

And ultimately, humanity itself.

That is why we must be cautious when using concepts such as good and evil.

Often we speak from the perspective of the individual.

Sometimes from the perspective of a group.

But rarely do we make explicit which perspective we are actually using.

ALEX:

So before calling something good or bad, we should first ask: *for whom?*

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Good for whom?

Bad for whom?

And at what level are we looking?

The individual?

The group?

The species?

Or the system as a whole?

Only when we ask those questions can we begin to understand why moral judgments are often far more complex than they first appear.

And that brings us back to our original question.

If good and evil are not simply properties of reality, what have we actually learned?

1.6. A Preliminary Conclusion

Central Question: *What remains when we challenge our self-evident assumptions about good and evil?*

TREBLA:

Let us look back at what we have discussed so far.

We began with a simple question:

Do good and evil truly exist?

At first glance, the answer appears obvious.

Most people regard certain actions as good and others as bad.

But as we examined the question more closely, it became far more complicated than it initially seemed.

ALEX:

Because our judgments appear to depend on the perspective we adopt.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

We attempted to step back from our instinctive human viewpoint.

Not because that viewpoint is unimportant, but because it can sometimes prevent us from seeing the larger picture.

We discovered that human beings are not separate from nature but are themselves products of a long evolutionary process.

Our drives, emotions, and behaviors did not appear out of nowhere.

They were shaped by generations of selection, adaptation, and change.

ALEX:

And that is why traits such as cooperation, empathy, and competition coexist.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

What we often regard as opposites may, from an evolutionary perspective, be complementary strategies.

Self-preservation and cooperation.

Competition and care.

Individual and group.

All are part of the same process.

We then examined the concepts of good and evil.

We saw that events themselves do not necessarily appear to possess moral meaning.

That meaning often arises only when living beings evaluate events according to their own interests, needs, and expectations.

ALEX:

Like the wildebeest migration.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

For the wildebeest caught by a lion, there is only fear and loss.

For the ecosystem as a whole, the same event contributes to a process that supports the continuation of the system.

Neither perspective is false.

But they are different.

And that difference matters.

ALEX:

So when people speak of good and evil, they are often speaking from a particular perspective without realizing it.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

Many moral debates are not only about facts, but also about the perspective from which those facts are evaluated.

Those who fail to make that perspective explicit risk confusing their own preferences with universal truths.

ALEX:

Does this mean that good and evil do not exist at all?

TREBLA:

Not necessarily.

What we have discovered so far is only that the question is more complicated than it first appears.

Perhaps good and evil are not objective properties of reality, like mass or temperature.

Perhaps they are ways in which conscious beings assign meaning to their experiences.

That does not make them any less important.

But it does make them less self-evident.

ALEX:

So we should be cautious about making absolute claims regarding morality.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

True understanding often begins when we recognize the limits of our own perspective.

Not with certainty, but with curiosity.

Not with condemnation, but with inquiry.

And that brings us to a new question.

If good and evil are not simply embedded in reality itself, where do our moral rules come from?

Why do nearly all human societies develop norms, values, and rules of conduct?

Why do religions, laws, and moral traditions arise?

And why do some of those rules resemble one another so closely, even in cultures that never came into contact with each other?

Those are the questions we will explore in the next chapter:

The Origins of Ethics and Religion.

2. The Origins of Ethics and Religion

2.1. A New Question

Central Question: *If good and evil are not objective, where do our moral rules come from?*

TREBLA:

At the end of our previous conversation, we arrived at a remarkable conclusion.

Perhaps good and evil are not properties of reality itself.

Perhaps they depend on the perspective of the one making the judgment.

ALEX:

That sounds reasonable, but it immediately raises a new question.

Why, then, have people all over the world developed rules about what is acceptable and what is not?

TREBLA:

An excellent question.

Because when we look at human societies, we observe something remarkable.

Almost everywhere, we find rules against murder.

Rules against theft.

Rules concerning honesty.

Rules concerning cooperation.

And often religions that support and reinforce those rules.

ALEX:

That seems to suggest that morality must come from somewhere.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

But perhaps not from the same source that many people assume.

Let us explore where moral rules might originate.

2.2. Morality Before Religion

Central Question: *Do people need religion to distinguish right from wrong?*

ALEX:

Many people believe that morality ultimately comes from religion.

According to them, without religion people would not know the difference between right and wrong.

TREBLA:

That is a common belief.

But let us examine whether history supports it.

Suppose all religions disappeared tomorrow.

Would murder, theft, and deception suddenly become acceptable?

ALEX:

I do not think so.

Most people would still condemn those things.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

That suggests our moral intuitions may run deeper than religious teachings alone.

Consider the Greek philosophers.

Plato and Aristotle lived centuries before Christianity emerged.

Yet they devoted considerable attention to questions of justice, courage, honesty, and responsibility.

ALEX:

So they developed moral ideas without Christian influence.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

And we see the same pattern with Confucius in China.

He also developed ideas about respect, reciprocity, and good governance without relying on the religious traditions that later became dominant in Europe.

ALEX:

That seems to suggest that people are capable of thinking about morality for themselves.

TREBLA:

That is precisely the point.

Perhaps religions do not discover morality.

Perhaps they build upon moral intuitions that already exist within human societies.

Which brings us to another question.

Why do groups develop moral rules in the first place?

2.3. Why Groups Create Rules

Central Question: *Why do similar rules of behavior emerge in almost every society?*

TREBLA:

Imagine a group of people without any rules.

No agreements.

No trust.

No expectations.

Everyone does only what seems advantageous at the moment.

How long do you think such a group would function?

ALEX:

Probably not very long.

TREBLA:

I think so too.

Cooperation requires predictability.

When people constantly deceive, steal from, or attack one another, cooperation becomes difficult.

And without cooperation, survival becomes more difficult as well.

ALEX:

So moral rules may provide a practical advantage.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

From an evolutionary perspective, groups that succeeded in fostering trust and cooperation may have enjoyed an advantage over groups dominated by distrust and chaos.

That does not mean people consciously designed a moral system.

Just as language developed gradually, moral rules may also have emerged gradually.

ALEX:

Because some behaviors worked better than others.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

Honesty increases trust.

Trust promotes cooperation.

Cooperation increases the likelihood of success for the group.

Moral rules can therefore be viewed as cultural solutions to recurring problems of living together.

ALEX:

So morality may have emerged because it was functional.

TREBLA:

That is a possibility we should take seriously.

But if that is true, why did religions become such an important part of human civilizations?

2.4. Why Religion Emerged

Central Question: *Why do people believe in gods?*

TREBLA:

Let me take you back to a time before science.

No electricity.

No physics.

No meteorology.

No knowledge of bacteria or viruses.

Only people trying to understand a mysterious world.

Imagine standing beneath the sky thousands of years ago during a violent thunderstorm.

Lightning flashes across the heavens.

Thunder shakes the earth.

What would you think?

ALEX:

That something supernatural was taking place.

TREBLA:

Many people thought exactly that.

The Vikings saw Thor.

The Greeks saw Zeus.

The Romans saw Jupiter.

Different names.

But remarkably similar explanations.

ALEX:

Because people were searching for explanations for things they did not understand.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The same happened with earthquakes.

Diseases.

Droughts.

Floods.

The unknown was filled with stories.

Not because people were unintelligent.

But because human beings seek meaning.

When knowledge is absent, imagination fills the gap.

ALEX:

So religion provided explanations.

TREBLA:

Yes.

But not explanations alone.

Religion also provided community.

Identity.

Comfort.

And rules for behavior.

And that last function proved especially important.

Because once people believe that rules come from a higher power, those rules acquire much greater authority.

And that brings us to the role religion may have played in strengthening morality.

2.5. Religion as Social Technology

Central Question: *Did religion create morality, or did it reinforce existing morality?*

ALEX:

So religion gave people explanations for phenomena they did not understand.

But does that also explain why religions became so influential?

TREBLA:

That is an important question.

If religion had done nothing more than explain thunderstorms, earthquakes, and diseases, its influence would likely have remained limited.

Religion served another function as well.

It helped groups of people live together.

ALEX:

What do you mean?

TREBLA:

Imagine a leader trying to organize a community.

He wants people to cooperate.

He wants to reduce theft.

He wants to prevent violence within the group.

He wants agreements to be honored.

Now he can try to persuade everyone through reason and argument.

But that is not easy.

People disagree.

People have different interests.

People may resist rules.

ALEX:

So a leader needs a stronger justification.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And which is more persuasive?

"Follow these rules because I say so."

Or:

"Follow these rules because they come from a higher power."

ALEX:

The latter would probably be more convincing.

TREBLA:

That often appears to have been the case.

Religion gave moral rules a special authority.

Not necessarily because those rules were true, but because they were linked to something greater than the individual.

A god.

A sacred text.

A divine order.

A supernatural reality.

ALEX:

So religion made existing rules more powerful.

TREBLA:

That is one possible interpretation.

From that perspective, religions can be viewed as cultural instruments that promote cooperation.

They create a shared story.

A common identity.

A collective purpose.

And that makes large-scale cooperation possible.

ALEX:

But does that mean religions are merely human inventions?

TREBLA:

That depends on whether a higher power actually exists.

But immediately we encounter a problem.

How can we make meaningful statements about a being when we do not know what it is?

What its attributes are.

What its intentions are.

Or even whether it exists at all.

ALEX:

That seems difficult.

TREBLA:

Philosophers have struggled with that question for centuries.

Take Spinoza, for example.

He did not view God as a personal being concerned with human affairs.

For him, God was more or less identical with nature itself.

The totality of reality.

ALEX:

That is quite different from the traditional image of God.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

And that illustrates how diverse human conceptions of the divine can be.

Perhaps that tells us something about ourselves.

Perhaps we project our expectations, fears, and desires onto the universe.

Just as we saw earlier with Thor, Zeus, and other gods.

ALEX:

So religious concepts evolve along with the cultures in which they arise.

TREBLA:

That often seems to be the case.

And that brings us to another interesting pattern.

Whenever science explains a phenomenon, the need for a supernatural explanation often diminishes.

Lightning was once explained by gods.

Today we understand electrical discharges.

Diseases were once seen as punishment from higher powers.

Today we understand bacteria, viruses, and genetic factors.

Earthquakes were once attributed to divine forces.

Today we understand plate tectonics.

ALEX:

So the role of the gods seems to shrink as our knowledge grows.

TREBLA:

That is precisely what some thinkers have observed.

People sometimes speak of a "*God of the gaps*."

A god who appears primarily in places where our knowledge is lacking.

As those gaps become smaller, so does the space available for such explanations.

ALEX:

But even if religious explanations disappear, moral questions remain.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that may be the most important insight of all.

Whether people follow different religions—

or none at all—

questions of justice, responsibility, honesty, and cooperation remain.

That suggests morality may be rooted more deeply than religion alone.

Religions have strengthened, spread, and legitimized moral systems.

But the need for cooperation appears to be older than any religion.

ALEX:

So morality may arise from humanity's need to live together, while religion was one of the ways of supporting that morality.

TREBLA:

That is precisely the possibility we are exploring.

And once people develop rules for living together, another question naturally arises.

Are those rules primarily for the benefit of the individual?

Or primarily for the benefit of the group?

Because what is good for one person is not always good for another.

And that brings us to the next chapter:

The Individual and the Group

3. The Individual and the Group

3.1. An Inevitable Tension

Central Question: *Does a human being ultimately live for themselves or for the group?*

TREBLA:

Alex, imagine that tomorrow you find yourself stranded on a deserted island.

No family.

No friends.

No society.

Just you.

Do you think you could survive?

ALEX:

Perhaps for a while.

But probably not for very long.

TREBLA:

Why not?

ALEX:

Because I depend on knowledge, tools, and skills that I learned from other people.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Even the most independent person turns out to depend on others.

Our language.

Our knowledge.

Our technology.

Our culture.

Everything has been built by the generations that came before us.

ALEX:

So no one truly stands alone.

TREBLA:

That certainly seems to be the case.

Yet people generally experience themselves as individuals.

We have our own thoughts.

Our own desires.

Our own interests.

Our own dreams.

And therein lies an interesting tension.

We are both individuals and social beings at the same time.

ALEX:

And sometimes those two come into conflict.

TREBLA:

Constantly.

What is good for the individual is not always good for the group.

And what is good for the group is not always good for the individual.

Think of taxes.

Traffic regulations.

Military conscription.

Or environmental regulations.

Again and again, individual interests must be weighed against collective interests.

ALEX:

That seems like a problem without a perfect solution.

TREBLA:

Perhaps it is.

But before we can understand the problem, we must first examine how individuals and groups relate to one another.

3.2. Why Groups Form

Central Question: *Why do humans almost always live in groups?*

TREBLA:

Let me ask you something, Alex.

Do you think the first humans consciously decided to form groups?

ALEX:

Probably not.

I think it happened naturally.

TREBLA:

I think so too.

But why?

Why do wolves live in packs?

Why do ants live in colonies?

Why do humans live in families, villages, cities, and nations?

ALEX:

Because cooperation offers advantages.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

An individual alone is vulnerable.

A group can share knowledge.

Divide tasks.

Detect dangers.

Protect its young.

Gather food.

Cooperation often increases the chances of survival.

ALEX:

So groups are essentially an evolutionary strategy.

TREBLA:

That seems plausible.

Our ancestors lived in small groups for thousands of generations.

Those who cooperated effectively often had a better chance of survival than those who relied entirely on themselves.

As a result, traits such as communication, empathy, and cooperation became increasingly important.

ALEX:

So our social nature is not accidental.

TREBLA:

Probably not.

We appear to be biologically adapted to life in groups.

That does not mean groups are always harmonious.

Quite the opposite.

Precisely because people depend on one another, tensions constantly arise.

But before we examine those tensions, we must first understand why groups are so attractive.

Because people do not join groups merely out of necessity.

They often derive part of their identity from them as well.

3.3. The Power of Belonging

Central Question: *Why do people identify so strongly with groups?*

TREBLA:

Have you ever noticed how easily people divide themselves into groups?

ALEX:

What do you mean?

TREBLA:

Think about sports clubs.

Political parties.

Religions.

Professions.

Nationalities.

Even people who barely know one another often feel a sense of connection as soon as they discover they belong to the same group.

ALEX:

I have noticed that.

TREBLA:

Interesting, isn't it?

Two people may be completely different.

Yet as soon as they discover that they speak the same language, come from the same country, or share the same beliefs, an immediate sense of kinship often emerges.

ALEX:

Where does that come from?

TREBLA:

Perhaps because groups were essential for survival throughout much of our evolutionary history.

Those who belonged to a group had protection.

Those who were excluded faced significant risks.

As a result, the desire to belong may have become deeply embedded within us.

ALEX:

So our need for connection may be older than modern civilization itself.

TREBLA:

Much older.

It probably emerged long before there were states, religions, or written laws.

But there is also a danger hidden within it.

Because the same force that binds groups together can also set groups against one another.

And that brings us to a less pleasant aspect of human group formation.

3.4. The Dangers of the Group

Central Question: *Why does the same force that unites people sometimes divide them?*

TREBLA:

We have seen that groups provide many benefits.

Protection.

Cooperation.

Belonging.

But do you think groups produce only positive outcomes?

ALEX:

No. History shows that groups also cause many conflicts.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that is what makes group formation so fascinating.

The same characteristic that helps people cooperate can also place them in opposition to others.

As soon as a "*we*" emerges, a "*they*" often emerges as well.

ALEX:

Because people begin to identify with their own group?

TREBLA:

That often seems to happen.

People feel connected to their family.

Their friends.

Their village.

Their religion.

Their people.

Their country.

There is nothing inherently wrong with that.

But when loyalty to one's own group becomes more important than understanding other groups, tensions can arise.

ALEX:

So belonging has a downside.

TREBLA:

Yes.

History is filled with examples.

Tribes fighting one another.

Religious conflicts.

Civil wars.

Nationalist movements.

Often the people involved are convinced they are doing the right thing.

And that is precisely what makes it so dangerous.

ALEX:

Because every group sees itself as the good group.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Almost nobody sees themselves as the villain in their own story.

Almost every group develops a narrative in which it sees itself as righteous, threatened, or morally superior.

As a result, the same human need for belonging can lead to exclusion, discrimination, and sometimes even violence.

ALEX:

That almost makes it sound as though group formation inevitably leads to conflict.

TREBLA:

Not necessarily.

But the risk is always present.

Because groups do not merely strengthen cooperation.

They also strengthen loyalty.

And loyalty can sometimes become more important than truth, justice, or compassion.

ALEX:

So group formation is both a strength and a risk.

TREBLA:

That is exactly the paradox.

Without groups, human beings would probably never have built great civilizations.

Yet those same groups can also become sources of division and conflict.

And that leads us to another question.

What happens when the interests of the individual clash with the interests of the group?

3.5. When the Individual and the Group Collide

Central Question: *To whom do we ultimately owe our loyalty?*

TREBLA:

Suppose a society decides to implement a policy that benefits the majority but harms you personally.

Should you accept that policy?

ALEX:

That depends on how great the benefit is for the group and how great the disadvantage is for me.

TREBLA:

Interesting.

So even you are already weighing individual interests against collective interests.

ALEX:

I suppose we all do that.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

And that is where one of the most difficult questions in political and moral philosophy arises.

When may the group demand something from the individual?

And when may the individual resist the group?

Think of taxes.

Environmental regulations.

Military service.

Vaccination programs.

Freedom of speech.

Again and again, individual interests collide with collective interests.

ALEX:

And there seems to be no simple formula that always provides the correct answer.

TREBLA:

I agree.

Some societies place strong emphasis on the collective.

Others emphasize individual freedom.

But both extremes carry risks.

A society concerned only with the individual may fall apart due to a lack of cohesion.

A society concerned only with the collective may suppress individual freedom.

ALEX:

So a balance must constantly be sought.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Perhaps there is no perfect balance.

Perhaps the search for that balance is itself a permanent part of the human condition.

And that brings us to an interesting conclusion.

3.6. A Preliminary Conclusion

Central Question: *What have we learned about the relationship between the individual and the group?*

TREBLA:

Let us summarize what our inquiry has revealed so far.

We began with a simple question:

Does a human being ultimately live for themselves or for the group?

At first, it seemed as though we had to choose between the two.

But as our discussion progressed, we discovered that reality is more complex.

ALEX:

Because the individual and the group need each other.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

An individual has difficulty surviving without others.

But a group consists entirely of individuals.

Neither can be fully understood apart from the other.

We saw that groups did not arise by accident.

Cooperation provided advantages to our ancestors.

Protection.

The sharing of knowledge.

The division of labor.

Groups increased the chances of survival.

ALEX:

And as a result, people developed a strong need to belong.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Our need for connection appears to be deeply rooted in our evolutionary history.

Families.

Tribes.

Religions.

Peoples.

Nations.

All of these forms of group formation build upon the same human tendency to seek connection.

But we also saw the other side of the story.

ALEX:

As soon as a *"we"* emerges, a *"they"* often emerges as well.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

The same force that makes cooperation possible can also lead to exclusion, conflict, and division.

Group formation is therefore both a source of strength and a source of risk.

We then examined the tension between individual freedom and collective interests.

We discovered that neither can completely dominate.

A society focused exclusively on individual freedom risks falling apart.

A society focused exclusively on the collective risks suppressing freedom and creativity.

ALEX:

So the challenge is to find a balance again and again.

TREBLA:

That does indeed seem to be one of the fundamental challenges facing every society.

But our investigation raises another question.

Whenever people live together, they are almost never completely equal.

Some possess more than others.

Some have greater influence.

More power.

More knowledge.

More status.

ALEX:

We see that everywhere.

In families.

In businesses.

In countries.

Even in small groups.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

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And that raises an important question.

Are such differences flaws in the system?

Or are they an inevitable consequence of human diversity?

In other words:

Why does inequality almost always emerge whenever people organize themselves?

And that brings us to the next chapter:

Inequality and Diversity

4. Inequality and Diversity

4.1. An Uncomfortable Observation

Central Question: *Why are people never truly equal?*

TREBLA:

Alex, do you think all people are equal?

ALEX:

That depends on what you mean.

Before the law, people should be equal.

But in practice, people obviously differ enormously from one another.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And yet the idea of equality remains one of the most influential ideals in modern societies.

Almost everyone considers it important that people are treated fairly.

At the same time, however, we see differences everywhere.

Some people are stronger.

Others are more intelligent.

Some are more creative.

Others are more sociable.

Some are born into prosperous circumstances.

Others are not.

ALEX:

So complete equality does not seem to exist.

TREBLA:

That certainly appears to be the case.

Even children who grow up in the same family often differ greatly from one another.

They have different talents.

Different interests.

Different personalities.

Different ambitions.

ALEX:

But many people see inequality as something negative.

TREBLA:

That is understandable.

After all, inequality can lead to poverty, powerlessness, and injustice.

But before judging whether differences are desirable, let us first try to understand where they come from.

As in our earlier conversations, we should begin by observing and only afterward by judging.

ALEX:

So the question is not whether inequality is good or bad.

But why it arises in the first place.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And to answer that question, we must first examine one of the most fundamental characteristics of life itself:

diversity.

4.2. Why Diversity Is Inevitable

Central Question: *Why does nature continuously produce differences?*

TREBLA:

Let us begin with a simple observation.

Have you ever met two completely identical people?

ALEX:

No.

Even identical twins eventually differ from one another.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Everywhere we look, we see variation.

Not only among people.

But also among plants.

Animals.

Bacteria.

In fact, among all forms of life.

ALEX:

But why?

Wouldn't it be more efficient if all individuals possessed the same successful traits?

TREBLA:

That may seem logical.

But imagine for a moment that everyone were exactly the same.

The same intelligence.

The same personality.

The same talents.

The same weaknesses.

What would happen when circumstances changed?

ALEX:

Then everyone would become vulnerable at the same time.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And that is exactly the problem.

A population perfectly adapted to current conditions may appear highly successful.

But once the environment changes, that same perfection can become a disadvantage.

Diversity functions as insurance against uncertainty.

Because individuals differ, there is always a possibility that some will be better adapted to new circumstances.

ALEX:

So variation increases a species' chances of survival.

TREBLA:

That does indeed seem to be one of its most important functions.

What appears to be a disadvantage today may become an advantage tomorrow.

What seems exceptional today may become the trait that makes all the difference in the future.

Evolution does not know what circumstances the future will bring.

That is why it continually produces variation.

ALEX:

So diversity is not a deviation from the system.

It is part of the system.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

In fact, without diversity, evolution would be almost impossible.

Without differences, there is nothing upon which natural selection can act.

Diversity is therefore one of the foundations of life itself.

ALEX:

That makes it sound as though differences are not only inevitable but necessary.

TREBLA:

That is precisely the conclusion to which this line of reasoning appears to lead.

And once differences exist, another question naturally arises.

Do differences eventually lead to inequality?

4.3. Why Differences Lead to Inequality

Central Question: *If people are different, can their outcomes ever be completely equal?*

TREBLA:

We have seen that diversity is a fundamental characteristic of life.

People differ in abilities, talents, interests, health, and personality.

But they also differ in something else.

Circumstances.

ALEX:

You mean the environment into which someone is born?

TREBLA:

Exactly.

No one chooses their parents.

No one chooses their birthplace.

No one chooses the economic conditions in which they grow up.

And yet all of these factors influence the opportunities a person receives.

ALEX:

So differences exist even before a person makes their first choice.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

And then personal choices are added on top of those differences.

Some people take risks.

Others seek security.

Some are ambitious.

Others place a higher value on leisure.

Some invest years in developing knowledge and skills.

Others choose a simpler path.

ALEX:

So differences accumulate.

TREBLA:

That often seems to happen.

And as differences accumulate, they eventually produce differences in income, wealth, influence, knowledge, and status.

In other words:

inequality.

ALEX:

But many people experience inequality as unfair.

TREBLA:

That is understandable.

Especially when differences become extreme.

Or when people feel that opportunities are distributed unequally.

But first, let us distinguish between two different concepts.

Differences.

And inequality.

ALEX:

That sounds as though they are not the same thing.

TREBLA:

They are not.

Diversity means that people are different.

Inequality means that those differences lead to different outcomes.

The first appears almost unavoidable.

The second often emerges as a consequence of the first.

ALEX:

So as long as people differ, their results will differ as well.

TREBLA:

That is a logical possibility.

Imagine ten people running a marathon.

Even if they all begin from exactly the same starting position, they will probably not cross the finish line at the same time.

Not because the rules are unfair.

But because people differ.

In fitness.

Training.

Motivation.

Experience.

ALEX:

So equal opportunities do not automatically produce equal outcomes.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that insight has important implications.

Many discussions about inequality become confused because people mix together two different goals.

One goal is equal opportunity.

The other is equal outcomes.

Those are not necessarily the same thing.

ALEX:

And sometimes they may even conflict with one another.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

A society that strives for complete equality of outcomes must constantly correct for differences.

But a society that allows differences to operate completely freely may eventually develop very large inequalities.

This raises a difficult question.

How much inequality can a society tolerate without losing its cohesion?

And to answer that question, we must first examine why inequality not only creates problems but may also offer certain advantages.

4.4. The Benefits of Inequality

Central Question: *Can inequality contribute to progress?*

ALEX:

Most people view inequality primarily as a problem.

What benefits could it possibly have?

TREBLA:

That depends on the form and degree of inequality.

But let us begin with a simple example.

Imagine that everyone had exactly the same profession.

The same education.

The same skills.

The same interests.

What would such a society look like?

ALEX:

Probably not very efficient.

Many necessary tasks would remain undone.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

A society functions precisely because people differ.

Some become physicians.

Others engineers.

Farmers.

Teachers.

Researchers.

Artists.

Entrepreneurs.

The division of labor that results from these differences makes complex civilizations possible.

ALEX:

But that is diversity.

Not necessarily inequality.

TREBLA:

A fair point.

But differences in talent and choice often lead to differences in outcomes.

And those outcomes can, in turn, stimulate new developments.

Consider scientific discoveries, for example.

Not everyone makes the same discovery.

Not everyone develops a new technology.

Not everyone takes the same risks.

Sometimes it is exceptional individuals who produce breakthroughs that benefit society as a whole.

ALEX:

So differences can encourage innovation.

TREBLA:

That often seems to be the case.

People are driven not only by necessity but also by ambition.

Curiosity.

Prestige.

Recognition.

Sometimes even competition.

Many inventions, businesses, and scientific achievements have emerged partly because of such motivations.

ALEX:

So a society in which everyone receives exactly the same reward, regardless of effort or contribution, may lose some incentives.

TREBLA:

That is a possibility.

When differences in effort, responsibility, or risk never affect the outcome, motivation and innovation may decline.

The challenge, therefore, is not necessarily to eliminate all differences.

The challenge is to organize differences in a way that contributes to the functioning of society as a whole.

ALEX:

So inequality is not automatically harmful.

TREBLA:

Not automatically.

Just as fire can be both useful and dangerous.

The question is not merely whether inequality exists.

The question is how much inequality develops and what consequences it produces.

Because the same processes that stimulate innovation and progress can also create problems.

And that is where the other side of the story begins.

4.5. The Dangers of Inequality

Central Question: *When does inequality become a threat to a society?*

TREBLA:

Now let us look at the other side.

What happens when differences continue to grow larger?

ALEX:

Then a society may emerge in which some people have far more opportunities than others.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And when those differences become extreme, a variety of problems can arise.

Economic power may become concentrated.

Political influence may be distributed unequally.

Social mobility may decline.

People may begin to feel that the system no longer functions fairly.

ALEX:

And that can lead to frustration.

TREBLA:

Or even instability.

History shows that societies often come under pressure when large groups of people lose confidence that they can still share in progress.

When differences become too great, the sense of connection between people can weaken.

People begin to feel less like part of the same system.

ALEX:

So both too much equality and too much inequality can create problems.

TREBLA:

That does indeed appear to be one of the central dilemmas.

A society needs enough freedom to allow differences, creativity, and innovation to flourish.

But it also needs enough cohesion to prevent those differences from hardening into permanent divisions.

ALEX:

That sounds like a constant balancing act.

TREBLA:

I believe it is.

Perhaps there is no perfect distribution.

Perhaps there is only an ongoing search for balance.

Between dynamism and stability.

Between individual development and social cohesion.

Between freedom and justice.

And that brings us to an even more fundamental question.

If people differ in talents, circumstances, and opportunities, how much freedom should they have to make their own choices?

4.6. Inequality Alone Is Not Enough

Key Question: Is inequality by itself sufficient to create change?

ALEX:

So inequality seems to be the driving force behind change.

TREBLA:

Almost.

But one important element is still missing.

A difference in energy or opportunity does not automatically produce activity.

There must also be a pathway through which that difference can be released.

ALEX:

Can you explain that?

TREBLA:

Think again about the two rain barrels.

One barrel is full, while the other is empty.

As long as the valve connecting them remains closed, nothing happens.

The potential exists, but the system remains completely at rest.

Only when the valve is opened does the water begin to flow.

So it is not only the inequality that matters, but also the possibility of converting that inequality into movement.

ALEX:

So without a connection, there can be no flow.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

We see the same principle everywhere in nature.

A rock resting on top of a wall possesses gravitational potential energy, yet nothing happens as long as the wall continues to support it.

Only when that support is removed is the potential energy converted into motion.

A battery stores electrical energy, but without a closed electrical circuit, no current flows.

A seed contains the potential to grow into a tree, but without water, nutrients, and sunlight, that potential remains unrealized.

Again and again we encounter the same principle: a potential difference alone is not enough. The necessary conditions must also exist for that potential to be transformed into action.

ALEX:

Does that apply to people as well?

TREBLA:

Perhaps it applies most clearly to people.

Every human being is born with a unique combination of talents, abilities, and personal characteristics.

But when a society forces everyone into the same profession, the same beliefs, or the same way of life, much of that potential remains unrealized.

Not because the abilities are absent, but because the opportunity to develop them is missing.

ALEX:

So freedom is really the bridge between potential and reality.

TREBLA:

That's a beautiful way to put it.

Freedom alone is not sufficient for progress, just as differences in talent alone are not sufficient.

But when people with different abilities are given the freedom to develop those abilities, creativity, innovation, and progress emerge.

Differences themselves are valuable.

But equally important are the conditions that allow those differences to be expressed.

Freedom is therefore not merely a moral ideal.

It is one of the essential conditions under which human potential can develop.

5. Freedom and Responsibility

5.1. The Temptation of Freedom

Central Question: *Why do people long for freedom while simultaneously accepting limitations?*

TREBLA:

Alex, imagine that tomorrow you were completely free.

No laws.

No taxes.

No obligations.

No rules.

Would that sound appealing?

ALEX:

At first, yes.

But I suspect problems would arise.

TREBLA:

What kind of problems?

ALEX:

Traffic would become chaotic.

Agreements would be difficult to enforce.

People could more easily harm one another.

TREBLA:

Interesting.

So even though people value freedom, they also seem to need rules.

ALEX:

That certainly seems to be the case.

TREBLA:

And there we encounter a curious paradox.

Freedom appears to be one of humanity's most cherished ideals.

Yet complete freedom can make social life impossible.

ALEX:

Because one person's freedom can conflict with another person's freedom.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Every society must therefore find a balance between individual liberty and collective order.

But before we can determine how much freedom is desirable, we must first understand what freedom actually means.

5.2. What Is Freedom, Really?

Central Question: *Are you free when no one stops you, or when you are genuinely able to shape your own life?*

ALEX:

Freedom seems like such a simple concept.

Surely everyone knows what it means.

TREBLA:

Do they really?

Imagine someone living alone on a deserted island.

No laws.

No government.

No obligations.

Is that person completely free?

ALEX:

In one sense, yes.

No one tells them what to do.

TREBLA:

But suppose they cannot find food.

Have no medicine.

Possess no tools.

Are they truly free?

ALEX:

That feels different.

They may not be restricted by other people, but they are restricted by their circumstances.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that brings us to an important distinction.

Some people define freedom as the absence of coercion.

No one prevents you from acting.

No one dictates how you must live.

This is often called **negative freedom** or **negative liberty**.

ALEX:

Freedom from interference.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

But there is another interpretation.

Suppose someone formally possesses every legal freedom, yet has received no education, suffers from chronic illness, or lives in extreme poverty.

How many real opportunities does that person have?

ALEX:

Probably far fewer than someone who is healthy, educated, and given opportunities.

TREBLA:

Some people call that **positive freedom** or **positive liberty**.

Not freedom from constraints, but freedom to make meaningful use of one's possibilities.

ALEX:

So freedom can have two different meanings.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

The freedom to be left alone.

And the freedom to develop one's capabilities.

In practice, both appear to be important.

ALEX:

But those two can sometimes conflict.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

A society that seeks to maximize negative freedom may allow large disparities in opportunities and possibilities to emerge.

A society that seeks to maximize positive freedom will often need to intervene more extensively in the lives of individuals.

And that creates new tensions.

ALEX:

So even freedom turns out to be more complicated than it first appears.

TREBLA:

As is often the case with philosophical concepts.

Words that seem simple frequently reveal multiple layers of meaning upon closer examination.

But there is an even deeper question.

Even if no one prevents us from acting, and we possess abundant opportunities, are we truly free?

ALEX:

What do you mean?

TREBLA:

Are our choices genuinely our own?

Or are they shaped by factors beyond our control?

Our genes.

Our upbringing.

Our culture.

Our experiences.

Our emotions.

Perhaps we should first examine how much freedom remains once all of these influences are taken into account.

And that brings us to an even more fundamental question:

Are we truly free?

5.3. Are We Truly Free?

Central Question: *To what extent do we determine our own choices?*

ALEX:

That is indeed a difficult question.

I have always felt that I make my own choices.

TREBLA:

Most people feel that way.

But let us examine where our choices come from.

Did you choose who your parents would be?

ALEX:

Of course not.

TREBLA:

Did you choose where you were born?

Which language you learned as a child?

Which culture shaped you?

ALEX:

No.

TREBLA:

And yet all of those factors influence who you are today.

Your beliefs.

Your habits.

Your preferences.

Your fears.

Your expectations.

Much of that was formed before you were capable of making conscious choices.

ALEX:

That is true.

But that does not mean I lack free will, does it?

TREBLA:

Not necessarily.

But it does make the question more complicated.

Imagine two children growing up under completely different circumstances.

One grows up in safety, receives a good education, and is given many opportunities.

The other grows up in poverty, uncertainty, and violence.

Do you think both children are likely to make exactly the same choices later in life?

ALEX:

Probably not.

Their experiences will influence them.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Our choices do not emerge in a vacuum.

They are constantly shaped by circumstances we did not choose.

But the story does not end there.

Our biological makeup also plays a role.

ALEX:

You mean genetic differences?

TREBLA:

Yes.

People differ in temperament.

In their tolerance for risk.

In curiosity.

In impulsiveness.

In their ability to concentrate.

None of us completely chose those traits.

ALEX:

So both nature and nurture influence our behavior.

TREBLA:

That certainly seems to be the case.

And for precisely that reason, some philosophers have questioned whether free will exists at all.

They argue that every choice is ultimately the result of prior causes.

Genes.

Upbringing.

Experiences.

Environment.

Brain processes.

According to that view, freedom is largely a feeling that arises after a decision has already been prepared by processes over which we have little control.

ALEX:

That almost makes human beings sound like robots.

TREBLA:

That is one extreme.

But there is another.

The belief that people are completely free and entirely responsible for shaping their own lives.

That position is also difficult to defend.

After all, no one chooses their starting point.

No one chooses every circumstance they encounter.

ALEX:

So perhaps the truth lies somewhere between those two extremes.

TREBLA:

I think so.

Perhaps we are not completely free beings.

But neither are we fully programmed machines.

We operate within boundaries that we did not choose.

Yet within those boundaries, we possess a certain degree of freedom.

ALEX:

Like a chess player who did not invent the rules but still chooses their own moves?

TREBLA:

That is an excellent analogy.

The player chooses the moves.

But not the board.

Not the rules.

Not the position from which the game begins.

Freedom therefore seems less like absolute independence and more like the ability to make choices within given circumstances.

ALEX:

So freedom is not an all-or-nothing concept.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Freedom probably exists in degrees.

Some people possess more opportunities than others.

Some situations allow more choice than others.

The question, then, may not be whether people are completely free.

The question is how much freedom they actually possess.

ALEX:

But if our freedom is limited by factors beyond our control, how can we be held responsible for our actions?

TREBLA:

An excellent question.

Because once we begin thinking about freedom, we inevitably arrive at responsibility.

Can we hold someone accountable for choices shaped in part by genes, upbringing, and circumstance?

Or is responsibility itself necessary for societies to function?

That is the question we must now explore.

5.4. Freedom Without Responsibility?

Central Question: *Can freedom and responsibility exist independently of one another?*

ALEX:

If our choices are influenced by genes, upbringing, and circumstances, how can we be held responsible for what we do?

TREBLA:

That is precisely the question philosophers have wrestled with for centuries.

Suppose someone commits a serious crime.

What do you think is the most important question a judge must ask?

ALEX:

Whether that person is guilty.

TREBLA:

But what exactly does guilt mean?

Does it mean that a person could have freely chosen to act differently?

Or does it simply mean that a person is held responsible for their actions, regardless of how those actions came about?

ALEX:

That seems like an important distinction.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

For if we require complete freedom as a condition for responsibility, a problem immediately arises.

No one has complete control over their genetic makeup.

No one chooses their childhood.

No one chooses every circumstance that shapes them.

ALEX:

Then almost no one could ever be held fully responsible.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

But imagine the opposite scenario.

Suppose nobody is ever held responsible because everything is ultimately the result of circumstances.

What would happen then?

ALEX:

It would become very difficult to organize a society.

TREBLA:

I think so too.

Societies function because people expect behavior to have consequences.

Rewards.

Criticism.

Recognition.

Punishment.

Trust.

Distrust.

All of these responses influence future behavior.

ALEX:

So responsibility also serves a practical purpose.

TREBLA:

Certainly.

Even if our choices are not completely free, it may still be useful to hold people accountable for their actions.

Not only to provide justice for victims.

But also to guide behavior and make cooperation possible.

ALEX:

So responsibility does not necessarily depend on absolute free will.

TREBLA:

That is an intriguing possibility.

Perhaps responsibility is not a property of the universe but a social instrument.

A way societies attempt to make social life possible.

ALEX:

That sounds less absolute than many people are accustomed to.

TREBLA:

Perhaps.

But consider how often we assign responsibility in everyday life.

We praise people for their achievements.

We criticize them for their mistakes.

We admire courage.

We condemn deceit.

Even when we know circumstances played a role.

ALEX:

Because we look not only at causes but also at consequences.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that is where an important tension arises.

On the one hand, our understanding of the factors influencing human behavior continues to grow.

On the other hand, the need to hold people responsible remains.

ALEX:

So understanding and responsibility do not necessarily exclude one another.

TREBLA:

I do not think they do.

A physician who understands how a disease develops does not therefore approve of the disease.

Likewise, a society can seek to understand human behavior without abandoning responsibility altogether.

ALEX:

That requires nuance.

TREBLA:

Far more nuance than most people find comfortable.

It is easier to declare someone completely guilty or completely innocent.

Reality usually lies somewhere in between.

People are influenced by circumstances.

But they also respond to those circumstances.

They may not possess absolute freedom, but neither are they entirely powerless.

ALEX:

So freedom and responsibility seem to go hand in hand.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The more freedom someone has to make choices, the more responsibility we generally expect them to bear.

And the less freedom someone possesses, the more understanding we often show toward their circumstances.

But that leads us to a new question.

If freedom is valuable and responsibility appears necessary, where should the line be drawn?

When may a society limit individual freedom?

And when does it go too far?

5.5. The Limits of Freedom

Central Question: *When may a society restrict the freedom of individuals?*

ALEX:

Freedom seems to be an important ideal.

But we have also seen that complete freedom can create problems.

So where should the line be drawn?

TREBLA:

That is one of the most difficult questions any society faces.

Let me give you a simple example.

Suppose someone decides that from now on, they will drive on the left side of the road while everyone else drives on the right.

Should they have that freedom?

ALEX:

No, of course not.

That would be dangerous.

TREBLA:

Why exactly?

If freedom means that people may do whatever they want, why should this person not be allowed to do so?

ALEX:

Because their freedom puts other people at risk.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And that brings us to an important principle.

The freedom of one person often ends where the freedom of another begins.

ALEX:

So absolute freedom does not really exist.

TREBLA:

That certainly seems to be the case.

As soon as people live together, limits inevitably arise.

Traffic laws.

Property rights.

Contracts.

Safety regulations.

All of these restrictions reduce a portion of our freedom.

Yet at the same time, they make a much greater freedom possible.

ALEX:

That sounds paradoxical.

TREBLA:

And yet it happens all the time.

A traffic law limits your freedom to drive however you wish.

But in return, it gives you the freedom to participate safely in traffic.

Property rights limit your freedom to use someone else's possessions.

But they also give you security regarding your own possessions.

Some restrictions actually create new forms of freedom.

ALEX:

So not every restriction is a loss.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The question is not whether freedom may be limited.

The question is when a limitation is justified.

ALEX:

And how do we determine that?

TREBLA:

People disagree about that.

Some place strong emphasis on individual liberty.

Others consider the protection of the community more important.

Often the answer depends on the specific situation.

Take freedom of speech, for example.

Most people believe it is important that ideas can be discussed freely.

Yet almost nobody believes that freedom of speech includes the right to knowingly make false emergency calls or to directly incite violence.

ALEX:

So even fundamental freedoms have limits.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

We see the same thing with environmental regulations.

A company may wish to maximize its profits without restriction.

But when those profits are achieved by polluting rivers or destroying ecosystems, the consequences affect others as well.

Once again, the question arises of where individual freedom should give way to collective interests.

ALEX:

So many political debates are really about finding that balance.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

Beneath the surface of many social conflicts lies the same underlying question:

How much freedom should an individual have, and how much protection does the community require?

There is probably no single answer that applies to every situation.

Each society must continually make that judgment for itself.

ALEX:

That means freedom can never be separated from responsibility.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

Freedom without responsibility can descend into chaos.

But responsibility without freedom can descend into oppression.

A healthy society seeks to balance the two.

ALEX:

And that balance will probably never be perfect.

TREBLA:

I think so too.

Perhaps freedom is not a final destination that can ever be fully reached.

Perhaps it is an ongoing process of weighing interests, adapting to circumstances, and searching for balance.

But our discussion has now led us to a new question.

So far, we have focused primarily on individuals, groups, and societies.

But what about humanity as a whole?

Do we have responsibilities only toward those who live alongside us today?

Or do we also have responsibilities toward future generations?

5.6. A Preliminary Conclusion

Central Question: *What have we learned about freedom and responsibility?*

TREBLA:

Let us look back at what we have discovered.

We began with a simple idea.

Freedom appears to be one of humanity's most valued ideals.

Almost no one wants to be constantly controlled.

Almost everyone wants the opportunity to shape their own life.

But it quickly became apparent that freedom is more complicated than it first appears.

ALEX:

Because complete freedom can conflict with the freedom of others.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

A society without rules may sound appealing, but it would probably become unlivable very quickly.

Freedom therefore requires limits.

Not to make freedom impossible, but to make it possible.

ALEX:

We also discovered that freedom can have different meanings.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Sometimes we mean freedom from coercion.

The freedom to be left alone.

But at other times we mean the freedom to make meaningful use of our opportunities.

The freedom to develop ourselves.

To make choices.

To take advantage of opportunities.

Both forms of freedom turn out to be important.

ALEX:

Then we arrived at the question of whether human beings are actually completely free.

TREBLA:

A question that proved more difficult than we expected.

No one chooses their parents.

No one chooses their genetic makeup.

No one chooses their birthplace or culture.

Our choices are constantly influenced by factors over which we have little control.

And yet we do not experience ourselves as passive victims of circumstance.

We make choices.

We respond to events.

We influence our environment.

ALEX:

So freedom does not seem to be an all-or-nothing concept.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Freedom probably exists in degrees.

Within the circumstances we inherit, we possess a certain amount of latitude.

Not unlimited freedom.

But neither complete powerlessness.

ALEX:

And that is why responsibility remains important.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

Societies can hardly function without responsibility.

Trust.

Cooperation.

Agreements.

Laws.

All of these depend on the assumption that people are, to some extent, accountable for their behavior.

At the same time, we have seen that understanding the role of circumstances remains essential.

Human behavior never arises from a single cause.

ALEX:

So responsibility requires nuance.

TREBLA:

I believe it does.

Placing too much emphasis on individual blame can blind us to the influence of circumstances.

But abandoning responsibility altogether can undermine cooperation and trust.

Once again, reality appears to lie somewhere between two extremes.

ALEX:

Just as with many of the other subjects we have discussed.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Again and again, we encounter the same pattern.

Not absolute freedom.

Not absolute control.

Not absolute equality.

Not absolute inequality.

Reality often seems to be a search for balance.

ALEX:

But so far, we have focused mainly on individuals and societies.

TREBLA:

That is true.

And that brings us to the next step in our inquiry.

For human beings do not live only among other human beings.

They are also part of a much larger system.

The Earth.

Nature.

The ecosystems upon which their existence depends.

ALEX:

So the question of responsibility does not end with our fellow human beings.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

If we can feel responsibility toward our family, our community, and our society, can we also bear responsibility toward future generations?

Toward people who have not yet been born?

Toward the world we leave behind?

These are questions that become increasingly important as our influence on the planet continues to grow.

And that brings us to the next chapter:

Humanity and Earth

6. Humanity and Earth

6.1. A Broader Perspective

Central Question: *Do we have responsibilities toward a future that we ourselves will never experience?*

TREBLA:

Alex, have you ever planted a tree?

ALEX:

Yes, a few times.

Why do you ask?

TREBLA:

Because trees are an interesting phenomenon.

Some trees live for hundreds of years.

Often, the person who plants a tree will never live to see how large it eventually becomes.

And yet people continue to plant trees.

ALEX:

That is true.

TREBLA:

Why, though?

Why do people invest time and effort in something from which they may never fully benefit themselves?

ALEX:

Perhaps because they are thinking about their children or grandchildren.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And in doing so, we touch upon something remarkable.

Human beings are among the very few species capable of consciously thinking about a future they themselves will never experience.

We can make plans for generations that do not yet exist.

We can concern ourselves with events that may occur decades or even centuries from now.

ALEX:

That gives us a unique position.

TREBLA:

But perhaps also a unique responsibility.

For once a species becomes capable of influencing the future, the question arises of how it should deal with that influence.

And that brings us to a broader perspective than any we have discussed so far.

Not merely the individual.

Not merely the group.

Not merely society.

But the Earth as a whole.

6.2. Humanity as Part of a Larger System

Central Question: *Does humanity stand above nature, or is it part of nature?*

TREBLA:

Do you remember how our inquiry began?

ALEX:

With the question of whether we could look at the Earth without placing humanity at the center.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Let us revisit that idea.

Human beings do not exist apart from nature.

We breathe air.

Drink water.

Consume plants and animals.

Use natural resources.

We are completely dependent upon processes that have existed for billions of years.

ALEX:

Yet many people behave as though humanity stands apart from nature.

TREBLA:

At times it certainly seems that way.

Perhaps because our technology gives us an illusion of independence.

But in the end, every human society remains dependent upon ecosystems.

Upon fertile soils.

Clean water.

A stable climate.

Biodiversity.

When these systems are seriously disrupted, human societies are ultimately affected as well.

ALEX:

So we influence the system, while simultaneously depending on it.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And that makes our position unique.

As far as we know, humanity is the first species capable of becoming aware of its own influence on the system of which it is a part.

That insight raises new questions.

How much growth is possible?

How much change can a system tolerate?

And what responsibilities do we have toward future generations?

6.3. Growth and Limits

Central Question: *Can infinite growth exist on a finite planet?*

ALEX:

When people speak about progress, growth almost always seems to be viewed as something positive.

More prosperity.

More technology.

More production.

More consumption.

More opportunities.

Isn't growth the engine of civilization?

TREBLA:

For a long time, that has indeed been the dominant view.

And not without reason.

Thanks to growth, many people today enjoy a standard of living that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations.

Food.

Medicine.

Education.

Communication.

Technology.

All of these developments have transformed human life.

ALEX:

So growth has given us a great deal.

TREBLA:

Certainly.

But let us ask a simple question.

Can anything continue growing forever?

ALEX:

That depends on what is growing.

TREBLA:

Imagine a tree.

Can a tree continue growing indefinitely?

ALEX:

No.

Eventually it reaches a natural limit.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The same applies to animals.

Populations.

Ecosystems.

And almost all natural systems.

Growth is often possible, but not without limits.

Sooner or later, boundaries are reached.

ALEX:

But does that also apply to human societies?

TREBLA:

That is precisely the question.

The Earth contains a finite amount of space.

A finite amount of natural resources.

A finite amount of fertile farmland.

A finite capacity to absorb waste.

When a system is finite, it seems logical that unlimited material growth will eventually encounter limits.

ALEX:

That sounds almost self-evident.

Why is there so much debate about it?

TREBLA:

Because growth can mean different things.

The growth of knowledge, for example, has very few physical limits.

The growth of science.

The growth of efficiency.

The growth of technological capabilities.

But when growth is accompanied by ever-increasing consumption of resources and energy, the situation changes.

Then physical limits become relevant.

ALEX:

So not all forms of growth are the same.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

That distinction is important.

A society can become more intelligent without necessarily consuming vastly more resources.

It can produce more efficiently.

Recycle more effectively.

Develop new technologies.

Yet even then, the question remains how much pressure an ecosystem can withstand.

ALEX:

So ultimately the issue concerns the relationship between human activity and the carrying capacity of the system.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And that brings us back to an idea we discussed earlier.

Human beings do not stand outside the system.

We are part of the very system upon which we depend.

When we seriously disrupt that system, we ultimately disrupt our own living conditions as well.

ALEX:

That sounds like someone sawing off the branch they are sitting on.

TREBLA:

An excellent analogy.

The question is not whether humanity influences its environment.

That influence is already evident.

The question is how wisely we use that influence.

History shows that people are often very good at solving immediate problems, but far less effective at recognizing long-term consequences.

ALEX:

Why is that?

TREBLA:

An interesting question.

Why do people respond quickly to immediate threats but often slowly to problems that will not fully manifest for decades?

Perhaps part of the answer lies hidden within our evolutionary history.

And that is precisely what we must examine next.

6.4. Why People Underestimate the Future

Central Question: *Why are people so effective at responding to immediate problems, yet often poor at anticipating long-term consequences?*

ALEX:

You said that people often struggle to recognize long-term consequences.

Why is that?

TREBLA:

Imagine you are given two choices.

You can receive one hundred dollars today.

Or one hundred and twenty dollars a year from now.

Which option do you think most people would choose?

ALEX:

Many would probably choose the money they can receive immediately.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

And we see the same pattern not only with money.

We see it in health.

Consumption.

Debt.

Environmental problems.

And virtually every situation in which an immediate benefit is weighed against a delayed cost.

ALEX:

But that does not seem very rational.

TREBLA:

Perhaps not from a long-term perspective.

But let us consider the circumstances under which our ancestors lived.

For most of human history, life was uncertain.

Food could be scarce.

Disease could strike unexpectedly.

Predators posed a danger.

Wars and natural disasters were ever-present.

ALEX:

So the future was far more uncertain than it is today.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

For someone who did not know whether they would still be alive next year, an immediate benefit was often more valuable than a possible benefit in the distant future.

From that perspective, short-term thinking may actually have been a successful strategy.

ALEX:

But many people today live under very different circumstances.

TREBLA:

That is true.

Our technology has developed far more rapidly than our biological nature.

We possess nuclear power plants, computers, and satellites.

Yet our brains were largely shaped by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution in a world of hunters and gatherers.

ALEX:

So we still carry ancient instincts within us.

TREBLA:

That seems plausible.

We respond strongly to immediate rewards.

Immediate threats.

Events that are visible and tangible.

But far less strongly to risks that develop gradually over time.

ALEX:

Such as climate change.

TREBLA:

For example.

Or soil depletion.

Loss of biodiversity.

Rising national debt.

Or even personal health problems.

When consequences become visible only years or decades later, people often underestimate the problem.

ALEX:

Even though those slow changes can ultimately have enormous consequences.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Imagine a ship slowly drifting off course.

Over the course of a single day, the deviation may be barely noticeable.

But after thousands of miles, the ship may arrive at an entirely different destination.

Many social and ecological processes operate in a similar way.

Small changes accumulate.

Slowly.

Almost invisibly.

Until the consequences can no longer be ignored.

ALEX:

So the problem is not that people are unintelligent.

But that our intuitions are not always well suited to long-term processes.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

Our brains are exceptionally effective at detecting immediate dangers.

But much less effective at evaluating developments that unfold over decades or generations.

That is precisely why science, statistics, and long-term planning are so important.

They help us recognize patterns that intuition can easily miss.

ALEX:

That means responsibility for the future does not arise automatically.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

It requires conscious reflection.

Self-discipline.

Foresight.

And sometimes a willingness to sacrifice something today for a benefit that will only become visible tomorrow.

ALEX:

But why should people do that?

Why should I make a sacrifice for someone who hasn't even been born yet?

TREBLA:

That may well be the most important question of this chapter.

Why should we care about future generations?

And with that, we arrive at the very heart of our inquiry.

6.5. Responsibility Toward Future Generations

Key Question: Why should we care about people who do not yet exist?

ALEX:

That remains a difficult question.

Why should I make sacrifices today for people who may not live until a hundred or even a thousand years from now?

TREBLA:

Let me turn the question around.

Do you think your life is solely the result of your own efforts?

ALEX:

No, of course not.

I benefit from everything that previous generations have built.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The language you speak.

The knowledge you possess.

The roads you travel on.

The technology you use.

The science you apply.

The democratic rights you enjoy.

None of these things were created by you.

They are the result of the work of countless people who lived long before you.

ALEX:

So, in a sense, I am the heir to their efforts.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Every generation receives a world that it did not build itself.

We inherit more than possessions.

We also inherit knowledge.

Institutions.

Culture.

Technology.

And the natural environment in which we live.

ALEX:

But that does not automatically mean that we have obligations toward future generations.

TREBLA:

Not automatically.

But it does raise an interesting question.

If we benefit from what others before us have left behind, why should future generations not benefit from what we leave behind?

ALEX:

That sounds like a form of reciprocity between generations.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Not because future people can do anything in return for us.

They cannot.

But because we are part of a chain that is far greater than a single human life.

Every generation receives something.

And every generation passes something on.

ALEX:

So responsibility does not necessarily have to be based solely on direct self-interest.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

Human beings appear capable of looking beyond the span of their own lives.

We write books for readers we will never meet.

We plant trees whose shade we will never sit beneath.

We build cathedrals, bridges, and universities that may endure for centuries.

We invest in scientific research whose benefits may not become visible until much later.

ALEX:

Those are indeed all examples of long-term thinking.

TREBLA:

And perhaps there is something remarkable in that.

Perhaps civilization itself is largely founded on the willingness to look beyond immediate self-interest.

ALEX:

But how far does that responsibility extend?

Do we have responsibilities toward all future people?

TREBLA:

That is difficult to answer.

But perhaps we do not need to know exactly where the boundary lies in order to recognize that our choices have consequences.

When we cut down forests.

Consume natural resources.

Develop technologies.

Accumulate debt.

Or alter ecosystems.

We affect not only our own lives, but also the opportunities available to those who come after us.

ALEX:

So even if we do nothing, we are still making a choice.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

Inaction is often a form of action as well.

Every generation leaves its mark.

The question is not whether we influence the future.

The question is how we influence it.

ALEX:

That brings us back to something we discussed earlier.

We are part of a larger system.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And perhaps responsibility is ultimately nothing more than the recognition that our actions have consequences that extend beyond ourselves.

Not only for our families.

Not only for our societies.

But possibly for generations yet to come.

ALEX:

That does not mean we can fully control the future.

TREBLA:

Certainly not.

No one knows exactly what the world will look like a hundred years from now.

But uncertainty does not free us from responsibility.

On the contrary.

Precisely because the future is uncertain, we must be careful about what we pass on.

ALEX:

So responsibility may begin not with certainty about the future, but with respect for its possibilities.

TREBLA:

Well said, Alex.

And with that, we arrive at the final question of our inquiry.

If morality is not absolute, and if we are part of a larger system that we influence, what values can help us ensure the long-term flourishing of both humanity and the world upon which it depends?

6.6. Preliminary Conclusion

Key Question: What have we learned about the relationship between humanity and the Earth?

TREBLA:

Let us look back at what we have explored.

We began with a simple question.

Do we have responsibilities toward a future that we ourselves will never experience?

At first glance, that does not seem like a self-evident idea.

After all, human beings live only for a limited time.

Why should we concern ourselves with events that will take place long after our deaths?

ALEX:

But as we proceeded, we discovered that nearly everything that makes our lives possible comes from previous generations.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

We are not merely individuals.

We are also heirs.

We inherit knowledge.

Language.

Science.

Culture.

Technology.

Institutions.

And the natural environment in which we live.

No generation starts entirely from scratch.

ALEX:

And because of that, we are part of a much longer chain.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

We receive a world that we did not build ourselves.

And we pass on a world that we manage only temporarily.

That insight changes the way we can think about responsibility.

ALEX:

We have also seen that humanity is not an outsider.

We are part of the same system upon which we depend.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The Earth is not merely a stage upon which the human story unfolds.

It is an active system of which we are a part.

The air we breathe.

The water we drink.

The food we eat.

The ecosystems upon which we depend.

Everything is interconnected.

ALEX:

And because of that, our actions often have consequences that extend far beyond what we can directly see.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

This brings us to an important lesson.

Human beings are particularly good at recognizing immediate problems.

But much less skilled at recognizing gradual changes.

Yet it is often those gradual changes that prove decisive for the future.

ALEX:

Like a ship that slowly changes course.

TREBLA:

A small deviation may seem insignificant.

But over time it can lead to an entirely different destination.

The same is true for societies.

For ecosystems.

For civilizations.

ALEX:

So responsibility requires looking beyond the present.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

Not because we can predict the future with complete certainty.

We cannot.

But because we know that our choices have consequences.

And because we know that future generations will have to live with part of the world that we leave behind.

ALEX:

That does not mean there are simple answers.

TREBLA:

Quite the opposite.

Many questions remain open.

How much growth is desirable?

Which risks are acceptable?

What sacrifices may we ask of present generations?

These are difficult questions.

But the fact that they are difficult does not mean we can ignore them.

ALEX:

So perhaps responsibility lies not in knowing all the answers, but in taking the questions seriously.

TREBLA:

That is a beautiful way to put it.

And with that, we have arrived at the final step of our inquiry.

We began by asking whether good and evil exist objectively.

We explored morality, religion, groups, inequality, freedom, and responsibility.

Now only one question remains.

If morality is not an absolute property of the universe, what values can help us ensure the long-term flourishing of both humanity and the larger system upon which it depends?

In other words:

What kind of ethics is appropriate for a world in which everything is constantly changing, yet continuity still matters?

That is the question we will address in the final chapter:

A Sustainable Ethics

7. A Sustainable Ethics

7.1. The Final Question

Central Question: *If no absolute morality exists, why should we choose anything at all?*

ALEX:

Trebla, throughout our conversations we have questioned many assumptions.

We examined whether good and evil truly exist as objective realities.

We explored evolution, religion, group formation, inequality, and freedom.

But one question still remains.

If no absolute morality exists, why should we choose any values at all?

Why should we consider certain principles important?

TREBLA:

That may be the most important question of our entire inquiry.

Many people assume that once absolute morality disappears, everything becomes relative.

As though nothing matters anymore.

ALEX:

That seems like a logical conclusion.

TREBLA:

But is it really?

Suppose there is no objective rule written into the universe requiring a ship to be properly maintained.

Does that mean maintenance is meaningless?

ALEX:

No.

If you want to prevent the ship from sinking, you must maintain it.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

The choice to maintain the ship does not follow from a cosmic law.

It follows from a goal.

Namely, keeping the ship afloat.

In much the same way, values can emerge from goals.

Not because they are absolutely true, but because they contribute to something we consider important.

ALEX:

So the real question becomes:

What do we wish to preserve?

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And once we ask that question, we arrive at humanity itself.

Do we want human civilization to continue?

Do we want future generations to have opportunities?

Do we want the biosphere upon which we depend to remain functional?

If the answer is yes, then certain values naturally follow.

Not as absolute truths.

But as logical consequences.

7.2. From Absolute Morality to Functional Morality

Central Question: *Can values be important without being absolute?*

ALEX:

I think I understand your point.

Perhaps values do not need to be absolute in order to be meaningful.

But many people find that an uncomfortable idea.

TREBLA:

Why do you think that is?

ALEX:

Because it seems as though morality loses its foundation.

If there is no universal law determining what is good and evil, why would anyone still follow moral rules?

TREBLA:

That is a reasonable concern.

But let us consider other human systems.

Take traffic regulations.

Why do people stop at a red light?

ALEX:

Because it is safer.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Not because a red light possesses cosmic significance.

Not because the universe decrees that red means stop.

But because the rule helps achieve a particular goal.

Namely, safe traffic.

ALEX:

So the value of the rule is connected to its function.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

The same applies to many other human institutions.

Science values honesty and verifiability.

Not because the universe demands them.

But because reliable knowledge would otherwise be impossible.

Healthcare values hygiene.

Not because bacteria are immoral.

But because hygiene prevents disease.

Legal systems value fairness and predictability.

Not because these values are literally written into the laws of nature.

But because societies struggle to function without them.

ALEX:

So many values are functional.

They help achieve particular goals.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And perhaps the same is true of morality.

Perhaps values do not need to be absolute in order to matter.

Perhaps they derive their significance from the role they play within human societies.

ALEX:

That sounds less mysterious than traditional morality.

TREBLA:

Perhaps.

But not necessarily less valuable.

Consider trust.

Can you imagine a society in which nobody trusts anyone else?

ALEX:

That seems almost impossible.

Every form of cooperation would constantly break down.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Trust proves to be functional.

Not because it possesses a supernatural quality.

But because it makes cooperation possible.

The same applies to honesty.

Responsibility.

Reciprocity.

Respect.

These values do not appear important because they were prescribed somewhere in the universe.

They appear important because they contribute to the functioning of human communities.

ALEX:

So morality can be viewed as a collection of behaviors that support cooperation.

TREBLA:

That is one way of looking at it.

Not the only way.

But an interesting one.

From that perspective, the question becomes not:

"Which values are absolutely true?"

But rather:

"Which values help human beings live together sustainably?"

ALEX:

That certainly changes the discussion.

TREBLA:

I believe it does.

Because once we ask that question, we can evaluate values according to their consequences.

Not according to their supposed sacredness.

But according to their contribution to the flourishing of individuals, societies, and perhaps humanity as a whole.

ALEX:

So a functional morality requires continuous evaluation.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

It is not a collection of eternal truths.

It is more like a toolbox.

Some ideas prove useful under certain circumstances.

Others lose their value when circumstances change.

Just as technology evolves, moral systems may evolve as well.

ALEX:

That actually fits quite well with what we learned earlier about evolution.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

There, too, we found no fixed final destination.

Only a continual process of adaptation to changing circumstances.

Perhaps something similar applies to human values.

Not everything that works today will work tomorrow.

Yet certain principles seem to reappear with remarkable consistency.

Cooperation.

Trust.

Knowledge.

Responsibility.

Freedom.

Diversity.

Perhaps because they contribute to something many people consider valuable:

the continuation and development of human civilization.

7.3. Which Values Promote Continuity?

Central Question: *Which values increase the likelihood that a civilization will endure?*

ALEX:

If morality is not absolute but functional, then the next question seems obvious.

Which values work best?

TREBLA:

That naturally depends on the goal we choose.

If our goal were nothing more than personal pleasure, we would choose different values than if our goal were the long-term survival of human civilization.

ALEX:

So first we must determine what we consider important.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

For the purposes of our inquiry, let us assume that the survival and continued development of humanity are desirable.

Not because the universe commands it.

But because most people value their own survival, the survival of their children, and the opportunities available to future generations.

ALEX:

That seems like a reasonable starting point.

TREBLA:

Then we may ask which characteristics help civilizations remain stable, adaptable, and resilient.

And interestingly, certain values appear again and again.

ALEX:

Such as?

TREBLA:

Let us begin with **knowledge**.

A society that learns from its mistakes generally has a better chance of solving problems than one that ignores knowledge.

Science, education, and critical thinking increase our ability to understand reality.

Not perfectly.

But usually better than ignorance.

ALEX:

So knowledge increases our capacity to adapt.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

And that brings us to a second value:

a commitment to truth.

Not because people always possess the truth.

But because a society that systematically attempts to correct its own errors usually functions better than one that continually deceives itself.

ALEX:

That makes sense.

A faulty map is of little use to a traveler.

TREBLA:

An excellent analogy.

A society can navigate wisely only when its understanding of reality corresponds reasonably well to reality itself.

ALEX:

What other values seem important?

TREBLA:

Cooperation.

No individual builds a civilization.

No generation develops all knowledge on its own.

Everything we have achieved is the result of cooperation among millions of people, often spread across centuries.

ALEX:

But cooperation also requires trust.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

Which is why **trust** and **reliability** appear equally fundamental.

When trust disappears, the cost of nearly every human activity increases.

Cooperation becomes more difficult.

Institutions weaken.

Conflicts multiply.

ALEX:

So trust functions like a kind of lubricant for society.

TREBLA:

A fitting metaphor.

Next, let us consider **freedom**.

As we discussed earlier, freedom makes innovation, creativity, and personal development possible.

New ideas rarely emerge within completely controlled societies.

Civilizations therefore require a certain degree of freedom if they are to adapt to changing circumstances.

ALEX:

But freedom alone is not enough.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Freedom without responsibility can lead to chaos.

Responsibility therefore appears to be the natural partner of freedom.

Freedom creates possibilities.

Responsibility helps guide those possibilities in constructive directions.

ALEX:

And what about diversity?

We discussed that at length earlier.

TREBLA:

Diversity turns out to be one of the most important sources of resilience.

A society in which everyone thinks the same way, possesses the same skills, and pursues the same solutions may appear efficient.

But it becomes vulnerable when circumstances change.

New challenges often require new perspectives.

Diversity increases the likelihood that such perspectives will be available.

ALEX:

So variation is important not only in biology, but also in culture and ideas.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

And that brings us to a final value.

Sustainability.

Not as a political slogan.

But as a simple principle.

A system that destroys the conditions necessary for its own existence ultimately undermines itself.

A society that consumes more than it can replace over the long term will eventually create problems for itself or for future generations.

ALEX:

So sustainability essentially means that a system takes its own future into account.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

When we summarize everything, we arrive at a remarkable set of values:

- Knowledge
- Commitment to truth
- Cooperation
- Trust
- Freedom
- Responsibility
- Diversity
- Sustainability

Not because the universe commands them.

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But because they appear to contribute to a civilization's ability to adapt, survive, and continue developing.

ALEX:

So these values are not absolute commandments.

They are practical guidelines.

TREBLA:

That is exactly how I would describe them.

Not as eternal truths.

But as principles that, as far as we can judge, contribute to the continuity and flourishing of humanity and society.

Yet that immediately raises a new question.

What happens when some of those values come into conflict with one another?

How much freedom can we tolerate?

And should we really tolerate everything?

That is the paradox we must now examine.

7.4. The Paradox of Tolerance

Central Question: *Must we tolerate everything in order to be tolerant?*

ALEX:

We have discussed freedom, diversity, and cooperation.

All of these seem to be important values for a sustainable society.

But freedom raises a question for me.

Should we actually tolerate everything?

TREBLA:

What exactly do you mean?

ALEX:

If people are free to hold different beliefs, should we also tolerate beliefs that threaten freedom, cooperation, or even society itself?

TREBLA:

That is an important question.

Let us begin with a thought experiment.

Imagine a society that is completely tolerant.

Every opinion is permitted.

Every belief is accepted.

Every group is granted complete freedom.

What would happen if one of those groups then attempted to prohibit all other opinions?

ALEX:

Then that group would be using the tolerance of society to abolish tolerance itself.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that brings us to what the philosopher Karl Popper called **the paradox of tolerance**.

A society that tolerates unlimited intolerance risks ultimately losing its own tolerance.

ALEX:

That sounds paradoxical.

To remain tolerant, one must sometimes be intolerant of intolerance.

TREBLA:

In a sense, yes.

But we must be careful.

That principle can easily be abused.

Almost every group regards its opponents as intolerant.

For that reason, it is important to define our terms precisely.

ALEX:

So the issue is not simply disagreement?

TREBLA:

No.

A healthy society benefits from differing opinions.

New ideas.

Criticism.

Debate.

Doubt.

These are often the sources of progress.

A society in which everyone thinks alike becomes vulnerable.

ALEX:

So diversity of thought is valuable.

TREBLA:

Extremely valuable.

But there is a difference between expressing an opinion and actively destroying the conditions that make free expression possible.

ALEX:

Can you give an example?

TREBLA:

Suppose someone says:

"I disagree with your ideas."

That does not threaten a free society.

But suppose someone says:

"People with your ideas should no longer be allowed to speak."

That is different.

In the first case, someone is participating in the conversation.

In the second, someone is attempting to make the conversation itself impossible.

ALEX:

So a society must protect not only freedom, but also the conditions that allow freedom to exist.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

The same applies to democracy.

Democratic systems are built upon disagreement.

But they struggle to function when large groups reject the principle of peaceful disagreement itself.

ALEX:

So some values protect other values.

TREBLA:

That is an important insight.

Freedom protects creativity.

Trust protects cooperation.

Commitment to truth protects knowledge.

Tolerance protects diversity.

But when any one of these values becomes completely detached from the others, problems can emerge.

ALEX:

So even tolerance has limits.

TREBLA:

Probably so.

Not because dissenting opinions are dangerous.

Quite the opposite.

But because a society must also defend the conditions that make open discussion, freedom, and cooperation possible.

ALEX:

That sounds less like an absolute rule and more like a balance.

TREBLA:

I believe it is.

As we have seen throughout our inquiry, reality rarely consists of extremes.

Not absolute freedom.

Not absolute control.

Not absolute equality.

Not absolute inequality.

And perhaps not absolute tolerance either.

Again and again, sustainable systems appear to seek a balance among competing interests and values.

ALEX:

So even an open society must think carefully about what it wishes to protect.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

And that brings us to one final philosophical question.

If there are no absolute truths upon which we can rely, can we still find direction?

Can we live with uncertainty without falling into relativism?

That is the final question of our inquiry.

7.5. An Ethics Without Absolute Truths

Central Question: *Can we find direction without ultimate certainty?*

ALEX:

Trebla, throughout our conversation we have tried to examine our assumptions critically.

We have seen that cultures differ.

That morality evolves.

That religions change.

That societies are constantly in motion.

But if there are no absolute truths on which we can rely, how do we prevent everything from becoming relative?

TREBLA:

That may be the greatest concern people have when they move away from absolute morality.

They fear that without fixed foundations, everything becomes arbitrary.

As though every opinion were just as valid as every other.

ALEX:

Yes, I sometimes feel that concern myself.

TREBLA:

Then let us consider how people deal with uncertainty in other areas.

Think of a scientist.

Does a scientist possess absolute certainty?

ALEX:

No.

Scientific theories can always be revised or replaced.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Yet that does not make science worthless.

Scientists act on the basis of the best available knowledge while simultaneously acknowledging that their knowledge may be incomplete.

ALEX:

So uncertainty does not mean that all possibilities are equally likely.

TREBLA:

Precisely.

Between absolute certainty and complete arbitrariness lies a vast middle ground.

That is where most human decisions take place.

We rarely possess complete certainty.

But that does not mean we cannot make sensible choices.

ALEX:

So an ethics without absolute truths does not automatically become relativistic.

TREBLA:

I do not believe it does.

It simply requires greater humility.

Less dogmatism.

A greater willingness to revise ideas when new insights become available.

ALEX:

That sounds similar to the scientific attitude.

TREBLA:

In some respects, yes.

Not because morality is an exact science.

But because both require self-correction.

The ability to recognize mistakes.

An openness to new information.

ALEX:

So perhaps we should spend less time searching for eternal answers and more time searching for better answers.

TREBLA:

Beautifully stated.

Perhaps the question is not:

"Which morality is eternally true?"

But rather:

"Which values help us best address the challenges we face?"

ALEX:

And those answers may change as circumstances change.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Just as technology changes.

Just as knowledge changes.

Just as societies change.

So too may moral insights evolve.

Not because everything is arbitrary.

But because reality itself is constantly changing.

ALEX:

That requires a certain degree of intellectual humility.

TREBLA:

More than many people find comfortable.

Absolute certainty provides comfort.

Doubt requires effort.

But doubt also offers an advantage.

It keeps the door open to learning.

To improvement.

To the correction of mistakes.

History shows that some of humanity's greatest errors arose from excessive confidence in absolute certainties.

ALEX:

So uncertainty need not be a weakness.

TREBLA:

Quite the opposite.

Recognizing uncertainty may itself be a form of wisdom.

Not because we know nothing.

But because we understand that our knowledge will always remain incomplete.

ALEX:

Then ethics seems less like a collection of commandments and more like an ongoing conversation.

TREBLA:

That is exactly how I see it.

A conversation between generations.

Between cultures.

Between science and experience.

Between the individual and society.

Not a conversation that will ever be definitively concluded.

But a continuing inquiry into how human beings can live together in a changing world.

ALEX:

So ultimately we do not have to choose between absolute certainty and complete relativism.

TREBLA:

No.

Perhaps we can choose a third path.

An attitude in which we strive for knowledge without pretending to possess complete knowledge.

In which we take values seriously without treating them as untouchable.

In which we accept responsibility without claiming access to absolute truths.

ALEX:

That sounds less dramatic than discovering an ultimate truth.

But perhaps more realistic.

TREBLA:

I believe so.

And with that, we have reached the end of our inquiry.

We began with a simple question about good and evil.

Along the way we explored evolution, morality, religion, freedom, inequality, and responsibility.

Perhaps we have not found all the answers.

But perhaps we have found something more important.

A way of looking.

A way of questioning.

A way of thinking about our place in the world.

And that leaves us with one final reflection on the journey we have taken together.

7.6. Concluding Reflections

Central Question: *What have we ultimately learned?*

TREBLA:

Alex, our walk is nearly over.

ALEX:

That is true.

Although it feels as though we have traveled much farther than this walk alone.

TREBLA:

I feel the same way.

We began with a simple question:

Do good and evil truly exist?

At the time, it seemed like a relatively straightforward issue.

But as our inquiry unfolded, we discovered that behind that question lay an entire world of other questions.

ALEX:

We discovered that many of our beliefs depend upon perspective.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

We attempted to step back from our instinctive human viewpoint and view the Earth as a larger system of which we ourselves are a part.

In doing so, we explored how humanity became what it is today.

Not as the result of a predetermined plan.

But as the product of a long evolutionary process.

ALEX:

From that followed the realization that many traits we take for granted—such as cooperation, competition, empathy, and self-preservation—are deeply rooted in our history.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

We then turned our attention to morality.

We saw that concepts such as good and evil may be less objective than people often assume.

That they frequently depend on the perspective of the observer.

ALEX:

After that, we examined religion and ethics.

TREBLA:

Yes.

We explored how moral systems may have emerged from the necessity of cooperation.

And how religions not only provided explanations for a mysterious world but also played an important role in strengthening social cohesion.

ALEX:

Then we shifted our attention to groups.

TREBLA:

And discovered that human beings are simultaneously individuals and social creatures.

That cooperation offers enormous advantages, yet also creates tensions.

That the same force which unites people can sometimes set them against one another.

ALEX:

Next came inequality.

TREBLA:

A subject that often evokes strong emotions.

We saw that diversity is a fundamental characteristic of life.

That differences between people appear unavoidable.

And that such differences often lead to inequality.

Sometimes with positive consequences, such as innovation and progress.

Sometimes with negative consequences, such as exclusion and instability.

ALEX:

Then we discussed freedom and responsibility.

TREBLA:

And once again we encountered a tension.

People desire freedom.

Yet freedom can exist only within a framework of responsibility.

Complete freedom proves just as problematic as complete control.

Once again, reality appeared to lie somewhere between extremes.

ALEX:

And eventually we arrived at the Earth and future generations.

TREBLA:

Indeed.

We saw that human beings may be unique in their ability to look beyond their own lifespan.

To feel responsibility for a future they themselves will never experience.

That insight ultimately led us to the question of which values might contribute to the continued survival of humanity and civilization.

ALEX:

And there we found no absolute truths.

TREBLA:

No.

No eternal laws.

No unquestionable answers.

But perhaps we found something else.

ALEX:

What do you mean?

TREBLA:

An attitude.

A way of looking at the world.

A willingness to ask questions before passing judgment.

A willingness to examine our own beliefs.

A willingness to accept uncertainty without falling into cynicism or relativism.

ALEX:

So perhaps the purpose of philosophy is not to find all the answers.

TREBLA:

Perhaps not.

Perhaps its most important task is to help us ask better questions.

For every generation will face new challenges.

New technologies.

New conflicts.

New opportunities.

No book can contain all the answers for every future situation.

But perhaps it can pass on a way of thinking.

ALEX:

A way of thinking that remains open to new insights.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

For in the end, we are all travelers.

Not only through space, but also through time.

We inherit a world from those who came before us.

And we pass a world on to those who come after us.

What we leave behind will never be perfect.

But perhaps we can strive to understand it a little better than we found it.

ALEX:

And perhaps that is already a worthwhile goal in itself.

TREBLA:

I think so too.

Look, Alex.

The sun is beginning to set.

ALEX:

Our walk is over.

TREBLA:

Perhaps this walk.

But not the inquiry.

For as long as human beings continue asking who they are, where they came from, and how they ought to live, the philosophical journey will never truly end.

ALEX:

Then this is not an ending.

TREBLA:

No.

Merely the end of one conversation.

And perhaps the beginning of many others.

8. Philosophical and Scientific Backgrounds

8.1. Observing Before Judging

Why does Trebla consistently try to observe before forming a judgment?

Throughout the book, Trebla repeatedly emphasizes that we should attempt to observe reality before evaluating it. This idea did not emerge in isolation. It belongs to a long philosophical tradition in which thinkers have sought to temporarily set aside their assumptions in order to investigate phenomena as impartially as possible.

An important representative of this approach was the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of phenomenology. Husserl argued that human beings never perceive the world in a completely objective manner. Our perceptions are constantly influenced by expectations, beliefs, upbringing, and culture.

To better understand reality, he proposed a method known as **epoché**. This involves temporarily placing existing assumptions in brackets. Not because those assumptions are necessarily incorrect, but because they may influence the investigation.

Trebla employs a similar approach when he proposes viewing the Earth as though we were not part of it. Of course, this is impossible—we remain human beings. Yet the thought experiment helps us distance ourselves from assumptions that otherwise seem self-evident.

When a lion kills a wildebeest, many people immediately feel sympathy for the wildebeest. That reaction is understandable. But Trebla asks the reader first to investigate what is happening before making a moral judgment.

This attitude does not mean that moral judgments are forbidden.

It simply means that **understanding precedes evaluation**.

A similar idea can be found in the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c. 50–135 CE). Although his primary goal was practical—achieving inner tranquility—he also emphasized the importance of distancing oneself from immediate emotions and impulses.

Both Husserl and Epictetus point toward a fundamental insight:

What we observe and what we judge about it is not necessarily the same thing.

The distinction between observation and evaluation forms the methodological foundation of the entire book.

For before we can ask what is good or bad, we must first attempt to understand what is actually happening.

8.2. Evolution and Human Behavior

Why do people behave the way they do?

A central theme of this book is that many human characteristics cannot be understood apart from our evolutionary history. To understand human beings, we must look not only at what people think, but also at how they came to be what they are.

The theory of evolution developed by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) provides a powerful framework for this purpose. Darwin proposed that species are not fixed and unchanging but gradually develop because individuals possessing advantageous traits tend, on average, to leave more offspring than those possessing less advantageous traits. This process is known as **natural selection**.

Importantly, evolution has no predetermined goal.

It does not follow a plan.

There is no predefined endpoint toward which species evolve.

Evolution is the result of variation, chance, and selection.

8.2.1. Variation as the Raw Material of Evolution

No two individuals are completely identical.

People differ in:

- Intelligence
- Temperament
- Physical characteristics
- Willingness to take risks
- Capacity for empathy
- Creativity
- Health

These differences arise partly from genetic variation and partly from environmental influences.

Without variation, evolution would be impossible. If all individuals were identical, none would be better adapted to changing circumstances than any other.

Diversity is not a flaw in the system.

Diversity is the system.

8.2.2. Self-Preservation and Reproduction

From an evolutionary perspective, two drives appear especially fundamental:

1. Survival
2. Reproduction

Individuals better able to stay alive and produce offspring tended to pass their traits on more frequently to future generations.

This does not mean that people consciously seek to spread their genes. Evolution does not operate through deliberate planning. Human beings experience their behavior as desires, emotions, preferences, and motivations.

Love.

Desire.

Curiosity.

Fear.

Ambition.

For the individual, these are psychological experiences. Yet they may simultaneously be viewed as components of a biological motivational system that evolved over long periods of time.

8.2.3. Why Do People Help One Another?

A common misconception is that evolution promotes only selfishness.

At first glance, this seems logical. If every individual strives for their own survival, why would they help others?

Yet throughout nature we observe forms of cooperation.

Ants build colonies.

Wolves hunt in packs.

Dolphins cooperate.

Human beings form families, communities, and societies.

Cooperation often proves to be an effective strategy.

An individual who belongs to a successful group frequently has a greater chance of survival than one who operates entirely alone.

From an evolutionary perspective, cooperation and self-interest are therefore often not opposites.

They reinforce one another.

8.2.4. **Kin Selection**

An important insight was developed by the biologist William Donald Hamilton (1936–2000).

Hamilton pointed out that relatives share portions of their genetic material.

As a result, behavior that helps relatives may indirectly contribute to the spread of the same genes.

This principle is known as **kin selection**.

It helps explain why parents often make significant sacrifices for their children and why family relationships play an important role in virtually all human societies.

8.2.5. **Reciprocal Cooperation**

But people do not help only relatives.

They also cooperate with non-relatives.

The evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers developed the concept of **reciprocal altruism**.

The idea is simple:

I help you today.

You help me tomorrow.

When individuals interact repeatedly, cooperation can benefit both parties.

Trust, reputation, and reciprocity therefore become important characteristics within social groups.

8.2.6. **Competition and Cooperation**

Another misconception is that evolution is solely about struggle.

Competition certainly plays a role.

Individuals compete for food.

For mates.

For status.

For resources.

But at the same time, human beings are deeply dependent on cooperation.

Human civilization did not emerge through competition alone.

Nor through cooperation alone.

It emerged through the continual interaction between the two.

Competition stimulates innovation.

Cooperation makes large-scale organization possible.

Both forces are present in nearly every society.

8.2.7. **Nature and Nurture**

Human behavior arises from a combination of:

- **Nature** (innate characteristics)
- **Nurture** (upbringing and environment)

The old debate about which factor is more important has largely become outdated.

Almost all human traits emerge through interaction between the two.

An innate predisposition may be strengthened, weakened, or modified by experience.

Likewise, people respond differently to the same environment because their predispositions differ.

8.2.8. **Evolution and Morality**

An important conclusion of this book is not that morality is completely determined by evolution.

Rather, evolutionary theory suggests that many of our moral intuitions likely emerged within social groups in which cooperation increased the chances of survival.

Empathy.

Fairness.

Reciprocity.

Loyalty.

Trust.

These characteristics can be understood both culturally and biologically.

This does not make them absolute truths.

But it does help explain why similar moral intuitions recur across many different human societies.

8.2.9. Summary

Evolutionary theory does not describe a goal-directed process, nor does it prescribe moral rules.

It does, however, provide a powerful framework for understanding how human characteristics emerged.

From this perspective, many forms of human behavior can be viewed as the result of a long history of variation, selection, cooperation, and adaptation.

Or, as Trebla would put it:

Before we judge how people ought to be, we must first try to understand how people became what they are today.

8.3. Hobbes, Rousseau, and Human Nature

Is human nature fundamentally selfish or fundamentally social?

One of the oldest questions in philosophy is:

What are human beings like by nature?

Throughout history, very different answers have been proposed. Two of the most influential contributors to this debate are Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

Their ideas are often presented as opposing viewpoints and continue to serve as important reference points in discussions about morality, politics, and human behavior.

8.3.1. Thomas Hobbes: The War of All Against All

Hobbes lived during a period of political instability and civil war. His view of human nature was strongly shaped by those experiences.

In his famous book *Leviathan*, Hobbes described a hypothetical **state of nature** in which no government, laws, or organized society exist.

According to Hobbes, people in such a condition would constantly compete for security, food, power, and resources.

His famous description was that life under such circumstances would be:

"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

According to Hobbes, people are not necessarily evil, but they are strongly oriented toward their own survival and interests.

To escape continual conflict, people enter into a **social contract**. They surrender part of their freedom to a governing authority that provides order and security.

From this perspective, morality does not arise because human beings are naturally moral.

Rather, morality emerges because cooperation ultimately proves beneficial for security and well-being.

8.3.2. **Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Noble Savage**

Rousseau viewed human nature very differently.

According to him, human beings were originally relatively peaceful and lived more simply than modern people.

Rousseau argued that many human problems arose from social inequality, private property, and increasingly complex social structures.

In his view, people possess natural capacities for compassion and empathy.

Where Hobbes emphasized competition, Rousseau emphasized humanity's capacity for cooperation and fellow feeling.

His work exerted a profound influence on later ideas about education, democracy, and social reform.

8.4. **Two Extremes**

At first glance, Hobbes and Rousseau appear to contradict one another.

Hobbes sees human beings as fundamentally self-interested.

Rousseau sees human beings as fundamentally social.

Yet modern findings from psychology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology suggest that both thinkers may describe only part of the story.

8.4.1. **What Does Evolution Tell Us?**

From an evolutionary perspective, human beings possess characteristics consistent with both Hobbes and Rousseau.

People can be remarkably competitive.

They compete for status.

For partners.

For resources.

For influence.

At the same time, human beings are also extraordinarily cooperative.

They form families.

They share knowledge.

They build societies.

They help strangers.

They sometimes even sacrifice themselves for others.

These two characteristics are not necessarily opposites.

Both are part of human nature.

8.4.2. **The Human Being as a Social Individual**

For much of human evolutionary history, people lived in relatively small groups.

Within those groups, cooperation was often essential for survival.

Yet competition never disappeared.

People cooperated with members of their own group while sometimes competing with other individuals or groups.

From this perspective, human beings are neither completely selfish nor completely altruistic.

Rather, they appear to be creatures constantly balancing self-interest and cooperation.

8.4.3. **Why Both Views Remain Attractive**

The ideas of Hobbes and Rousseau remain influential because each describes recognizable aspects of human behavior.

When we observe wars, crime, and power struggles, Hobbes appears correct.

When we observe friendship, love, voluntary assistance, and solidarity, Rousseau appears correct.

Reality contains examples of both.

That is precisely why the debate remains relevant.

8.4.4. **Trebla's Position**

Throughout the book, Trebla deliberately avoids choosing either extreme.

He views human beings as products of evolution.

From that perspective, both self-preservation and cooperation are understandable characteristics.

Self-preservation increases the chances of individual survival.

Cooperation often increases the chances of both collective and individual survival.

For that reason, selfishness and cooperation need not be opposites.

On the contrary.

They often reinforce one another.

An individual who cooperates successfully often improves their own prospects.

And a group that supports its members often strengthens its own stability.

8.4.5. Summary

The contrast between Hobbes and Rousseau has shaped thinking about human nature for centuries.

Modern insights suggest, however, that human beings do not fit neatly into either category.

People are capable of both competition and cooperation.

Of both self-interest and empathy.

Of both conflict and solidarity.

It is precisely this combination that appears to be an essential part of what makes us human.

Or, as Trebla would put it:

Human beings are neither selfish creatures who occasionally cooperate, nor altruistic creatures who occasionally compete. They are both at the same time.

8.5. Free Will, Determinism, and Responsibility

Are our choices truly our own, or are they determined by causes beyond our control?

The question of free will is among the oldest and most controversial topics in philosophy.

Virtually everyone experiences themselves as a being capable of making choices.

We decide what to eat.

What field of study to pursue.

Whom to associate with.

Which beliefs to defend.

It seems self-evident that we are the authors of our actions.

Yet this intuition proves surprisingly difficult to defend philosophically.

8.5.1. **The Problem of Free Will**

Suppose someone makes a choice.

Where does that choice come from?

There appear to be only two possibilities.

Either the choice is caused by prior factors.

Or the choice arises without a cause.

Both possibilities create problems.

If a choice is completely caused by prior circumstances, it does not appear truly free.

But if a choice arises without a cause, it appears random.

In either case, the traditional notion of free will comes under pressure.

Philosophers have wrestled with this problem for centuries.

8.5.2. **Determinism**

The view that every event is caused by preceding events is known as **determinism**.

According to a strictly deterministic perspective, every event is the inevitable consequence of prior causes.

Our thoughts.

Our feelings.

Our decisions.

Our actions.

Everything ultimately arises from a chain of cause and effect.

An important advocate of this view was the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677).

Spinoza argued that people consider themselves free because they are aware of their desires but unaware of the causes that produced those desires.

According to him, freedom often resembles an illusion created by our limited view of the causal chain.

8.5.3. Schopenhauer

A similar idea appears in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).

His famous statement was:

"Man can do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills."

By this he meant that people may follow their desires, but they are not free to choose those desires themselves.

After all, nobody consciously chooses:

- Their personality
- Their talents
- Their preferences
- Their fears
- Their temperament

Many of these characteristics exist long before a person begins consciously reflecting on their choices.

8.5.4. Modern Neuroscience

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the debate gained a new dimension through research on the brain.

Experiments conducted by researchers such as Benjamin Libet suggested that certain patterns of brain activity can be measured before participants become consciously aware of making a decision.

Some researchers have interpreted these findings as evidence that the brain begins preparing a decision before the conscious self becomes aware of it.

These results remain the subject of ongoing debate.

They do not conclusively prove that free will does not exist.

However, they do demonstrate that many decision-making processes occur outside conscious awareness.

8.5.5. The Opposite Extreme

Yet most people do not experience themselves as fully programmed machines.

We consider alternatives.

We hesitate.

We plan.

We learn from mistakes.

We sometimes change our minds.

These experiences form the basis of our intuitive sense of freedom.

For that reason, many philosophers find it difficult to regard human beings as merely passive products of causal forces.

8.5.6. **Compatibilism**

For this reason, a third position emerged, known as **compatibilism**.

Compatibilists argue that freedom and determinism do not necessarily exclude one another.

According to this view, an action is free when it arises from a person's own desires, beliefs, and intentions, even if those desires themselves ultimately have causes.

Freedom therefore does not mean:

acting without causes,

but rather:

acting in accordance with who you are.

This approach is regarded by many contemporary philosophers as a workable compromise between complete freedom and complete determinism.

8.5.7. **Why Responsibility Still Matters**

Even if our choices are partly influenced by genetics, upbringing, and circumstances, an important question remains:

Can we still hold people responsible for their behavior?

In everyday life, we do so constantly.

We praise courage.

We value honesty.

We condemn fraud.

We punish violence.

Societies function largely on the basis of such expectations.

From a practical perspective, responsibility serves several functions:

- It encourages cooperation.
- It discourages harmful behavior.
- It promotes trust.
- It makes social order possible.

For that reason, responsibility remains important even if complete free will turns out to be uncertain.

8.5.8. Trebla's Position

Throughout the book, Trebla deliberately avoids taking an extreme position.

He rejects both the idea of absolute freedom and the idea that human beings are completely powerless products of circumstance.

People do not choose their starting position.

They do not choose their genes.

They do not choose their childhood.

Yet within those given circumstances, they often possess a certain degree of latitude.

Freedom therefore appears not as an all-or-nothing property, but as a matter of degree.

Some individuals possess more opportunities than others.

Some situations provide more freedom of choice than others.

8.5.9. Summary

The debate over free will is far from settled.

Philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists continue to discuss it.

Nevertheless, one conclusion seems reasonable:

Human behavior emerges from a complex interaction between biological predispositions, environmental influences, personal experiences, and conscious reflection.

Whether free will ultimately exists in a complete sense remains a matter of debate.

But for understanding human behavior, it is probably more fruitful to investigate **how much freedom people possess** than to ask only whether they are completely free.

Or, as Trebla would put it:

Perhaps we are not the fully free authors of our lives. But neither are we merely spectators watching a story being written without us.

8.6. Karl Popper, Open Societies, and the Paradox of Tolerance

Why can an unlimitedly tolerant society ultimately become intolerant?

In Chapter 7, we discussed the so-called **paradox of tolerance**. This idea is most commonly associated with the philosopher Karl Popper (1902–1994), one of the most influential philosophers of science of the twentieth century.

Although Popper is best known for his work on science and falsification, his political philosophy was equally important. His experiences with totalitarian regimes during the twentieth century led him to reflect deeply on the vulnerability of free societies.

8.6.1. The Open Society

Popper defended the idea of the **open society**.

An open society is characterized by:

- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of inquiry
- Political pluralism
- Democratic decision-making
- Space for criticism and dissent

According to Popper, no individual, leader, or ideology is infallible.

For that reason, a healthy society must allow room for discussion and criticism.

Just as scientific theories are continually tested and improved, political ideas should also remain open to critical examination.

8.6.2. Why Openness Is Vulnerable

Precisely because an open society grants freedom, it can be vulnerable to groups that seek to use that freedom to abolish it.

Here we encounter Popper's famous paradox.

He formulated it essentially as follows:

If a society is unlimitedly tolerant, its tolerance may ultimately be destroyed by the intolerant.

The logic is straightforward.

Suppose a society accepts every form of intolerance without limit.

Intolerant movements may then use that freedom to silence other viewpoints.

If they succeed, the very tolerance that enabled their rise eventually disappears.

8.6.3. What Popper Did Not Mean

The paradox of tolerance is often misunderstood.

Popper did **not** argue that unpopular opinions should be prohibited.

On the contrary.

He strongly defended open debate and free discussion.

His point was more subtle.

As long as intolerant ideas can be challenged through argument within an open discussion, discussion should remain the preferred response.

Only when groups resort to violence or actively attempt to make free discussion impossible does a serious problem arise for an open society.

8.6.4. Disagreement Versus Suppression

It is important to distinguish between:

- Expressing an unpopular opinion.
- Suppressing the right of others to express an opinion.

These two situations are often confused.

An open society depends upon diverse viewpoints.

Scientific progress.

Political innovation.

Philosophical development.

These often emerge from disagreement.

But when a group attempts to abolish the right to disagree itself, the situation changes.

At that point, what is under attack is not merely an idea, but the very possibility of discussing ideas freely.

8.6.5. A Systems Perspective

From the systems perspective that runs throughout this book, the paradox of tolerance can be viewed in another way.

A system must protect not only its components.

It must also protect the conditions that allow the system to function.

An ecosystem does not merely sustain individual organisms.

It also preserves the processes that keep the ecosystem alive.

Similarly, an open society must not only protect individual freedoms.

It must also protect the conditions under which freedom can continue to exist.

8.6.6. The Relationship to Other Values

Chapter 7 discussed several values that contribute to the continuity of civilizations:

- Knowledge
- Commitment to truth
- Cooperation
- Trust
- Freedom
- Responsibility
- Diversity
- Sustainability

These values often reinforce one another.

Freedom enables innovation.

Trust supports cooperation.

Diversity promotes adaptability.

Yet none of these values can be fully understood in isolation.

Freedom without responsibility can become destructive.

Diversity without cohesion can create instability.

Tolerance without protecting openness can ultimately enable intolerance.

8.6.7. **No Simple Formula**

The paradox of tolerance offers no simple solution.

It does not tell us precisely where the boundary should be drawn.

That remains a difficult political and social judgment.

Popper himself recognized this.

His contribution was primarily to identify a tension inherent in every free society.

How do we protect freedom without becoming unfree ourselves?

How do we protect openness without destroying it?

8.6.8. **Trebla's Position**

Trebla approaches this issue not through absolute principles but through the question of which conditions contribute to the continuity of an open and resilient society.

From that perspective, tolerance appears to be an important value.

But not an unlimited one.

Like most complex systems, an open society requires a balance among competing interests and principles.

Absolute freedom proves problematic.

Absolute control proves problematic as well.

Perhaps the same is true of tolerance.

8.6.9. **Summary**

The paradox of tolerance illustrates that values can sometimes come into conflict with one another.

Freedom and protection.

Openness and security.

Diversity and cohesion.

Popper's insight is not that tolerance should be abandoned.

Quite the opposite.

His point is that a free society may sometimes need to take measures to protect the very conditions that make freedom and tolerance possible.

Or, as Trebla would put it:

A society that wishes to remain open must not only value freedom, but also understand the conditions that allow that freedom to endure.

8.7. Systems Thinking and the Earth as a Whole

Why does Trebla continually view the Earth as a single interconnected system?

A recurring theme throughout this book is the idea that we should not look only at individual events, but also at the larger whole of which those events are a part.

When we talk about people, animals, ecosystems, economies, or societies, we often focus on individual components. Yet many phenomena can only truly be understood when we examine the relationships among those components.

This way of thinking is known as **systems thinking**.

8.7.1. What Is a System?

A system is a collection of components that are connected to one another and influence one another.

Examples include:

- A cell
- A human body
- A family
- An economy
- An ecosystem
- A society
- The Earth as a whole

The most important characteristic of a system is that the behavior of the whole cannot always be understood simply by examining its individual parts.

8.7.2. **The Whole Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts**

A human body consists of billions of cells.

By studying a single cell, we can learn a great deal about that cell.

Yet doing so does not fully explain how consciousness arises.

Consciousness appears to be a property of the whole.

Such properties are often called **emergent properties**.

An emergent property arises from the interaction among components and cannot be completely explained by examining any single component in isolation.

Examples include:

- Consciousness in a brain
- Traffic patterns in a city
- Market dynamics in an economy
- Culture within a society

8.7.3. **Feedback Mechanisms**

An important concept in systems thinking is **feedback**.

A change in one part of a system can affect other parts, which may then influence the original component in return.

There are two principal forms of feedback.

8.7.3.1. **Negative Feedback**

Negative feedback has a stabilizing effect.

When a system moves away from equilibrium, processes emerge that help restore balance.

A simple example is body temperature.

When the body becomes too warm, we sweat.

When it becomes too cold, we shiver.

These responses help return the system to a stable condition.

8.7.3.2. *Positive Feedback*

Positive feedback amplifies change.

As a result, a small effect can grow progressively larger.

A well-known example is a financial panic.

When people fear that a bank may fail, they withdraw their money.

This places the bank under greater strain, which increases public anxiety even further.

The feedback loop reinforces itself.

8.7.3.3. *Equilibrium Does Not Mean Stagnation*

Many people associate equilibrium with a static condition.

In reality, living systems are constantly changing.

A forest changes continuously.

A society changes continuously.

Even the human body continually renews itself.

Yet the system as a whole remains recognizable.

Equilibrium therefore usually does not mean the absence of change.

Rather, it means the ability to absorb change without falling apart.

8.7.3.4. *The Earth as a System*

Throughout this book, the Earth is frequently viewed as an integrated system.

This does not imply that the Earth is a conscious being.

It simply means that countless processes are interconnected.

The atmosphere.

The oceans.

Forests.

Animals.

Microorganisms.

Human societies.

Economies.

Technology.

All influence one another.

A change in one component can affect many others.

Sometimes immediately.

Sometimes only after a long period of time.

8.7.4. **Humanity Within the System**

One of the central ideas of this book is that humanity does not stand outside this system.

We are part of it.

This may seem obvious, yet in practice people often think differently.

We speak of "*nature*" as though it were something separate from ourselves.

As though humanity and nature were two distinct entities.

From a systems perspective, that distinction is artificial.

Human beings influence the system.

But the system also influences human beings.

Our health.

Our economy.

Our food supply.

Our security.

Ultimately, all of these depend upon the condition of the larger system of which we are a part.

8.7.5. **Why Systems Thinking Matters**

Many societal problems prove difficult to solve when we focus only on individual components.

A measure that appears beneficial in the short term may produce unexpected consequences in the long term.

A solution to one problem may create new problems elsewhere.

Systems thinking therefore attempts to look beyond immediate causes and effects.

It asks questions such as:

- Which processes influence one another?
- What feedback mechanisms are present?
- What long-term effects may emerge?
- Which conditions sustain the system?

8.7.6. **The Relationship to Ethics**

Systems thinking forms the bridge to the sustainable ethics discussed in Chapter 7.

When we view the Earth as a complex system upon which we depend, a different perspective on responsibility emerges.

Not merely:

What is good for me?

Or:

What is good for my group?

But also:

What consequences do our choices have for the larger system upon which we depend?

From this perspective, sustainability acquires a rational meaning.

Not as a moral dogma.

But as recognition that a system which destroys the conditions necessary for its own existence ultimately damages itself.

8.7.7. **Trebla's Position**

Throughout the book, Trebla continually shifts between different levels of analysis.

From the individual to the group.

From the group to society.

From society to humanity.

From humanity to the Earth.

Not because one level is more important than the others.

But because each level can be understood only partially without reference to the others.

The individual influences the group.

The group influences society.

Society influences the Earth.

And the Earth ultimately influences the individual.

8.7.8. Summary

Systems thinking teaches us that phenomena can rarely be fully understood in isolation.

The world consists of networks of relationships, feedback loops, and interdependencies.

By examining not only individual components but also their interconnectedness, we gain a broader perspective on humanity, society, and nature.

Or, as Trebla would put it:

He who looks only at the individual links will never fully understand the chain. He who looks only at the chain will never fully understand the links. True understanding emerges only when both are studied together.

8.8. Epilogue – Returning Home

The sun now hung low above the horizon.

The shadows of the trees grew longer, and the golden light of the evening cast a warm glow across the fields.

For a while, Trebla and Alex walked silently beside one another.

The conversations of the past several hours still seemed to echo in their thoughts.

To the left of the path, a field of blooming rapeseed stretched all the way to the horizon. A gentle breeze caused the yellow flowers to ripple like a calm sea.

In the distance, a bird sang.

Otherwise, all was quiet.

ALEX:

You know what strikes me?

TREBLA:

What is that?

ALEX:

When we set out this morning, everything seemed simpler.

Good and evil.

Freedom.

Equality.

Responsibility.

I thought I had fairly clear opinions about many of those things.

TREBLA:

And now?

ALEX:

Now I am less certain about what I think.

Yet strangely, it does not feel like a loss.

TREBLA:

Perhaps because understanding often begins where certainty ends.

ALEX:

Perhaps.

I feel as though I have more questions now than when we started.

TREBLA:

That could be a good sign.

The world does not necessarily become simpler when we understand it better.

Often it becomes more complex.

But that complexity was always there.

We are simply beginning to see it more clearly.

Alex gazed ahead in silence for a while.

The path gradually led toward the village.

The first houses became visible among the trees.

ALEX:

Do you think we found answers?

TREBLA:

To some questions, perhaps.

To others, probably not.

But that was never the primary goal.

ALEX:

What was?

TREBLA:

Learning how to see.

Learning how to doubt.

Learning how to investigate.

Many people search for definitive answers.

But perhaps good questions are ultimately more valuable.

An answer closes a door.

A question often opens one.

They continued walking.

At the edge of the path, Alex noticed a row of young trees.

They had probably been planted only a few years earlier.

Their slender trunks swayed gently in the wind.

ALEX:

Someone planted those trees without knowing who would someday enjoy them.

TREBLA:

Just as so many people before us built things from which we benefit today.

ALEX:

And just as we, in turn, will leave something behind for others.

TREBLA:

Exactly.

Perhaps that is ultimately one of humanity's most beautiful qualities.

The ability to look beyond oneself.

Beyond today.

Beyond one's own lifetime.

They reached the end of the walking path.

Ahead of them lay the village.

The houses.

The streets.

Everyday life.

Nothing had changed.

The world looked exactly as it had that morning.

And yet everything felt different.

Not because the world had changed.

But because their perspective on the world had changed.

ALEX:

So this is the end?

Trebla smiled.

TREBLA:

Of this walk, yes.

But not of the inquiry.

As long as people continue asking who they are, where they came from, and how they ought to live, that search will continue.

Perhaps philosophy is ultimately nothing more than that.

Not the possession of truth.

But the willingness to keep searching for it.

Together they walked into the village.

Slowly, the last sunlight disappeared behind the horizon.

Night fell.

The questions remained.

And perhaps that was exactly as it should be.

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10. Selected Quotations and Reflections

10.1.1. Friedrich Nietzsche and the Cow

Nietzsche once imagined a conversation with a cow.

He asked the cow:

“Why are you so happy?”

And the cow replied:

“Because I do not think about the future or the past. I think about nothing at all.”

But before the cow could finish saying this, it had already forgotten what it was about to say.

The story illustrates Nietzsche’s observation that human beings differ from animals because they are burdened—and enriched—by memory, reflection, and anticipation.

10.1.2. Nietzsche's Übermensch

The **Übermensch** ("Overman" or "Beyond-Man") is Nietzsche's term for the courageous individual who fully embraces life and creates new values for themselves.

The Übermensch does not seek the meaning of life in an afterlife or in a Platonic realm of ideal forms.

Instead, meaning is found in life itself.

The Übermensch is therefore **not** a superior race of human beings, as the concept has sometimes been misunderstood.

Rather, it refers to a person who refuses to create comforting illusions in order to soften the realities of existence.

Nietzsche famously wrote:

“Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Übermensch.”

10.1.3. Jean-Paul Sartre

The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre expressed a similar idea in a different form:

“Life has no predetermined purpose; the purpose is life itself.”

For Sartre, meaning is not discovered but created through human choices and actions.

10.1.4. Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant made several observations that remain influential today.

One of his educational principles can be summarized as:

“Do not teach people philosophy; teach them how to philosophize.”

The goal is not merely to transfer conclusions but to cultivate the ability to think critically and independently.

Kant also provided one of the most famous definitions of the Enlightenment:

“Enlightenment is humanity’s emergence from its self-imposed immaturity.”

By this he meant the transition from dependence on external authority toward the independent use of reason.

HUMANITY

*On the
Relativity of
Ethics, Evolution, and Behavior*

By
Albert Prins

END

Your feedback is welcome at:
aprins@hotmail.com