

Homo Nexus: The Next Step in Human Evolution

The French writer and scholar Alexis de Tocqueville, who traveled in the United States in the early nineteenth century and was a keen observer of the nascent American society, wrote:

[T]he inhabitants of the United States almost always manage to combine their own advantage with that of their fellow citizens . . . The American moralists do not profess that men ought to sacrifice themselves for their fellow creatures because it is noble to make such sacrifices, but they boldly aver that such sacrifices are as necessary to him who imposes them upon himself as to him for whose sake they are made . . . The Americans . . . are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood; they show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another . . .¹

Tocqueville probably had no inkling that what he was describing was the emergence of a new mode of human existence—a new kind of human being. But in fact that’s what he was doing. He was an early witness of the birth stirrings of what I call *homo nexus*—a new kind of person dedicated to a new way of life, guided by the very principle Tocqueville described: “the principle of self-interest rightly understood.”

Of course, self-interest is dependent on and defined by the social environment. The social environment has shifted drastically many times in human history. Starting in the mid-eighteenth century, people in the industrialized countries have had growing experience of the power of free markets and free capital. Since then, people and societies all over the world have been slowly learning that these things are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for free minds and free

¹ de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835. *Democracy in America*, Book II, Chapter VIII.

people. Indeed, the paradigm has been so powerful that it has left most other social models in the dust. Serious people no longer argue that a planned economy can outcompete a free market, nor that it can coexist with political freedom.

Competition and individual choice are essential to free markets. Market cultures accept the idea that human beings seek to maximize their own personal gain. This is certainly true; you can't easily socialize a person into preferring the gain of others at his or her own net cost, and societies that have tried to do this have had to resort to extreme methods of mental, social, economic, and physical coercion.

Respect for individual choices, competition, and self-interest, however, in the context of the relatively simple environment of the industrial economy, has unfortunately left us with a rather narrow legacy definition of "self-interest"—one that is not necessarily shared by psychologists, biologists, and logicians, but one that remains the consensus paradigm in the popular imagination and in too many business circles. The formal name for this kind of self-interest is Rational Actor Theory. The strategy pursued by the "rational actor" involves the pursuit of gain with no explicit concern for the benefit to other parties affected by the transaction. The rational actor is not necessarily opposed to others doing well; but unless the gains of others add to his or her own direct and immediate gains, those gains do not factor into the course of action that the rational actor undertakes.

Those who believe that this is the optimum strategy for human prosperity are fond of quoting Adam Smith, one of the founding philosophers of economic liberalism. In one of the most familiar passages from *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith put it like this:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self love . . . and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.²

² Smith, Adam. 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

These words have been much misunderstood by those who cared little about the larger picture of economic interdependence that Smith was painting in *The Wealth of Nations*, nor about Smith's observations on empathy and human solidarity, published almost twenty years earlier in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. At worst, this passage has been invoked to support a vision of human society as a struggle of all against all; a justification for the idea that if the calculations of cost and benefit seem to suggest it, the rational actor should pursue "zero-sum" transactions, in which the gain sought is completely offset by a loss to the other party.

This way of looking at social and economic transactions was often useful and rewarding in the economic environment of the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath, in a world in which classical liberal economics was showing its transformative power.

We don't live in that world anymore. Emerging markets like China, India, and Brazil are on the rise, and if their paths follow that of the last three hundred years of American industrialization, it will spell disaster for the whole world. We must adjust our globally embraced beliefs to the new realities we are facing. The basic precepts about free markets, choices, and individual autonomy still hold true, of course, and have been vindicated time and again. But many new factors have come into play, and these factors greatly affect the calculation of self-interest.

This book describes a new way of thinking about a set of behaviors (collaboration, mutual aid, and social networking) that have been with us for a long time. It discusses these behaviors in the context of some conditions (instantaneous communications, democratized access to information, very low cost of publishing, global efficiencies of scale, and pressing environmental problems that demand new ways of thinking) that are quite new. These behaviors and conditions, when their utility is properly understood, create opportunities for a new type of actor in the world—the new kind of human I call *Homo nexus*.

Homo nexus is a person located within a thick web of relationships—personal, economic, informational, social, intellectual—who tends and maintains these relationships, building trust, reciprocating aid, looking for opportunities to

help others succeed. Not out of some abstracted, saintly sense of altruism, but because Homo nexus is highly aware that the success of others creates new opportunities that change his or her own world for the better.

This is self-interest, properly understood.

Homo nexus is multidisciplinary, seeking out new connections and new ideas and paradigms across time, space, and traditional barriers. Walls—whether geographic, intellectual, cultural, or practical—mean nothing to Homo nexus. He or she is extremely *self-conscious*: pragmatic, forward-thinking yet responsive, adaptive, always quick to jettison an idea or an approach that doesn't work and to seek out new ones. Homo nexus thus both lives in and helps to build a society that is in an *adaptive steady state* – always changing and growing, but in pragmatic response to the realities on the ground, not in obedience to any rigid dogma.

Homo nexus seeks the benefits of scale, of bringing in more minds, more resources, more ways of looking at a problem or opportunity. He or she is able to see the value in difference, and is a natural builder and integrator of capacity-enhancing tools—capital, networks, skills, etc.

Homo nexus is not a collectivist, however. He or she envisions people in networks and working together, but doing so as individuals, in recognition of their own ultimate individual best interests. The goal is to help build a more effective, non-zero-sum, total economic system in which individual enterprises interact in an environment of free flows of information, skills, resources, and capital. This being so, it is essential that relationships are freely chosen.

Therefore, Homo nexus rejects a collectivist model in which a common, diffuse ownership is imposed by the State or any other social power, in which participants are required to pool their talents and resources, while subordinating their individual interests to the overall success of the enterprise. This model of mandatory collaboration is a good one for ants. Given the constraints of human social psychology and the realities of economic drivers, it has proven less beneficial for people.

Perhaps most importantly of all, Homo nexus has an innate but also an actively trained capacity for *empathy*, for imagining the needs, hopes, aspirations,

frustrations, and social situations of others. Empathy is at the root of effective, meaningful collaboration. Without empathy, we are severely compromised as human beings. Without identification of our own needs and interests with those of others, true collaboration is impossible.

As human beings move between cultures and around the globe in far more fluid and heterogeneous social and economic systems than our species has ever before experienced, applied empathy—a *felt* concern for the well-being and subjective conditions of others—becomes ever more important. It is the only effective internal check on behavior that harms others and damages the shared environment. It is essential to the ability to mediate and resolve conflict. It is at the core of teamwork. We have an absolute imperative to teach it to our children in an ongoing manner, beginning from their first attainment of consciousness. Empathy can be taught and learned as a skill; it can also be incentivized and rewarded.

This is why collaborative organizations that are changing the world focus so heavily on empathy—and especially on cultivating empathy as part of early childhood education. A *central* part, not a peripheral one. Sonali Ojha, founder of the Dreamcatchers' Foundation, puts it like this:

One of the things that's very important in terms of transforming a school, or inviting the empathy piece into parents' teachings, is that people need to understand that empathy is not about, "let's take 20 minutes today and be empathetic." It's about creating a spiraling level of activity and engagement in school life, where no matter where you go, from the moment you walk into the school to the time you leave the school, no matter the nature of your engagement, you are invariably asked questions and placed in positions and placed in dichotomies where you will be forced to transact empathetically."³

³ <http://empathy.ashoka.org/empathy-not-twenty-minute-exercise-it%E2%80%99s-way-being-conversation-sonali-ojha-ashoka-fellow-and-founder>

Bernard Amadei, the founder of Engineers without Borders, emphasizes the importance of taking students out of their familiar circumstances, confronting them with people in need whose circumstances might be very different from the student's own.

This way of viewing life is both very old and very new. A similar orientation has historically been an essential characteristic of successful individuals, yet it is much more so nowadays. Why is this so?

The empathetic approach to life has always been with us because non-zero-sum interaction is a central characteristic of biology, found at the level of cooperation between genes and chromosomes in furtherance of their shared interest in getting copies of themselves into the next generation, at the level of the once-independent organisms that make up the complex cell, at the level of symbiosis between multi-cellular organisms and the bacteria that inhabit them, and at the level of whole ecosystems.

Closer to home, collaboration for mutual benefit is a central evolutionary adaptation in the human survival toolkit. Our ancestors would not have been able to hunt effectively without it, nor to get maximum benefit over time from what they could manage to kill—because, in the absence of refrigeration, the best place to store one's surplus meat is in the minds and bodies of one's neighbors, in the accumulation of IOUs. Our hunter-gatherer forebears could not have raised their children to adulthood without collaboration. The amount of food and other resources that a human child required to survive, in the environment in which our species evolved, simply exceeded the ability of one family to provide.

Mutual aid is an artifact of our long and adaptive evolutionary psychology, imprinted on our genes because it was the most effective strategy, as judged by the merciless court of natural selection, that those genes could devise for their own survival. As a result, humans are naturally empathetic and "other directed" from birth, equipped with a sympathetic nervous system that reacts to the pain and pleasure of others. We are good at detecting cheaters, and at recognizing faces: it pays to know who reciprocates, and who does not. Humans are mind-readers and game-players, deeply concerned with the internal states of those with whom they

interact. We are motivated to increase our standing within our social groups, because a reputation as a reliable collaborator will lead to more opportunities for fruitful collaboration; and a heightened social reputation will, all else equal, enhance an individual's choice of mates and reproductive potential. Our economic and social lives are intertwined, if not indistinguishable. Mutual aid and reciprocity are written deeply into both our genetic and our moral codes.

In pursuit of the tangible benefits of collaborative, non-zero sum behaviors, human societies have, in the long run and not without setbacks, developed institutions that reduce barriers to trust and increase the predictability of transactional outcomes. Standard weights and measures, currency, policing, contracts, insurance, trade agreements—in a word, governance—are all examples of innovations that help people and groups to collaborate, and to do so over longer periods of time and at greater distances from each other. Technology has both rewarded and required greater collaboration, a fact that is exponentially more powerful in an age of global interconnectedness.

Yet the concept of Homo nexus is much more than the rather banal observation that human beings are collaborators, or that we prosper and develop rich and complex economies and societies through mutual aid. It is a recognition that the evolution of our species, within the context of the environment that we have created, has reached a decisive new stage, a stage expressed not by changes in our genes—there has not been time for that within our modern environment—but by changes in our way of life. Whether we are aware of it or not, human societies are now subject to a simple imperative: *collaborate or die*.

The problems we face—environmental overload, economic crisis, competition for dwindling resources—are simply too large and interconnected, too subject to negative feedback loops, to allow individuals, businesses, or societies to flourish in disdain for the interests of others.

This is not necessarily a grim, pessimistic warning. We have already reached levels of connectedness that make collaboration on the necessary scale for survival possible, even probable. It is an amazing fact that, very soon, all of the 4.3 billion available Internet Protocol addresses of IPv4, the current standard, will have been

allocated. This is an arbitrary, and certainly an easily overcome barrier (to hook up new devices to the internet, we will simply add more addresses using the IPv6 protocol). But the speed of growth in connections is unprecedented in human history. It is creating a new reality.

A connected world has changed how human beings understand ourselves and each other, how we relate to national identities, national cultures, international commerce, finance, and development. The global has become the local, and the local the global. Homo nexus thrives on the ubiquity and easy formation of “small-worlds”—clusters of distant or unlikely connections that would have been impossible in a previous age, with weak links between such clusters. These types of connections make it much harder to maintain parochial outlooks. They are, for better and for worse, destabilizing.

There are political effects of this global information and networking system, and the costs of *not* communicating and *not* collaborating are even greater than the gains of doing so. The model of a totalitarian superpower is no longer possible, because “totalitarian” and “superpower” have become contradictions in terms. The Soviet Union was always poorer than the countries with developed capitalist economies, but it could at least aspire to match their military strength and gross industrial output. This is no longer so. The relative costs of the centralized control of information and resources that is required to maintain such an economic and social system have become prohibitive in a world in which competing—and more successful—polities are modeled on access to information to all, and on access to capital and technology for entrepreneurial individuals and networks. If there is any future for the totalitarian state, it is the miserable, impoverished, non-self-sustaining future of North Korea.

History is not predictable or determined, but it is the product of the exposure of people to ideas, and the present human global environment facilitates that exposure better than it ever has in the past. In such an environment, Win/Win, non-zero-sum activities take on a new importance, and have tremendous potential for improving the lives of both individuals and societies. These activities yield unpredictable results, results guided by broadly enabled and democratized

networks of capital and people, networks that will include a critical and growing number of people who behave in the mode of Homo nexus. These individuals and the organizations that they found are vital to an entrepreneurial culture in which Adam Smith's agent of wealth creation, the entrepreneur, is an identity broadly pursued and encouraged.

That entrepreneurial culture is the nature habitat of Homo nexus. I am a "social entrepreneur"—someone who seeks to bring about transformational social change—and I've been privileged to work in several different societies that were on the verge of such transformational change, and to contribute to it. I'm also a plain entrepreneur, a businessman and an investor. As one who identifies with the ideal of Homo nexus, I believe that I can contribute to social change in this role, too.

Unsurprisingly, the major social changes I've seen in my life—globalization, its complications, the rise of emerging markets, and the march of democracy and freedom in much of the world since 1989—all had elements that connect with the emergence of Homo nexus, and were all greatly affected by young people, by their need for innovation, by their creative and collaborative potential.

In many ways, younger people, men and women, are today far more exposed to theories of connection, mutual aid, and Win/Win collaboration than I was when I was starting out. Social entrepreneurship is now a demonstrated and effective enterprise, and multilateral, multidisciplinary action as a social responsibility has become far more familiar through academic expectations and vocational opportunities than it has ever been in the past. Ideas about collaboration and service have gradually saturated the popular and business cultures through such mainstream works as Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Covey's thesis is that true effectiveness is available only to integrated, courageous, self-aware individuals whose actions are in harmony with ethical principles; and who work with these principles to inspire collaboration and to create solutions that benefit all who are touched by them. In Covey's words: "Public Victory does not mean victory over other people. It means success in effective interaction that brings mutually beneficial results to everyone involved. Public Victory means working together, communicating together, making things happen

together that even the same people couldn't make happen by working independently.”⁴

I'm writing about these ideas because, like so many people—perhaps including you—I care deeply about the future and want to help young people to continue to change the world. No matter that the concepts of mutual aid and interdependence are now more familiar to the public than they used to be, there's nothing like having lived the life. I believe that I have practical experience and hard-won knowledge that could greatly benefit younger people who are at the beginning of their careers, or those in mid-life who are contemplating meaningful career transitions.

I believe that it is no longer possible for individuals, businesses, or nations to thrive in isolation from, or at the expense of, their transactional counterparts. Today and in the future, the most successful individuals will be those who fully understand the principles that underlie the emergence of Homo nexus—and act on these principles.

Ultimately what I am talking about is a revolution in human affairs. If change on this world-historical scale intrigues you, I hope you'll want to learn more about the concept of Homo nexus and begin to explore the role you might play in this emerging new world.

⁴ Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 220.