What Happens Next?

In this essay, I intend to formulate a thesis that is, at its core, self-contradictory. Rather than providing an answer, I pose a new question: What happens next? I seek to justify this question—again, without offering an answer. This requires a process-oriented mode of thinking. Formally, it seeks (through its structure, repetition, and rhythm) to enact the very experience it describes.

To this end, the essay develops theoretical terms ("chain of problematizations" and "network of problematizations") and employs them as interpretative tools. Methodologically, it deliberately resists providing a classical definition, allowing its central concepts to emerge only through their enactment in the course of the argument.

I will introduce a series of analogies that will prove useful throughout the course of this essay. Should these analogies, examples, and repetitions at times appear tedious, this too, forms part of the intended experience and may ultimately contribute to the reader's understanding. The essay is therefore not merely a vehicle for conveying ideas; it is itself an event within a chain of problematization.

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In the preface to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, the early Ludwig Wittgenstein[1] famously writes: "The whole sense of the book might be summed up approximately in the following words: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

I have always found this statement deeply compelling. Language continually reveals itself to me as a limitation, particularly in any attempt to describe reality. At the same time, I find it difficult to identify the boundary of what can meaningfully be said and thereby avoid lapsing into complete silence. A statement such as "I am cold. Please close the window!" is both expressible and highly useful. By contrast, the question "How was your day?" already confronts me with a considerable challenge. How could I possibly formulate an adequate answer? Is such an answer expressible, and to what extent would it be useful?

A single day contains an extraordinary quantity of information, much of which is not linguistic in nature. Non-linguistic experience therefore must first be translated into language. Moreover, a waking day encompasses roughly eighteen hours of lived experience. Depending on the intended length of the account, this would have to be condensed into a report lasting perhaps two to ten minutes. Both reductions—if they are to

preserve as much essential information as possible—require considerable intellectual effort.

This immediately raises the question of motivation: what justifies investing such an effort? How important is my answer to the question, *"How was your day?"* If, at that very moment, the window happened to be open and I were cold, the statement *"I am cold. Please close the window!"* would clearly take absolute priority. Prioritisation therefore constitutes an implicit valuation of what is worth saying at all.

This consideration helps us assess whether I am able to engage with the question of whether humanity is currently entering a new Axial Age and whether we are witnessing a new turning point in world history. Can I address this issue linguistically and undertake, within the form of this essay, the considerable effort that such an undertaking requires? How can I reduce the totality of relevant information to the reading time of an essay, and how can I translate into language so much that is not itself linguistic in nature? Is my statement expressible—and is it useful? By the conclusion of this essay, I shall return to these questions.

The broader inquiry into a possible new Axial Age and a renewed transformation of world history is framed by the title of this essay:

What happens next?

To clarify the title, I require yet another analogy. Imagine an unborn child during the eighth month of pregnancy. At this stage, the development of most of the fetus's organs has been largely completed. The condition of this child resembles a paradisiacal state. The child is gently rocked by the mother's movements, receives a soothing massage with each of her breaths, hears the rhythm of her heartbeat and the sound of her voice—an acoustic experience that is almost musical. Oxygen and nutrients are supplied effortlessly through the umbilical cord. It is warm and comfortable, secure, not yet confined by lack of space.

From the perspective of the unborn child, what conceivable reason could there be to alter such a state? Birth abruptly transforms everything. The newborn must breathe independently for the first time; the initial cry bears witness to this profound rupture. Hunger emerges suddenly as an entirely new experience, often followed by discomfort once it has been satisfied. A multitude of entirely new problems confront the child. As soon as one problem has been resolved, the next immediately arises, until eventually it is expected to pay its own bills. Why, then, does the child not simply stop growing and remain forever in the blissful condition of the eighth month of pregnancy?

Interestingly, although contemporary science understands many of the biological processes involved in initiating childbirth—including the intricate

signalling between fetus, placenta, and mother—it still lacks a complete explanation for why spontaneous birth occurs at one precise moment rather than another. It simply happens.

Presumably, none of us retains any conscious memory of our own birth. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that an unborn child approaching birth has no conception of what lies beyond the womb.

This analogy is intended to help us understand that every state, no matter how advantageous it may appear, is merely transitional. I regard humanity as a child in the eighth month of pregnancy—a child that has never before enjoyed conditions as favourable as those of the present. Yet it cannot remain in this condition indefinitely. It does not know what lies ahead. Hence the question: *What happens next?*

At this point, one might object to my claim that humanity has never been better off than it is today. After all, the present age is once again characterised by numerous wars, famine, geopolitical instability, increasing concentrations of power and widespread violations of human rights. Climate change threatens countless areas of life and the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us how fragile our health truly is. Many also identify an AI crisis as one of the defining challenges of our time. My claim therefore requires justification.

I shall begin with perhaps the most destructive phenomenon of all: war. Although the year 2026 is profoundly marked by military conflict and unprecedented rearmament, a longer historical perspective suggests that warfare has never before been conducted to such an extent through economic and strategic mechanisms rather than purely territorial conquest. Every human life lost remains an irreparable tragedy. Nevertheless, contemporary forms of warfare increasingly display a tendency to minimise civilian casualties through technological precision. The strategic disruption of global supply chains—for example through the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz—and the growing reliance on precision-guided drones and autonomous systems illustrate this transformation.

A similar shift can be observed in another domain. According to UNICEF's 2025 report[2], for the first time in recorded history, more individuals between the ages of five and nineteen suffer globally from obesity than from undernutrition. UNICEF explicitly describes this development as a historic turning point.

Although violations of human dignity are undoubtedly increasing in many regions of the world, humanity has never before lived under conditions of such unprecedented transparency. At no previous point in history have crimes against human rights or violations of human dignity been so easily exposed and named as clearly as they are now—owing in no small part to the digital age. Furthermore, human rights themselves are a

comparatively recent achievement when viewed against the entirety of human history. Perhaps, for the first time, this achievement is now undergoing a comprehensive historical test. Just as clearly as digitalization can make things visible, it can just as powerfully obscure them. Like every other human institution, human rights remain subject to continuous transformation rather than historical permanence.

Climate change undeniably exerts a profound influence upon our world. We observe a marked increase in global temperatures, accelerated by rising greenhouse gas emissions. Weather and climate patterns are altering across the globe, resulting in an increasing frequency of extreme weather events. Sea levels continue to rise, while countless species face mounting adaptive pressure as ecosystems undergo transformation. Agriculture, freshwater resources, and the health of both humans and animals are increasingly affected, particularly in the most vulnerable regions. Natural disasters continue to claim human lives.

None of these developments should be minimised or denied. Yet, from the perspective of world history, it was not long ago that communities gathered each Sunday to pray simply for favourable weather. Such prayers were both intelligible and useful—not because they altered meteorological processes, but because humanity possessed few alternative means of responding to climatic uncertainty.

Today humanity commands highly sophisticated instruments of forecasting, statistical modelling, climate science, and disaster management. Disaster prevention has never been so efficient or globally coordinated. Prayer may still retain its place, but the horizon within which it functions has shifted profoundly, together with the range of human agency itself.

Here I return to my first analogy, though now in reverse. Perhaps humanity—understood as a global collective— is simply not yet "warm" enough to open the window, to assign the necessary priority to climate action and to undertake more comprehensive collective measures. Much about climate change is already known. Much can be said. Yet not everything that can be said proves genuinely helpful. Once again, the second analogy leads me to a similar conclusion. The unborn child in the eighth month of pregnancy is not yet cramped enough. Conditions remain sufficiently favourable that the necessity of transition has not yet become unavoidable.

In 1928, Alexander Fleming accidentally discovered penicillin after observing that the mould Penicillium secreted a substance capable of killing bacteria. During the 1940s, penicillin entered widespread clinical use as an antibiotic. It marked a milestone in the history of medicine, and it did not remain an isolated breakthrough. Yet this was less than a

century ago—a period that today often corresponds to no more than the lifespan of a single individual. Parallel to dramatic advances in medicine and agricultural productivity, the global population[3] increased from approximately 1.65 billion in 1900 to more than 8 billion by 2023.

Modern medicine has expanded human capacities for health and survival to an unprecedented degree. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic confronted humanity with entirely new forms of problematization.

Only a technologically advanced society could rapidly communicate nationwide regulations, digitalize work processes, develop vaccines and distribute them within an unprecedented timeframe. Testing infrastructures had been organised systematically and digital certification systems implemented. For the first time in human history, doctors were required to apply triage principles at the threshold of intensive care medicine and the allocation of ventilators.

When had such circumstances ever existed before? Pandemics themselves are by no means new from the perspective of human history—plague, smallpox, cholera, and the Spanish flu all testify to this. What has changed is not the existence of disease but the level at which human action becomes possible. The plane upon which humanity confronts its problems has shifted once again.

I now turn to a further transformation—one that is closely intertwined with what is commonly described as the AI crisis: the emergence of new forms of concentrated power. At the outset, I would like to emphasise that monopolies of power are a thoroughly familiar phenomenon throughout human history. According to David Stasavage[4], early forms of democracy were widespread among human societies and occurred approximately as frequently as autocratic forms of government. Democracy was neither a unique invention of ancient Greece nor the inevitable outcome of progressive historical development. Rather, both democratic and autocratic forms of governance appear to have emerged repeatedly as recurring—and perhaps even natural—modes of collective human organisation. Stasavage further argues that technological progress gradually diminished the informational advantage previously enjoyed by local communities over their rulers. Improvements in agriculture led to greater population density, reducing individuals' "exit options" while simultaneously facilitating the emergence of increasingly sophisticated bureaucratic administrations. Rulers thereby acquired unprecedented capacities to monitor, tax, and control their populations. In doing so, they undermined precisely those conditions that had previously enabled and sustained participatory forms of government.

Viewed from this perspective, today's concentration of power within technology corporations appears less as a historical anomaly than as a

logical continuation of a familiar pattern. Technological development has shifted control over data, information, and capital into the hands of a comparatively small number of actors, and with this shift has come a corresponding redistribution of power. Indeed, the exit options available to the global population have arguably never been more limited.

Already Immanuel Kant[5] emphasised the spherical shape of the Earth, arguing that it renders permanent separation between human beings impossible. Driven by scarcity of food and resources, people might disperse across the globe, yet the Earth's curvature inevitably causes them to encounter one another again. Globalisation and cosmopolitanism, in this sense, were not merely political aspirations but structural consequences of human conditions. By 2026, this process has entered an entirely new phase.

Digitalisation has produced an unprecedented informational asymmetry between technological corporations and ordinary citizens. Data have become the primary strategic resource of contemporary society, and with their accumulation comes an equally unprecedented concentration of power.

Pope Leo XIV addresses precisely this transformation in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanita*[6], published on 25 May 2026. He asks how humanity can preserve its dignity in the age of artificial intelligence and interprets the AI revolution as a profound historical rupture. How can human beings remain truly human when machines increasingly assume capacities that were once regarded as uniquely human? For Leo XIV, the decisive question is whether technology serves humanity or comes to dominate it. Closely connected to this concern is his critique of the growing concentration of technological power.

Before pursuing this line of argument further, I wish to observe that every major discovery or technological breakthrough throughout history has simultaneously represented both an extraordinary opportunity and a profound challenge for humanity. This began with the discovery of fire, continued through the development of sharpened tools, and extends to the invention of the automobile and the Industrial Revolution. In retrospect, no one seriously asks whether humanity ceased to be human once it stopped eating exclusively raw meat, began cutting food with tools instead of tearing it apart with its teeth, replaced walking with mechanical transportation, or transformed agricultural societies into industrial ones.

Human beings did not become less human through these developments, they incorporated new possibilities—and the new dangers accompanying them—into their understanding of what it means to be human. Human self-understanding is in constant transformation. It evolves continuously alongside the transformations that reshape the conditions of existence.

For this reason, I believe the question of whether artificial intelligence will allow human beings to remain human is fundamentally misguided. The more fundamental question remains: What happens next?

One consequence, however, appears virtually certain. Power is shifting. Every redistribution of power inevitably entails a redistribution of social roles. This development is particularly evident in the contemporary position of the Catholic Church. For centuries, the Church represented one of history's most powerful monopolies of knowledge. It shaped truth, controlled education, and participated in practices that today would be recognised as violations of human rights—rights that had not yet themselves been conceptually articulated. Today, by contrast, it finds itself in the role of the critical observer, the role that perhaps naturally belongs to those who no longer possess decisive power. Such a position is not only understandable but indispensable, for every concentration of power requires an external perspective capable of questioning it.

Over recent decades, we have witnessed the remarkable ascendancy of the sciences. Medicine, engineering, the social sciences, and the natural sciences profoundly shaped society's central problematizations, by accompanying and interpreting social transformation, exercising considerable authority over the production of knowledge itself, and enabling reductions in complexity. In this sense, science functioned as the dominant institution within the informational order.

By 2026, however, this balance has shifted. The central issue is no longer raw materials or territory, but data, knowledge, health information, demographic information, and behavioural profiles. Within liberal democracies these resources increasingly reside in the hands of large technology corporations. Within authoritarian systems they remain concentrated primarily within the government.

With this shift comes a reconfiguration of the very concept of truth. Scientific institutions no longer exercise exclusive authority over questions of validity and public knowledge. Instead, the new centres of informational power increasingly determine what counts as truth—and equally, which contents become visible and which disappear. *(We have seen this before; what do you think, Leo?)*

If the rules-based international order appears to be dissolving, and if established institutions seem to be losing both their authority and their effectiveness, this indicates that they have lost their relative weight within the *network of problematizations*. Allow me to introduce another analogy. Imagine a system of road traffic. If increasing numbers of drivers cease to obey the rules of the road—if they no longer cooperate—this does not necessarily indicate irrationality. Rather, it suggests that they no longer

perceive sufficient benefit in complying with the existing regulatory framework.

The purpose of traffic regulations is not merely obedience for its own sake. We comply because doing so dramatically increases the likelihood of arriving safely while simultaneously ensuring the efficient flow of traffic. Beneath every individual rule lies a more fundamental problematization: the necessity of movement itself. The road network exists because human beings seek to travel from one place to another.

Now imagine that a significant proportion of drivers begin ignoring red traffic lights. At a certain point, the appropriate response is no longer stricter enforcement but a redesign of the intersection itself. A roundabout may prove more effective than a traffic signal because it better accommodates the actual dynamics of movement. If no institutional redesign proves possible, those who disregard the rules will eventually discover that they, too, bear the consequences. The loss of cooperation ultimately threatens everyone, including those who initially appeared to benefit from non-compliance.

How –after these observations– can I maintain that humanity has never been better off than it is today, despite the profound shifts in power brought about by artificial intelligence and digital technology? To answer this, I propose a further analogy.

Let us consider the domestication of animals. In 2015, wild mammals—including marine mammals—accounted for only around four per cent of the total global mammalian biomass.[7] This was not always the case. What constitutes an essential difference between a wild animal and a domesticated one? A wild animal must solve every problem essential to its own survival. It must secure food, avoid predators, compete for territory, and adapt continuously to changing environmental conditions. A domesticated animal instead is relieved of many of these necessities. Food is provided. Shelter is constructed. Protection is organised externally. The essential conditions of survival are no longer problems that the animal itself must solve. Paradoxically, the reduction of existential burdens gives rise to entirely new forms of problematization. One striking example can be found in modern pig farming. Pigs are frequently provided with toys and forms of environmental enrichment, while their tails are routinely docked shortly after birth to reduce the incidence of tail-biting—a severe behavioural disorder associated with chronic stress (also attributable to the large number of individuals in such a confined space), boredom and the absence of meaningful stimulation.

Might something analogous be occurring within contemporary human civilisation? Over the past century—and with increasing intensity through the rise of artificial intelligence—we have progressively delegated

countless practical and cognitive tasks to technology. Washing machines wash our clothes. Robotic vacuum cleaners clean our homes. Autonomous lawn mowers maintain our gardens. Industrial agriculture automates food production. Satellite navigation has largely replaced the cultivation of spatial orientation. Digital systems organise communication, memory, calculation, and increasingly even creative work.

With every technological innovation, we recover something invaluable: time. An extraordinary amount of time. This raises a provocative question. Have we, perhaps, domesticated ourselves? Has the reduction of existential necessity produced a new condition in which boredom and psychological stress emerge precisely because so many traditional problematizations have disappeared? Might conflicts no longer arise solely from scarcity of resources, but also from an inability to discover meaningful new forms of self-realisation?

Could it be that societies accept declining social welfare in favour of increasing military expenditure because they lack more compelling alternatives through which collective purpose might be rediscovered? Meanwhile, individuals soothe themselves through the endless consumption of digital entertainment—finding distraction in humorous videos, outrage, or the perpetual stimulation of social media.

If this hypothesis is correct, then yes: Humanity is arguably better off than at any previous point in history. When we become bored, or when we suffer in one form or another, we once again turn to digital technologies.

Whenever boredom, loneliness, or dissatisfaction emerge, digital technologies immediately offer relief. We watch amusing videos of animals, short clips of carpets being cleaned, or countless other fragments of curated satisfaction. We no longer perform many tasks ourselves, yet we derive pleasure simply from watching them being performed. Experiences of agency are increasingly replaced by representations of agency. Even care itself is gradually transformed. When we require medical advice, emotional support, or simply someone to listen, we increasingly turn not to another human being but to conversational artificial intelligence.

While profound shifts in global power unfold around us (shifts humanity itself has created through centuries of development) the individual simultaneously enjoys levels of convenience, security, and immediate gratification unparalleled in history.

Even where robotic surgery, automated households, or advanced consumer infrastructures remain unavailable, the smartphone has become nearly ubiquitous. According to data published by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)[8], approximately 68 per cent of the world's population is now connected to the internet. Certainly, significant

disparities remain. My argument is therefore not that everything is good, nor that everything is perfect. It is simply this: Humanity has never before lived under conditions as favourable as those it presently enjoys.

The aspiration to halt (or even substantially slow) the development of artificial intelligence strikes me as fundamentally utopian. AI-supported and AI-driven systems solve far too many human problems. The very problematizations that emerge through AI are not unfortunate side effects to be eliminated; they are the conditions under which human history continues to unfold. The challenge before us is therefore not to prevent the emergence of these new forms of problematization, but to learn how to inhabit them. Ideally, we shall do so without turning destructively against one another.

Yet this raises an obvious question. How is such an adaptation possible when, unlike the domesticated pig whose environment is designed to maximise meat production, contemporary human beings have themselves become valuable primarily as producers of data?

This occurs, however, under the guise of voluntariness. Yet one must ask: How much voluntariness remains when technological systems systematically activate the addictive reward circuits of the human brain? Contemporary digital environments are designed to hold attention, they continuously activate mechanisms of reinforcement, anticipation, and satisfaction. *(Which is precisely why we feel so well.)*

In the treatment of addiction disorders, our understanding is no clearer than it is at this point in human history. One fact, however, is well established among many others: the addicted individual must personally desire change. Moreover, addiction is frequently accompanied by the displacement of responsibility. Blame is projected outward rather than confronted inward. Such externalisation serves as an effective strategy for avoiding the considerable effort required for genuine transformation. Our contemporary discourse often follows the same pattern, we blame artificial intelligence. Or immigrants. Or other religions. Or geopolitical rivals. War itself frequently operates according to precisely this logic: the construction of an external enemy upon whom responsibility for internal tensions can be projected. Yet in attacking the external other, one inevitably weakens oneself.

Here we return once again to the image of the open window. Perhaps it is still not cold enough.

Yet willingness alone is never sufficient. The network of problematization extends beyond the existence of the human species itself. Every individual problem is embedded within a wider network of relations that no single actor can fully perceive or control. This brings me to the central theoretical proposal of this essay.

I conceive both the history of humanity and the development of every individual as a *chain of problematizations* embedded within a *network of problematizations*. Every problematization that is successfully resolved inevitably gives rise to another, and it is precisely through this continuous succession that human beings experience agency and new forms of existence emerge. Why think in terms of chains of problematizations? Because problems arise in meaningful sequences.

A human being living during the Stone Age could no more have understood the challenges of the age of artificial intelligence than the unborn child can imagine what breathing or walking might be. Certain forms of problematization simply cannot emerge before others have been traversed. Their significance usually becomes intelligible only retrospectively.

In both cases, the underlying issue may concern human self-understanding and thus one of philosophy's oldest questions: What is the human being? At what point does a human being become human? With the emergence of *Homo sapiens*? At a particular stage in fetal development? The history of philosophy offers no definitive answer.

Perhaps recent decades have placed excessive emphasis upon rationality as the defining feature of humanity. If artificial intelligence increasingly performs rational and cognitive tasks once regarded as uniquely human, perhaps the question itself requires reformulation. The answer to “What is a human being?” changes continuously, just as the answer to “How old are you?” changes with every passing moment. The fetus has never breathed independently. It has always required oxygen, yet it has never consciously experienced breathing. Then, in a single moment, comes the first cry.

The decisive philosophical question today is not: “What is the human being?” Rather, it is: “What happens next?”

Artificial intelligence compels this question with particular urgency. What remains to do once AI performs increasingly sophisticated intellectual tasks? If AI can recombine everything that has already been said, does humanity now need to become radically original in order to remain distinct? Original how? Must every individual aspire to become another Einstein, producing genuinely unprecedented ideas? Or is even this insufficient? Must the genuinely new be something that cannot yet be imagined at all—just as independent breathing is unimaginable to the unborn child?

This leads to an even more fundamental question. Where does novelty itself originate? Does the new emerge from the individual human? Is it merely accidental? Is it calculable? Or does novelty arise from a far more complex network of conditions within which individual human beings

function less as autonomous creators than as nodal points through which larger processes unfold?

Human beings have grown accustomed to placing themselves at the centre of every process of problematization. Perhaps the fetus is simply bored after sucking its thumb for the thousandth time and listening endlessly to the same familiar sounds. One might jokingly summarise its condition with the slogan of democratic elections: “Anything is preferable—as long as it is different.”

Yet birth does not occur because the fetus consciously concludes: "I possess all the relevant information. I understand the problem. I know what must now be done." Quite the opposite. Human beings consistently overestimate the extent of their own understanding. The initiation of birth does not arise from the fetus alone, but from a still incompletely understood constellation of interacting factors involving the fetus, the placenta, and the mother.

The same, I suggest, may hold true for the historical transformations through which humanity itself now passes. Let us therefore attempt to understand more clearly the concepts of *chains of problematizations* and their embeddedness within a *network of problematizations* by returning to the analogy of the unborn child. If humanity is imagined as an unborn child, it possesses access to a certain body of conscious information. Admittedly, this experiential horizon is limited. Yet even at this stage of development, the fetus has already acquired a genuine history of lived experience. Crucially, this experiential horizon cannot be separated from the chain of problematization through which it has emerged.

Consider a simple example. A fetus is capable of distinguishing voices—particularly that of its mother—responding to music and speech, and becoming familiar with sounds that it hears repeatedly. Contemporary developmental research has demonstrated that newborn infants are capable of recognising melodies and speech rhythms repeatedly encountered before birth. This points to a form of learning and memory prior to birth. For such capacities to emerge, the inner ear, the auditory nerve, and the cortical centres responsible for auditory processing must first develop and become functionally integrated. Only this anatomical and physiological maturation makes it possible not merely to perceive acoustic stimuli, but also to process, interpret and remember them.

Here we observe that the problematizations of perceiving, processing, and remembering sounds is embedded within a chain of problematizations. Yet this chain cannot be understood in isolation. Its embeddedness within a network of problematizations is the indispensable precondition for its existence. For acoustic stimuli to be perceived at all, there must exist an

environment capable of providing them. The placenta and the mother therefore play a decisive role in shaping this network of problematizations.

Although the unborn child possesses neither complete knowledge of its condition nor access to the totality of information contained within the network of problematizations, it nevertheless participates in a clearly structured chain of problematizations. The progression of this chain is therefore not the result of the individual's conscious creation of problematizations. Rather, it constitutes a self-conditioning structure within which the individual represents only one factor among many.

It would therefore be mistaken to regard the fetus—and by extension the human being throughout history—as merely a passive object carried along by deterministic processes. It would be equally mistaken, however, to elevate the fetus to the status of sole creator of knowledge or primary generator of problematization. The truth lies between these extremes. This raises another question. Why does the perspective of the fetus—and, by analogy, the perspective of the human being—remain indispensable despite its intrinsic limitations?

Although the totality of the network of problematizations, that is, the entirety of existing information, is and must remain inaccessible from the human perspective, perception must nonetheless proceed from precisely this perspective. Only through participation in the chain of problematizations does the network of problematizations itself come into being.

In other words: if the fetus were not precisely the fetus that it is, there would be no pregnancy, and consequently neither a mother nor a placenta. The fetus is exactly what it is—and must be—at this particular point within the chain of problematizations. Its existence conditions the network of problematizations, just as the network conditions its existence.

The world can only exist because human beings exist as they do. Conversely, human beings can only become what they are because the world exists as it does. The Stone Age hunter inhabited a network of problematization that simultaneously shaped him and was shaped by him. Exactly the same holds for human beings in the age of artificial intelligence.

Let us now consider a different chain of problematization: Breathing.

By the eighth month of pregnancy, the lungs become increasingly capable of functioning independently. They produce sufficient quantities of surfactant—a substance that prevents the alveoli from collapsing during exhalation after birth. Consequently, the likelihood that the newborn will be able to breathe autonomously after birth increases substantially.

Yet surfactant production itself presupposes a much longer developmental sequence. The alveoli must first form. The respiratory tree must develop. Before this, the embryonic endoderm and mesoderm must differentiate. Earlier still, these tissues existed only as a simple cellular sphere. Before even that, they were nothing more than genetic information encoded within DNA.

Each developmental stage presupposes another. The chain extends backwards through embryology into evolutionary history itself. Evolutionary biology, despite its remaining uncertainties, offers a familiar example of precisely such developmental sequences: Mammals emerged. Respiratory systems evolved. Oxygen-based metabolism became possible. Yet even the problematization of breathing could never have arisen in an atmosphere devoid of oxygen. At the opposite end of this same chain we encounter a problem already discussed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, physicians were forced to decide which patients would receive mechanical ventilation and which would not. This ethical dilemma could arise only because the entire preceding chain of biological, evolutionary, atmospheric, technological, and medical developments already existed. Without oxygen in Earth's atmosphere, without the evolution of aerobic respiration, without the emergence of mammals, without modern medicine, intensive care units, and ventilators, no physician would ever have faced such a decision.

The point is therefore not simply that problems succeed one another. Rather, every problematization can arise only within precisely those chains and networks of problematization that make its existence possible.

For this reason, I ask once more: What happens next?

I formulate the question in precisely these terms because I remain conscious of the immense complexity of the reality within which I occupy only a single position. I myself constitute one node within this network. Even my own pulmonary alveoli formed part of this network of problematization and, because my particular problematization chain did not place me among those most vulnerable to COVID-19, they happened to occupy a remarkably fortunate position within it.

Medicine provides an exceptionally fruitful field for understanding both **chains of problematizations** and their embeddedness within a **network of problematizations**.

It also provides an ideal context for examining the evolving relationship between artificial intelligence, technology, and scientific expertise. Already today, AI-assisted systems perform an extraordinarily wide range of medical tasks. Diagnostic medicine in particular has become increasingly dependent upon machine learning technologies, and a clear developmental trajectory can be observed: artificial intelligence is evolving

from a mere instrument into an assistant, and from an assistant into an increasingly autonomous specialist.

In surgery, robotic technologies have advanced to a point at which they no longer merely assist the surgeon but actively participate in the operative process. Contemporary robotic systems are capable of identifying anatomical structures in real time, documenting individual stages of a procedure, warning the surgeon of critical regions, and integrating preoperative imaging into intraoperative decision-making. More importantly these systems frequently exceed the precision of unaided human perception. Their capacity to process visual information surpasses that of the human visual system by orders of magnitude. As a consequence, these systems no longer merely recommend how instruments should be guided; they actively guide—and constrain—their movement.

The transition resembles the evolution from driver assistance systems to autonomous driving. Where earlier lane-assistance technologies merely issued acoustic or visual warnings, contemporary vehicles are already capable of actively preventing a driver from changing lanes whenever the system detects an unacceptable level of risk. A similar transformation is occurring in the operating theatre. When robotic systems identify a nerve or major blood vessel, they may physically prevent the surgeon from continuing an incision. The technology no longer simply informs the surgeon's judgement; it directly limits the surgeon's sphere of decision-making.

From the perspective of chains of problematization, this marks a significant conceptual shift. Within the corresponding chain of problematizations, the principal problem-generating agency is therefore no longer the surgeon alone, but increasingly the AI technology itself. Artificial intelligence increasingly assumes this role. Long before the operation begins, AI systems have already analysed diagnostic images, evaluated anatomical variations, and contributed to surgical planning. During the procedure itself, the surgeon no longer acts with complete autonomy. Furthermore, the available surgical instruments, implant systems, and operative workflows must remain compatible with the technological system within which they are deployed. The effectiveness of treatment therefore depends not only upon the surgeon's expertise but also upon the quality of the underlying datasets, the maturity of the algorithms employed, and—ultimately—the technological infrastructure developed and financed by particular corporations.

Although legal responsibility currently continues to rest with the surgeon (within an egalitarian doctor-patient relationship), it is far from clear to determine where precisely the boundaries of the respective domains of decision-making of the physician, the AI-supported systems, and

ultimately the patient are drawn. Exactly the same considerations apply to the deployment of artificial intelligence in warfare.

Let us now return to the question with which this essay began: Are we living through a new Axial Age? Are we witnessing another decisive turning point in world history?

The introduction of my concepts of **chains of problematizations** and their embeddedness within a **network of problematizations**, introduced through the analogy of the fetus in the eighth month of pregnancy, provide a framework within which this question may be reconsidered. They allow us to ask not merely where humanity presently stands, but also from which conditions future developments may emerge. **Once again: What happens next?**

Several observations follow directly from this framework.

1. The network of problematization that constitutes reality is never accessible in its entirety. No individual perspective can encompass its totality, and the network itself is in a constant state of transformation.

2. Every present condition is unavoidably conditioned through chains of problematizations, without thereby diminishing our own significance as individual points within the network of problematizations.

3. Within a chain of problematizations, no stages can be skipped.

What follows from these observations for humanity today?

First. Human existence is characterised by a permanent tension between two opposing experiences.

On the one hand, we recognise our own insignificance within a reality whose complexity infinitely exceeds our capacity for comprehension. This recognition calls forth humility. On the other hand, we inevitably experience ourselves as acting individuals whose decisions genuinely matter, a reality that arises precisely because of the limitations of one's own perspective. These two experiences continually contradict one another. They inevitably generate a dissonance. Yet this contradiction should not be understood as a philosophical weakness. Rather, it constitutes one of the very conditions under which chains of problematizations continue to unfold. Human beings oscillate continuously between humility and self-assertion. Within this oscillation, history advances. Artificial intelligence intensifies precisely this movement.

By surpassing human beings in an increasing number of cognitive domains, AI compels us toward a renewed experience of humility. At the same time, this very displacement requires us to discover new forms of

agency—new ways of participating meaningfully within an evolving network of problematization.

Second. The information available to humanity is always situated within the present moment of the chain of problematization. Our scientific understanding—whether expressed through natural law, causal explanation, evolutionary biology, or historical scholarship—already reflects this sequential structure. We know that our present condition has been shaped by preceding developments, and we recognise ourselves as participants within those ongoing processes.

Artificial intelligence introduces an unprecedented instrument through which this complexity may both be understood AND actively reshaped. The conjunction of human intelligence and artificial intelligence therefore constitutes not simply another technological innovation. It marks the emergence of a new node within the chain of problematization itself. From this new position, humanity will participate in shaping entirely new chains of problematization whose contours cannot yet be fully anticipated.

Third. Before humanity can once again experience a renewed form of self-efficacy, it must first pass through humility. We cannot bypass the ethical, political, existential, and philosophical questions generated by artificial intelligence. They constitute necessary stages within the developmental sequence itself. Nor should we underestimate the extraordinary speed with which these transformations are unfolding. Yet perhaps this acceleration should not merely be feared. This very acceleration is itself an integral characteristic of the chain of problematizations.

Like the accomplished athlete who is able to run fast only because years of disciplined training have already been completed, civilisation now moves rapidly because countless prior chains of problematization have already been traversed. Even the athlete cannot miss out the indispensable processes of adaptation and recovery through which genuine development becomes possible. The same principle applies to civilisation. The transformations inaugurated by artificial intelligence are not, in themselves, pathological. They represent adaptations. And every adaptation requires time before it can become the foundation for a new experience of human agency.

This returns us to the question of the Axial Age and to the possibility that humanity is once again approaching a decisive historical threshold. What, precisely, would justify describing the present as an Axial Age? Would it be the unprecedented speed of technological development? Its global scope? Its relentless optimisation? Or perhaps the convergence of all three?

If these characteristics indeed define an Axial Age, then such an epoch can only be recognised retrospectively. Only from a later point within the

chain of problematization could humanity identify the present as a genuine historical rupture. A turning point becomes visible only once the trajectory has changed again.

Elon Musk would likely find the analogy of the unborn child particularly compelling. He might interpret humanity on Earth as a fetus within the womb and understand the colonisation of other planets as the equivalent of birth itself—as the next developmental stage toward which civilisation is naturally progressing. In that case, his answer to the question “What happens next?” would be straightforward: Humanity leaves the Earth.

Yet I cannot accept this answer. Earlier I argued that human beings overestimate themselves whenever they believe: "I possess all the relevant information. I understand the problem. I therefore know what must now be done." The same caution applies here. Birth does not immediately produce autonomy. A newborn child is incapable of independent survival. Even after leaving the womb, it remains profoundly dependent upon its relationship with the mother. Separation does not abolish interdependence; it merely transforms it. Indeed, from the perspective of the child, the well-being of the mother remains indispensable long after birth. The network of problematization does not disappear. It expands. New relationships emerge while earlier ones continue to sustain the whole.

For precisely this reason, humanity cannot simply abandon the Earth—even if future generations one day inhabit other planets. The analogy suggests precisely the opposite. Eventually, the relationship between mother and child is reversed. The child comes to care for the mother. Likewise, any future expansion of human civilisation would increase rather than diminish our responsibility toward the conditions from which that civilisation emerged. The chain of problematization cannot be dissolved. Its history remains constitutive of every future development. The child must know where it comes from.

And above all there is another lesson contained within the analogy: Premature birth endangers both mother and child. Within the chain of problematizations, no stages can be skipped.

I began this essay by promising to answer a different question. How is it possible to reduce the overwhelming complexity involved in asking whether humanity is entering a new Axial Age to the length of a single essay? How can realities that are themselves not exclusively linguistic nevertheless be translated into language? And finally: Was my statement both sayable and helpful?

The answer lies in the nature of language itself. Language constitutes one element within the network of problematization, but only one. Its greatest effectiveness lies not in representing reality exhaustively but in enabling movement within the chain of problematization.

When I say, "I am cold. Please close the window," Language performs precisely this function. It allows the chain of problematization to advance.

When someone instead asks, "How was your day?", I inevitably ask another question in return: What position does my answer occupy within the chain of problematization? Will it enable us to move forward?

The same criterion applies to this essay. Was what I have written sayable? Was it helpful? Did it allow us to advance within the chain of problematization? I cannot answer these questions with certainty. I remain only one node within that network. Just as the contemporary crises confronting humanity are themselves merely individual points within an ongoing chain of problematizations.

There is, however, one claim I can make with considerably greater confidence. The primary thesis of this essay has always been contained in its title: What happens next?

This question neither reduces the human being to the unique author of history nor excludes humanity from participating in it. Rather, it expresses a more fundamental insight. The very act of asking the question already constitutes a form of participation. If the argument presented here has succeeded in clarifying the importance of the title without reducing it to a definitive explanation or definition, then that alone already constitutes a success.

To understand oneself as one node within a chain of problematization, embedded in a wider network of problematization, fundamentally transforms the philosophical task. It becomes less a matter of providing final answers than of formulating better questions. If the question proposed here is understood—if it is accepted as a new problematization rather than a definitive solution—then I would consider my contribution justified.

Likewise, I hope it has become clear that this essay does not advance a teleological philosophy of history. I do not claim that history unfolds toward a predetermined end, nor do I identify a first or final problematization from which all others derive. Such claims would once again amount to answers, whereas my purpose has been precisely to resist them. Yet neither do I conclude that history is governed merely by chance.

Between teleological necessity and arbitrary contingency lies another possibility: that reality unfolds through interconnected chains of

problematization embedded within a network of problematizations whose complexity forever exceeds the perspective of any individual participant. AI is only one part of it, one point within the network of problematizations.

Or perhaps, in the end, it is simply the case that life has become so extraordinarily comfortable for me that I have grown bored—and therefore find myself asking: What happens next?

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[8] https://de.statista.com/infografik/35219/geschaetzter-anteil-der-internetnutzer-an-der-jeweiligen-landesbevoelkerung-weltweit/ 11.7.2026.