

Foreword

Cassandra, Dr. Popper, Helga,
Cosmo and I

Prophets, in spite of their name, do not foretell the future. No one can do that, and no one should claim to do so. What prophets can do is to tell the truth as they see it. They can point to the Emperor's lack of clothes. They can warn of dangers ahead if the course is not changed. Most of all, they can offer a way to clarify the dilemmas and concentrate the mind to the challenges, which are ahead.

Charles Handy

How is the future made?

Let us imagine a large room whose walls fade somewhere into infinity. There is muted light, of the kind we are familiar with at the beginning of a play in the theatre, when the audience is crouching expectantly on uncomfortable seats. Throats are cleared in the auditorium. On the stage is a table; a big, old table stained with wine and carved by children's pocket knives, with an old-fashioned coffee pot on it.

The table of history.

A door opens right. Cassandra enters. Although Cassandra appears in a male form in many cases, at this moment she is like a cliché of misogyny: a lady on the wrong side of the menopause, a bit like Nina Hagen mixed with Hillary Clinton and Alice Schwarzer. She is wearing a simple black Gaultier dress. Flat, grey shoes. Short hair with a reddish tint.

With disapproval, she looks at us, the nervous audience, while we rustle our sweet papers.

Cassandra is well-known to us all. She knows what's what with regard to the future. This way or that, humanity will fail due to its stupidity, immaturity and hybris, due to greed, false thinking, madness,

lechery and inner rottenness. Humanity will eat itself to death! (Aren't the obesity statistics rising all the time?) It will poison itself with hormones and become infertile! (»Spermicide! Nobody is having sex any more!«) We shall perish from terrorism, child abuse and global warming. We shall lose the savings we earned so bitterly; all our prosperity will dissolve into cancer and ruination. That's Cassandra's opinion.

In fact she only knows one sentence, a black mantra, which she goes on repeating without a trace of weariness. In the newspapers; in TV; in fat books and films with gloomy music; in conversations and subordinate clauses; at parties, with friends; at intellectual conferences and in three million talk shows (every day):

»It will end badly!«

Of course it will end badly. We know that already. We are fallible; our life is short and ends in dissipating molecules. But Cassandra adds another insight to this one. She makes a triumph of this realisation – a stage production. And this production serves most of all – herself.

When she was a child, snakes licked her ears while she was asleep. In that moment Cassandra became a priestess of Apollo, who promised to make her wisdom more profound. Cassandra seemed to accept the god's intentions, but then refused to live with him.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) spoke of *Cassandra betrayal*: Cassandra betrays us because she takes away our hopes. She knows everything; she knows evil; but nothing follows from that. She merely shows us that we are too dumb.

Man has no voice with which to oppose his fate!

Cassandra thus sits down on the left side of our table, with a sigh. She pulls the biscuits and the coffee pot towards herself. And she lights – without asking whether anybody minds – a cigarette with a clicking, golden, ribbed lighter. Gauloise, high powered. The table, old and unimpressed, with many ancient scratches in the pinewood, waits to see what will happen.

Who can we place at the table opposite this strong, archaic figure? In every talk show she would get the place on the red sofa directly opposite the moderator (»Madame Cassandra, so you think the end of the world is nigh...«).

Through a door on the other side of the set, a thin, ascetic-looking

man enters. He might just as well be 50 as 70. His flashing eyes make an immediate impression. His contoured nose and his fine, almost feminine mouth have something ironic about them. He is dressed in classic simplicity, which only the true connoisseur can enjoy (in the style of »artfully able to let things age«). He is carrying nothing but an old briefcase that resembles a doctor's case.

I would like to call this opposing lawyer Dr. Popper. Because he has a large amount of Sir Karl Popper about him, of course, even though he is not identical with him (there are also strong components from Peter Ustinow, Winston Churchill and Woody Allen, and from women as well, whom I love for their tough, sober energy of hope).

Karl Popper wrote his key work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in the darkest years of the twentieth century. In 1939, when the world conflagration was starting in Europe and its intellectuals were scattered to the four winds, confronted with crime, he wrote a work of unyielding hope. In New Zealand, at the other end of the world. So he cannot be suspected of naiveté. He knows that evil exists.

»All of life is problem-solving«, Dr. Popper will say softly, standing at the other end of the table and not really knowing what he should do with his hands and his briefcase, which has a thermos sticking out of it. »People aren't stupid. They are animals able to learn. And as such in principle talented for the future.«

Cassandra doesn't look at him. Her gaze is fixed on the audience. »So what problems have we solved in a hundred thousand years of human history? Think of the constantly increasing world population. The development of new epidemics; AIDS, hunger, wars everywhere!«

»Well now«, Popper answers courteously, »Humanity has been given up for lost more than once already. Men and women have been shaped by disasters; they even came about as a result of them. But they are also able to adapt. Why should all this come to an end in our century in particular?«

»Did you watch pay-television yesterday?«

Dr. Popper, still standing, follows a scar in the pinewood of the table with his fingers, lost in thought. »Modernity was always profane. Precisely that is its substance,« he then says.

»In the name of freedom we throw off our last firm bonds,« Cas-

sandra now declaims, and she lays her legs comfortably, with a gesture of inner agreement, on the nearest chair. »... to family, vocation, origins, nation! What we call globalisation is nothing less than the destruction of all human connections!«

Now the light changes. The stage-lights grow pale; Cassandra and Popper freeze in their current poses. »The future«, Popper is still heard to mutter, »cannot be foretold under any circumstances. Not even the negative...«

Spots go on, focussed on two remaining doors at the top of a ramp, from where an iron staircase leads up to the stage. The first to enter is Cosmo, with quite ruffled hair, coming through one of the doors. We see at the first glimpse that he has aged considerably.

Cosmo is an unforgotten school friend from the seventies of last century. We who gained our school leaving certificates in 1973 admired him greatly even though we didn't take him completely seriously. Cosmo, a charming, chaotic, constantly grinning type, who bit his fingernails until the bed of the nails bled, had repeated two classes. Cosmo believed in the future in a comprehensive, transcendental, eschatological way.

Cosmo was an early »extropian«. In contrast to entropians, who think that humanity is a cancer on nature, extropians believe in hyper-technologies. Cosmo was convinced that our brain would soon be stored in a computer. Space travel for everyone. Fully automatic houses. Cars that can be picked up. Robots in the form of photo models. Why not time travel as well, and beaming? He knew about cyberspace and cybersex even before these words were invented. (»Don't torture yourself with the ladies«, he said in his inimitable way, »they will soon be operated by remote control.«)

Cosmo's room in the basement of a tiny single-family house, where he lived with his solo mother, was a total mess of carpets rescued from the garbage, water pipes, cardboard model ships and books. It stank of pickled gherkins and patchouli. Cosmo smoked like a chimney (»Some day I'll just get a new lung«) and experimented with substances whose names I couldn't even spell. The gigantic lack of order in his room was a matter of total indifference to him (»Soon the robots will move in here and clean up«).

This is how he now comes onto the stage. It is, however, clear when one looks at him that – well – that the body demands its tribute.

»Hello«, he says, and sits down.

Now Helga enters through the other door. She has hardly changed. A little rounder, perhaps. But still radiant.

Helga is the living principle of conservation. Even in my school days she was a mother ship, who accompanied us through the dangers of late puberty. A large, warm-blooded, silent young woman you could trust to keep your secrets. Helga was a feminist, an ecologist, a humanist, but without saying such things about herself in the least. You could talk about *everything* with her. Apart from the future.

»Nothing ever changes«, she always said pertly. »Always the same twaddle, from the stone age to the moon station.«

Astonishingly, for a crazy half year – the last year before graduating from secondary school – Helga and Cosmo were together. It is hard to imagine a more extreme pair of lovers. They quarrelled constantly and at length, as if they had to work out the history of the world in their own persons.

»Will you just be quiet!« she said with the ironic intonation of a mother punishing her child, whenever Cosmo gave voice to one of his crazy theories. »And keep a hold on your maggoty ego!«

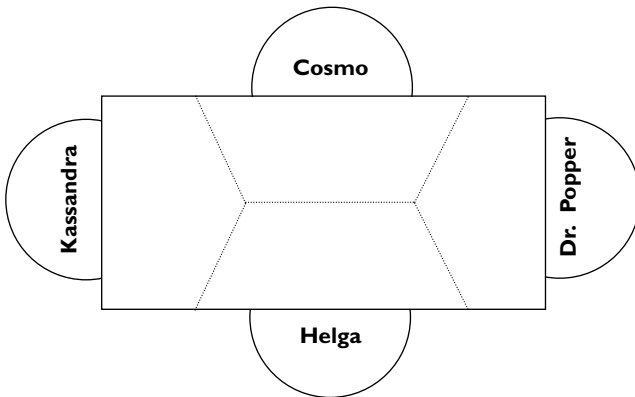


Figure 1:
The magic history table

Helga is »present perfect«. She embodies what Pirsig calls the »classical principle« in his work *Zen or the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance*. While Cosmo, a hopeless romantic, lay at her feet, where he had, however, long lost track of things, she floated above him with her love of order.

Cosmo and Helga sit down opposite each other, at the long sides of the table. And now it looks as it does in Figure 1, our magic table, where the future will be negotiated.

The world of ideas represented by our table now takes on the following shape:

If we now divide our table up into scenario quadrants, it then looks the way it is shown in Figure 2.

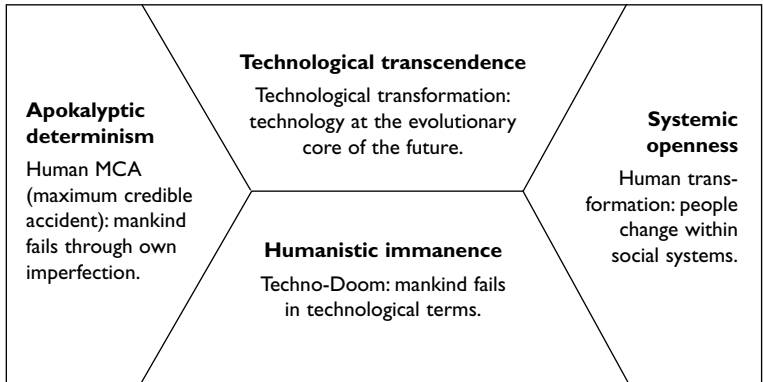


Figure 2:
Scenario quadrants of the magic table

I now want to invite you to join us at the table in spirit. You may take your place at the quadrant that seems most comfortable to you. Of course you may also place yourself somewhere in a corner. At a crossing-place, in the second row or even in the background, if you think you are not represented anywhere.

Before we set out into the world of the 21st century at our table, we will need a short briefing. Every reader should be informed about the conditions of our journey in time.

First: Technology Is Not Everything

What would seem most surprising to a time traveller who could be transported by some cosmological chance from the beginning of the twentieth century into our time, a distance of 100 years? Certainly: the miracles of technology would be hard to deal with. To see a jumbo-jet rise gracefully into the evening sky, to experience the tactile sophistication of driving in a BMW, to watch a computer rapidly produce pictures, symbols and networks – that would no doubt considerably raise the pulse of our wanderer through time.

But our time traveller would already be familiar with many of these artefacts as blue-prints or prototypes. Aircraft, mobile phones, escalators and even the television set would have analogies from a time when the waxwork panorama already anticipated the cinema, the telephone was widespread (if only for local calls) and the huge world fairs were presenting »the miracle of electricity«.

Let's imagine that our time traveller lands in the middle of Berlin on a gentle summer day. On the Kurfürstendamm the floats are being prepared for the »Christopher Street Parade«. Gays in leather are standing around in large groups, smoking Marlboro Lights and wearing Lederhosen that are split open at the back. Cheerful lesbians, with pierced nipples, are kissing each other, while Japanese tourists take photos, giggling.

What would deprive our transtemporal adventurer completely of his composure would be what he would probably call the »morals and manners« of our present day. The »immoral« way women dress and behave (and smoke!) in public. How titillating underwear is displayed on randy bodies on enormous posters. How children talk with their parents – indeed, the whole chattering, obscene language of nowadays, the flood of pictures and optical deconstruction – that would surely transport our poor time traveller into the most severe spiritual distress.

Last century, future researchers particularly made technical elements their theme of continuity. To be honest, most of these visions have faded away, in spite of computers, mobile phones and jumbos. In her book *Rocket Dreams*, Marina Benjamin seems almost offended when she says:

»Where are they, our space stations, our wonderful underwater stations, where we can spend the rest of our lives in utopian comfort with a cool martini? (...) So, where are they, the miracle cures for cancer, the space travel and the flying cars for everyone?»¹

This is a book about the *culture* of the future. About the question of what the future *feels like*. About everyday things. Life. Death. It moves along the question of how complexity comes about in human systems and how it *might* march on. That doesn't mean that technology has no role to play. But technology is not seen here as the carrier wave but as a product of the human, an expression of ultimately social human wishes, illnesses and fantasies.

Technology is the answer to a question that we sometimes forget. And its evolution by no means runs linearly into a determined, hyper-technological future but, like all living evolution in leaps, contradictions and digressions. Even technology has its own kinds of nostalgia, its retro and backward-leading paths. The proud bird of our childhood, the swan-white Concorde, now stands proud, but cannibalized, in our museums.

Secondly: remember the retro-trend!

»The faster the newest thing becomes old, the faster the old can become new again; everyone knows that who has just lived a little longer.« That is how Odo Marquard put it.² For every socio-cultural trend there is also a counter-movement. The triumph of material prosperity in the second half of last century let a whole wave of alternative life experiments come about, where members of the young, educated generation turned to rural life and the longing for tribe and clan. The increased mobility of the early nineties produced the counter-movement of »co-cooning«. When everything becomes »wellness« and more and more parts of our life are interwoven with Tai Chi and Chakra breathing exercises, as a reflex there is promptly an urge towards bad taste and trash. As I write this book a reality series is running in German television with the lovely title *Mein großer dicker peinlicher Verlobter* (My Big Fat Embarrassing Fiancé). The idea is that a pretty young woman

should try to »sell« a fat ugly slob to her parents as her future husband ... very funny.

The universal spread of »retro« means that many things are not new but merely variants of something old. In bright moments this leads to a certain future melancholy, which can come over even the most progressive spirit. Tyler Brûlé, the creator of the cult journal *Wallpaper*, wrote:

»The things we miss most are a strange mixture of humour, humanity and something intangible: time, space, good watermarks and three reliable friends.«³

Only very rarely in history was *one thing* completely replaced by *another*. The car did not make the bicycle disappear, even horses still exist in large numbers today (even though for other purposes than moving from place to place). The transformation of families does not mean that there are no more big, crazy, beautiful families, on the contrary. This is why such statements as »In 2050 we will all ...« are either misleading or simply wrong. This is why the *And Principle* is valid. Globalism *and* regionalism. Acceleration *and* deceleration. Individualisation *and* universalisation. All becoming is a recombination.

»Linear prognostication works with the logic of continuity, dialectic prognostication with the logic of the alternative«, writes Gerhard Schulze in his book *Die Beste aller Welten* (The Best of All Worlds).⁴ Sooner or later we come to a basic rule that I would like to call the »demand for complexity«. Vital paradoxes hold the ends of contradictions together and create constant new variations. But alas, if this gentle rule breaks down! Then come dark times, reversals into deepest simplicities. The questions that Dr Popper rightly wants to keep open are answered in Cassandra's favour.

Thirdly: questions are more important than answers

»In a world of constant change«, writes Watts Wacker in *The Deviants Advantage*, »good questions are the real scarcity«. ⁵ When I am on a lecture tour, again and again I make the sobering discovery that most questions people ask about future research are strangely sterile. »Is

Man good or evil?« »Is our society losing more and more solidarity?« »Won't we experience a relapse into old human atavisms?« These questions already hold their own answers (the ideology and world view of the questioner will permit no answer but the one he or she has long worked out). Such questions in millions of repetitions emerge as regressive »memes« (thought patterns) again and again in public discourse.

Bad questions hand out blame, change living processes into black-and-white phenomena, emphasise things in clichés and degrade the complexity of the world. *Good* questions, on the other hand, open things up. They rev up adrenaline production in thought and increase the brain's activity. They leave an echo of the future behind them that appeals to our self-responsibility and creative competence.

So what does the future come from? It comes, first, from chance events that we can hardly change – or not at all. Secondly it grows out of the laws governing living systems, which we can learn to understand – this book wants to make a contribution to that. But, above all, it develops as a result of human action. From human agreements. Such action may be blind and stupid. It may lead us in the wrong direction – Cassandra's direction. But it may also release the possible, giving evolution a direction, *leading into the future*.

Future is the result of a negotiation where we should, at least, have a seat and a vote. So let's all sit down at the beautiful, old, story-telling table. It's time to start!