

# My 2018 Christmas Notes - On Algorithms, My Own Children, Sustainability, Choice, and the Human Heart

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I was outside a city-centre store in the drizzle and dark two days ago, wondering whether my brain was made for better things than standing reflecting on waiting for my wife to emerge from a busy shop with another last-minute Christmas present. The human brain is a wondrous thing; we waste its powers in the name of trivial consumerist capitalism.

Yesterday I finished reading Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. It describes a worldview in which humanism appears as just another (rather small) episode in the history of Homo Sapiens, as we are witnessing (making?) its replacement by Dataism. Human emotions and human intelligence can be understood by science to be based on biological algorithms. The new world will see the algorithms of data management and artificial intelligence make ever more and ever better decisions than can be made by human biology, and so they will increasingly replace human agency. Harari's vision of a post-humanist world in which Dataism reigns and where our choices are made by algorithms that ultimately serve efficiency and profit made me feel glad not to be young - it is a world I hopefully will not have to learn to live in. Although I already am learning that, as the new age of the universal freedom of information flows is gradual and has long begun.

My son is presently in Cambodia, finding it strange to be in such a hot country for Christmas-time, and missing his family back in Europe. He is repeatedly appalled by the effect industrial and particularly plastic waste is having on the environment in south-east Asia. Our economies of growth mean that pollution levels will continue to rise; new EU bans on throwaway plastics are literally no more than a drop in the ocean.

The last hard coal mine in Germany closed last week. Two hundred years of industrial history came to an end. Phasing out coal mining in Germany is a peaceful business, done gradually and accompanied by efforts to reshape employment in the affected communities. It is also seen as an element in creating a more sustainable economy. I remember the bitter miners' strikes in the UK in the 1980s, in which irreconcilable positions clashed against each other, and there was no attempt at political consensus and not yet any public awareness of the need to reduce carbon emissions. Today, with Brexit, the UK seems to be an ever more divided country. Instead of hardened positions, how about trying consensual governance?

My daughter is vegan and refuses to fly, as neither meat nor dairy nor flying are sustainable. The days when people like my daughter were seen as eccentric dropouts or hippies are over. She is studying law and hopes one day to use law to make a difference. I think she will. She is already an influencer. To visit our family in the UK this Christmas, we are taking the train (from Germany) - just as I always used to do before the days of "cheap" flights. She has taken me close to vegan living, and I am now flying less and taking trains more, and I am finally offsetting my bad conscience at flying lots for work by buying compensation schemes.

Can I make my own choices in this world of algorithms?

In the last-but-one mediation I conducted in 2018 the parties came to an agreement that seemed to be satisfying to them and promising. Time will tell whether it will be sustainable. They made their own decisions, following the basic premise of mediation: the outcome is in the hands of the parties. It is their choice.

At the university where I work there was a Christmas concert, performed by our very own university choir and orchestra. They sang and played an arrangement by Gustav Holst of a nativity poem by the nineteenth-century English poet Christina Rossetti: *In the Bleak Midwinter*. I had never heard this before. The first verse goes:

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone,  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

I am not sure that there was much snow in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, even if Christ was born just after the winter solstice, so I could just put this imagery down to the Christmas fantasies of Victorian England.

This poem has meaning for what it does not and cannot say - that only few of us are now experiencing deep midwinters of the kind Rosetti describes. The past four years have been the hottest ever recorded, and 2018 was bleak in much of Europe for its searing midsummer heat. Is the recent Katowice Climate Change Conference really the best - and worst - we can do?

But isn't this verse more striking for its image of the beauty of "our" vulnerable world? None of my politics takes anything away from the beauty of Rosetti's poem, which begins with the monosyllabic and gleaming beauty of the iron-hard stone-cold winter, and ends with the beauty of the human heart:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

Sorry for not writing much about mediation here today. The "algorithm" gave me the 24th of each month for the Kluwer blog, and I make a choice to take note of that date in December.