

## We're only human- summary

A summary of a much more interesting argument! To read the full version click [here](#):

### Isn't it odd?

That we know changes in our climate will cause suffering to millions and perhaps billions, but we aren't pursuing mitigating actions with every sinew?

No, because we're human. We have limited attention span, limited senses, and have been watching this gradually unfold for decades so we haven't noticed the six ways in which we are causing this problem – and the kinds of radical multidimensional action needed to change it.

We must start noticing, only then can we exert pressure in the right places.

### What are we not noticing? Six fundamental causes of our climate crisis

*Devastated farmland and sea beds:* Farms have become factories, their fields now vast and increasingly sterile, largely dependent on artificial fertilisers, with almost no flourishing hedgerows and their abundant wildlife. Monolithic new farms have been created, often in place of ancient forests denuded of their flora and fauna, providing global food companies with vast amounts of a tiny range of crops. We may have only 60 harvests left. Since 1970 Earth has lost 60% of its wild animals. Vast sea and ocean-beds are similarly denuded. The scale and implications of this worldwide devastation are huge: planet threatening.

*Overpopulation:* There are three times more people in the world than when the baby boomers were born, and we're heading for four times. This is at huge cost to Earth's ecosystems but also to the women who bear more children than they want because of prevailing social norms, especially in the global south. (The global north is as overpopulated as the south – it's just rich enough to import the nutrition it needs). Evidence is clear that quality education and support for women's choices reduce birth-rates to below replacement levels. Within a century population levels could be at a sustainable level of 3 billion, 'only' politics and sexism are preventing this.

*Energy, Waste and Inequality:* Today 90% of our **energy** is from non-renewable sources, and every *day* we use fossil fuels equivalent to all the plant matter that grows on land and in the oceans in a *year*. No wonder our planet cannot cope with that.

The goods made with that energy quickly become **waste**: each of us in the West now throws away on average ¼ tonne of waste every year (that's the weight of a small car every four years) and we are running out of spaces to put this waste.

People in unequal societies use far more energy and produce far more waste than in more equal societies (and are less happy). Addressing **inequality** will be critical. Countries with greater equality (e.g. Portugal) have happier populations at a fraction of the income levels of those with less (e.g. United States).

*Unsustainable attacks on the amazing web of life:* Earth supports an amazing ‘plenum’ of life, a web of life so rich and diverse and intertwined and multitudinous we may never be able to fully perceive or understand its full complexity. It is that plenum (‘a space of which every part is full of interacting matter’) that supports us as a species. Large contiguous areas of wilderness are essential if the plenum is to thrive in its richness, complexity, and amazingness. It is hubris to presume that humans will ever fully comprehend it and be able to replace it. Wilderness is being destroyed by the massive physical infrastructure needed for global trade (roads, railways etc), and with it many species that have site-specific homes. Our desire for fast fashion and cheap consumer goods has shocking consequences.

‘Nature now needs protection at enormous scale and huge urgency with local people acting as partners and not overlords’. Eileen Crist.

*Human hubris:* All too many of us truly and deeply believe our human competences and capacities mean we can run ‘our’ planet and that we have the right to do so. We can’t and we don’t. This is ‘human supremacy’ and it is as dangerous as it is deep seated.

Every day scientists and others add to our knowledge base but there is still a huge amount we simply do not (and perhaps can never) understand: there is a huge range of capacities and capabilities possessed by other species, many completely beyond our imagination. We evolved within that amazing plenum, we cannot and must not rely on our limited understanding and managing of it.

*Mistaking the nature and role of Economics:* Economics is not a science. It is a hotly contested social science containing radically different beliefs about the nature and role of money, of governments, of markets, of our planet, and of human nature. Any economic orthodoxy reflects the interests of the powerful: today’s orthodoxy is a major factor in the damage being wrought on our planet, particularly its calls for constant ‘growth’. The beneficiaries are Big Business and its financiers.

We can usefully note that Capitalism is not the only form of market economy, and remember that what matters to us is not the wellbeing of capital but of people and the plenum. And that our wellbeing owes a lot more to us nurturing our ability to be content with what we have than our ability to buy yet another T shirt.

### **Dangerous thinking traps**

Even when we are noticing these six vital issues and taking them into our thinking about the future there are thinking traps we can fall into. Here are a popular five!

*We confuse complicated problems with complex ones.* This has been described as the difference between a puzzle and a mess. A puzzle has a solution, finding it may be challenging but there is one. A mess doesn’t. A mess is a system in which a number of puzzles interact with each other with unpredictable results. Instead of relying on logical searches for ‘the solution’ to a mess we must explore and experiment and find better and worse ways of approaching it. But in the last three decades (largely with the advent of computers) we’ve lost the art of handling messes, instead we’ve taught those computers how to use complicated but logical algorithms. We need to relearn how to ‘muddle

elegantly' through a mess. (Russell Ackof coined the distinction between puzzles, problems and messes; Charles Lindblom the concept of muddling through elegantly).

*We think Governments, like households, can only do and buy things if they have the money to pay for them.* Governments with a credible currency of their own can spend as much money as they like on whatever projects will yield a return that is of genuine value to people's lives. (A healthy planetary climate is of the greatest value imaginable). The only beneficiaries of governments keeping their expenditure low are the very wealthy.

*We think putting a price (a tax) on something protects it.* It doesn't. It reduces its worth to that of everything else of a similar price. If something needs protecting it should instead be awarded legal protection, even 'personhood'.

*We believe cities are good for our climate-* but only some of them are. Those that form part of a vibrant interactive society/economy with local towns, villages and countryside can add value. Too many *extract* value from their hinterland instead. In our rush to revivify our countryside we must be very careful what kinds of city we create.

*We think there is only one set of behavioural ethics* – but there are two ('commercial' ethics and 'guardian' ethics, see Jane Jacobs) and it's vital not to let them get entangled with each other, forming a 'monstrous hybrid'. The two have become very much entangled over the last 30 years and this is dangerous. (You need much more explanation of this! See the paper itself).

### **Different mindsets about tackling climate change**

Here are three different mindsets we can come across among those seeking to address the problems our planet faces.

#### *Market mindset*

The dynamism and discipline of markets offer the incentives we need if people are to put their energy and resources into finding solutions. If governments set targets and offer incentives, companies will compete to develop the most effective ways of decreasing problem emissions and biodiversity loss.

Economic growth will still be vital but we must find ways of dematerialising it, so it does not involve physical materials but still satisfies human needs: you want a holiday exploring wildlife on the Masai Mara – we'll give it to you using immersive 3D.

Yes, corporations right now are major sources of emissions, of waste, of desecration of biodiversity, but since 1980 their only goal has been maximising profits. Given clear 'green' goals they will use their amazing energy and technological know-how in these directions as well.

It is corporations that have transformed our world, lifted millions out of poverty, fed and clothed them. Now we only need to refocus (and perhaps police) them. In reality it's the only game in town, we need to treat their leaders as heroes and encourage them to live into that role.

### *Society mindset*

Market economics has not so much met our needs as fueled them, it's given us a set of ever more selfish, urgent desires that offer no lasting satisfaction, and have proved lethal for the planet. We know what it is that leads to people feeling fulfilled and it isn't incessant consumerism, it is relationships, a balance between work and leisure, a sense of security and of fairness, of achievement. Only if governments play an active role can those be delivered: a role shaping the business environment, offering high quality universal services, caring about unemployment figures and the kinds of jobs on offer, and sharing a sense of responsibility for our wellbeing.

We must harness the energy and dynamism of markets but contain them within a framework led by governments which serve the wider interests of society. Effective solutions will need large long-term investments in the interests of the whole of society. This is beyond the capability of companies; it needs the standing and broad reach of governments.

### *Planet mindset*

Yes companies and governments have parts to play but they focus primarily on the needs of only one of Earth's species: us. We need to have a healthy, living Planet, teeming with life of all sorts. How funny that we can even imagine a planet designed and run by us! Earth is way too complex for that, we understand only a fraction of its innumerable inhabitants and the contribution they make to our atmosphere. 2-300 years ago we had no conception of bacteria, of cells, of the periodic table, of Einstein's revelations. It's inconceivable that what we know now is all there is to know.

We need to tread with humility and care. Not with a Master Plan and a cascade of work programmes, not with a set of financial or other instrumental values in our heads, but inching forward on a number of different fronts observing as we go. We'll start to see things very differently: for example terms like Return on Investment will come to involve a wide consideration of how the *Earth* will benefit from an activity we are considering.

Exactly what this will look like we can't know, and this is scary. Yet if we understand that our knowledge is limited and that Earth is more amazing than we have the senses to be able to imagine, we will move, forward thoughtfully, with care and caution and great concern for all the occupants of our planet.

### **So what? Where does this thinking get us?**

In our daily newsfeeds we will find proposals from people in each of these mindsets who are genuinely trying hard to address our climate crisis – how do we know which to support and which to be wary of?

We can ask ourselves which of the six fundamental causes they address: do they address some without harming the others, or do they cause further harm to some as they address others? The latter we must surely oppose (gracefully, convincingly, firmly). Are they falling into any of the thinking traps? And which mindset they are operating from (how can we respond without alienating or endorsing).

Very often (not always) *proposals from the market mindset* focus only on reducing carbon emissions. Indeed, many of their big-tech solutions require human annexation of yet more land (causing yet more damage to nature's plenum). Yet leaders of these companies have the ear of government and intergovernmental decision makers so we must not alienate them but help them want to use their power, influence, energy and resources in healthy directions. Seeing them as villains will be counterproductive. Interesting them in the dangers of human supremacy and neoliberal economics will almost undoubtedly be a step too far. Interesting them in devastated landscapes, over-population, and even inequality will be easier, but it will be vital to engage them in concern for the plenum also. Framing our objectives like this gives us a greater chance of success.

*People in the society mindset* are more awake to all of the first four causes but are often still oblivious to the dangers of human supremacy and that of the economic system.

But people in the market and society mindsets understand each other even if they disagree. *People in the Planet mindset* are different – they have undergone what Thomas Kuhn called a paradigm shift, they can no longer see the other mindsets as at all possible. As they come to realise the hugeness of this shift they can feel grief, horror, despair, but also a liberation and a purposeful humility – and a strong desire to address all six fundamental causes.

### What is the future we are aiming for?

We don't know, we can't know. There are exciting enabling futures possible, and terrifying ones, and everything in between. We might just possibly be able to imagine:

- a shift from global to regional economies
- rewilding half of the planet
- being content without all the 'mod cons' of the Western lifestyle
- a 15-hour working week and radical changes to what we do with our time (in place of working and shopping)

But we will also be able to imagine an ever-growing global population suffering mass homelessness, starvation, attempted migration and boundary-protecting warfare

### No, it's not realistic

Of course it is not realistic to expect a complete change in the way national and international leaders see the world. It is not realistic to expect people to be able to imagine the kind of life that uses hugely less energy. It's just not any less realistic than maintaining the status quo which will assuredly lead to the displacement and deaths of millions and a completely unpredictable precarious life for our grandchildren.

There are no 'realistic' options. There are exciting enabling futures possible, and terrifying ones, and everything in between. And yet we have to move forward. Accepting that is both terrifying and **liberating**. It is what gives us permission and energy to think and act differently – and indeed requires that we do. It is up to us as much as anyone else to think freshly about what might work, what might help, what definitely won't.... and discuss these with others. We will need to accept that it is not necessary or possible to know what to do, that it is enough to know what not to do.

Our duty, to our children and grandchildren and succeeding generations as well as to the vital vibrant plenum of which we hope they will still be a part, is to be clear about what to avoid and open to everything else.

**Read the whole (much more interesting) argument here**

*The next thinking project is to explore a range of viable futures – the means of getting to them will be ‘unrealistic’ but imagining them may be energising – and help us think about how to lead our own lives now.*

*Would you like to be part of that? Do get in touch: [v.iles@reallylearning.com](mailto:v.iles@reallylearning.com)*