

**NEXT  
LEVEL  
CLIMATE  
THINKING  
AND  
ACTION**

CLIMATE  
ACADEMY

Chapter Twelve  
**The Psychology of Climate Change**  
Part Two

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## Reflection Number Six

### Dodgy heuristics

In a recent study, in *'Frontiers in Psychology'* the lead author Patrick Sörqvist exposes how poor much of our thinking is when we are trying to act ecologically. He comments: "Some groups have found that people intuitively think the environmental burden of a hamburger and an organic apple in combination is lower than the environmental burden of the hamburger alone."



Dr Sörqvist, is the research director of Environmental Psychology at the University of Gälve (Sweden, although you might have guessed from the number of umlauts). His deployment of cognitive and social psychology techniques and methods to unpick the workings of our thinking about environmental issues is part of a growing field of research at important level of the crisis.

Most of our thinking about sustainability, like so many aspects of life, is based on "heuristics". Namely, "Heuristics is any approach to problem solving or self-discovery that employs a practical method that is not guaranteed to be optimal, perfect, or rational, but is nevertheless sufficient for reaching an immediate, short-term goal or approximation. Where finding an optimal solution is impossible or impractical, heuristic methods can be used to speed up the process of finding a satisfactory solution. Heuristics can be mental shortcuts that ease the cognitive load of making a decision".<sup>1</sup>

The problem, however, with using 'an educated guess' to make our decisions relating to climate change is that we simply do not have a good education in sustainability. So, when this is added to the background biases of our cognitive apparatus, it leads to some thought-provoking insights about our green thinking.

It is worth quoting a full extract from Sörqvist's article, "*Psychological obstacles to the efficacy of environmental footprint tools.*"<sup>2</sup> "While heuristics can yield accurate assessments of the true nature of things, when used inappropriately, they can also lead to systematic biases in the human cognitive system. For example, people tend to overestimate their climate knowledge (Thaller and Brudermann 2020); they believe more strongly in global warming on hot days (Joireman *et al* 2010) and tend to think that larger appliances consume more energy than smaller ones (Cowen and Gatersleben 2017). Evidence suggests that people intuitively think that the carbon footprint for red meat combined with a side dish labelled 'eco-friendly' is lower than for the red meat alone, possibly believing that the low carbon footprint side dish somehow compensates for the environmental burden of the main course (Gorissen and Weijters 2016).

Even if people have a reasonably good understanding of the difference between a regular and a hybrid car with regard to the vehicles' environmental cost, they intuitively think that adding hybrid cars to an existing car pool does not add to the pool's total environmental burden (Kim and Schuldt 2018). It has been shown that people often rationalise environmentally harmful actions by pointing out other things they do that are better for the environment (Hope *et al* 2018).

One of the primary cognitive biases that underpins these psychological effects of environmental footprint labelling seems to be that people seek an average when they attempt to process complex

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heuristic>

<sup>2</sup> Patrik Sörqvist *et al* 2020 *Environ. Res. Lett.* **15** 091001

stimuli that comprise both environmentally friendlier and more environmentally harmful components (Holmgren *et al* 2018a). For example, when asked to estimate the environmental impact of a set of buildings, people accurately assign a lower value to buildings with a low carbon footprint compared to buildings with a higher carbon footprint. However, they also report that the environmental impact of the two sets of buildings combined is lower than the buildings with a high carbon footprint alone (figure one). This averaging bias makes the perceived environmental impact of a set of items decrease when items with low carbon footprint are added to the set, whereas in reality the absolute environmental impact levels increase.”

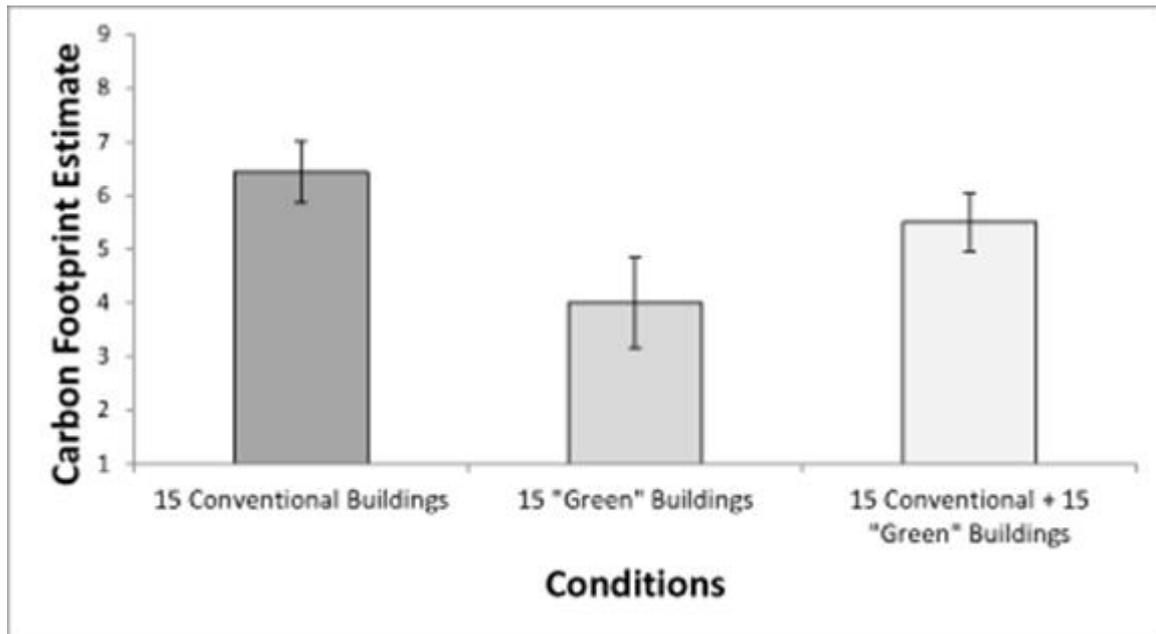


Figure one<sup>3</sup>

## Reflection Number Seven

### Psychic Numbing

One of the hazards of having young children living with you at home is that they can sometimes grab your phone when you are not looking and play various pranks with it. I am still suffering from the time my son discreetly took mine and then spent about an hour “liking” hundreds of Instagram posts about cats. Given that I am not such a big user of Instagram, my metadata suddenly lurched into an utterly different profile. From being occasionally interested in jazz and classical music, tennis and football, “dad jokes” and (of course) climate activism, in one sudden and sustained flurry of finger tapping I became a cat addict.

<sup>3</sup> Mean carbon footprint estimates assigned to a set of conventional buildings, a set of 'green' buildings, and to a complex set of the combination of the conventional and 'green' buildings. Vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Adapted from 'Averaging bias in environmental impact estimates: Evidence from the negative footprint illusion,' by M Holmgren, H Andersson, and P Sörqvist, 2018, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 55, p. 51.

Of course, he knows that one of my pet peeves is cats.

I know I am outnumbered in this unease about cats by millions, probably billions of people. They are very fluffy, playful and (apparently) charming and enchantingly hard to predict – and so it was not difficult for my son to find Instagram cat and kitten posts.

The global metadata of Instagram is a probably one of the best guides to human psychology that there is. Any alien visitation to the planet would be smart to start with their survey of humankind by looking at it. Essentially, we like cute and happy, we like smiling and laughing. We like cuddly and funny, sunny and yummy stuff.

And by its omission, there is one thing that is clearly not popular: mass human suffering.

In fact, we cannot even wrap our heads around it. This is known as “psychophysical numbing”.<sup>4</sup>

The term, was coined by Professor Paul Slovic to capture the fact that people cannot connect on an emotional level when they are shown big numbers.<sup>5</sup> Psychic numbing was undoubtedly in play when the BBC reported on the fact that two thirds of the giant ice fields in the Himalayan and Hindu Kush mountain ranges would disappear if rapid reductions in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were not achieved.<sup>6</sup> This outcome would critically endanger 250 million people living across eight different countries. Indeed, *half* the ice fields would be turned into bare rock by 2100 if temperatures reached 2°C by the 2100. Given that we are on track for about 3°C, this is a big deal for the lives of a further 2.56 billion humans who depend on the rivers that flow from these glaciers for their food and water.

"This is the climate crisis you haven't heard of," said Philippus Wester of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), who led the report. "Impacts on people in the region, already one of the world's most fragile and hazard-prone mountain regions, will range from worsened air pollution to an increase in extreme weather events. But it's the projected reductions in pre-monsoon river flows and changes in the monsoon that will hit hardest, throwing urban water systems and food and energy production off kilter".<sup>7</sup>

If our emotions are so quickly enflamed on Instagram for a furry kitten that is sitting in a box, and if we are caught by a sharp flash of concern for someone who is about to land very badly from a short flight off a skateboard, how do explain our emotional reaction to this piece of research? Absurdly, it only briefly made it into the Top 10 “Most Read” articles on the BBC website that day.

Professor Slavic would remind us that a significant part of the explanation for our lack of response is that such numbers are, literally, unimaginably catastrophic. We are psychically numbed by them.

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4 Slovic, P., “*Psychic numbing and genocide*”, Psychological Science Agenda (November 2007)

<sup>5</sup> The term is new, but the thought isn't. Stalin is reported to have said, “One death is a tragedy. A million deaths are a statistic”. There is no evidence that Stalin actually said this, but if he did, he was probably quoting from an essay written by a German satirist and pacifist, Kurt Tucholsky in 1932. In the essay a fictional French diplomat comments "The war? I cannot find it to be so bad! The death of one man: this is a catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands of deaths: that is a statistic!"

<sup>6</sup> Sharma, E. *et al.* (2019). *Introduction to the Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment*. pp1-16. In: Wester, P., Mishra, A., Mukherji, A., Shrestha, A. (eds) *The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment*. Springer, Cham.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92288-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92288-1_1)

<sup>7</sup> Feb 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019: “*Climate Change: Warming threatens Himalayan glaciers*”. Matt McGrath.

## Reflection Number Eight

### Looking under the rug

A basic feature of human psychology is how permanent the material world seems. This is normally quite helpful as it teaches us to not walk into walls and to avoid the front face of an on-coming bus.

However, even a short conversation with a Physicist or a Buddhist who is happy to talk about more than just the surface of things will open up a weird world of uncertainty and flux that lies beneath. Their disciplines are both tuned into a wibbly-wobbly world that lies at the root of things. They can see beyond our solid world.

Physicists have their jars of Brownian motion, walls with a double split, boxes with cats, and tubes 27km long for particle acceleration. And Buddhists have their Bodhi tree, in the shade of which an indepth psychology can expose all the cogs of human life and (un)happiness.

Everyday men and women, without the help of these piercing instruments of science or reflection only get to see at a general, summary level. Yet, behind the hard aggregate level of reality, things really are odd and spookily loose.

Not that Physicists or Buddhists are freaked out by this. They feel safe at the surface level. Yet both of them will inform you that an understanding of the deep makes their life so much more fruity and fulfilled.

Maybe there is something to learn from them? Perhaps an engagement with the flux of the true nature of things can help us get things right at the surface level too? (Disclaimer: this will not help any clumsy oaf avoid a brick wall, or a reckless jaywalker avoid an oncoming bus).

Indeed, an appreciation of the fundamental impermanence of matter could in fact help us avoid triggering catastrophic tipping points in nature.

Honestly.

But first, let's keep things local and simple.

#### **The individual**

With a funky bit of biological introspection we can see a shocking truth about how profoundly we are constantly changing. If you were to look at that cheeky young smile of yourself as a three year-old, it might trigger a charming little memory.

That person, however, does not exist anymore.

All the blood cells, gut cells, nails, hair... it has all gone. That self is no longer here (I will leave the notion of "here" in place, so we don't spiral out of control). The trillions of cells that belonged to you at three years old are all now part of something else, apart from your brain cells and a few other bits. Some specks of 'your' carbon might be stuck in the mud of a wheat field in northern France, a fleck of 'your' phosphorus might have made it onto the end of the matchstick that lit the candles on Beyoncé's birthday cake last September. Who knows?

Thankfully, these cells get replaced — gut cells every two–nine days, red blood cells every fourmonths. Interestingly, our hair grows at 1cm per month, and our fingernails at 0.3cm per month — which is the same speed that the gap grows between the North American and European tectonic plates. During Trump's presidency that speed might have increased a bit.

The point is that the three-year old in your mind's eye is gone. It is not like there is a core 'you' in there, that just got inflated. That 'you' does not exist anymore. Shockingly this poses a big question, in what sense do 'you' even exist now? It is not like that that process of constant flux is on pause whilst you read this article. For those interested in following these rabbit holes into existence any further, the insights of the Buddha into suffering (dukkha), impermanence (annica) and no-self (annata) are a great entry point.

What the Buddhists understand with such clarity, is that everything is constantly changing. But because of the habits and limits of our brains, we fix onto the illusion that they are permanent. Letting go of the illusions at the surface level is the key to genuine happiness.

### The global

Now let's go big.

There is the mobility of all your different body cells, and there is the mobility of the coastlines. It is true they move about over time rather more slowly, but they move none-the-less.

If you were hanging around northern Europe in 16,000BC, an area called Doggerland was really the place to be. This is because it was a mammoth hunting ground (both mammoth in size, and full of Mammoths.) We know this to be true because today there are deep sea trawlers that comb the area looking for seafood, and they very often find flints in their dragnets, along with all the fish and chips.

Between 16,000BC and today, something changed. It was a slow change, but it was a major change. That change was 120 meters of sea level. With the help of this graphic from National Geographic below, this ancient landscape can be made clear.

If you would like to travel forwards in time instead, you can visit NASA's website and click on their "Time Machine" simulations. There you can find the coastlines that will be redrawn in Europe, America, and Asia as the sea levels rise in line with our future emissions.

It is a bit of a jolt to our imaginations, but there is absolutely nothing permanent about the current sea levels. Yes, they have been with us for a few thousand years, but they do not have to stay where they are. The sea is not that bothered about where we have built our cities, it will not politely hold back whilst we take the time to reorganise ourselves.

Indeed, the shape of our coastlines are not just a matter of planetary decoration. Whole Pacific civilisations will be lost with just a 1.5°C rise sustained over enough decades. A rise of just 60cm (projected by 2100 on very conservative estimates) will displace a third of the entire Bangladesh population and it will cause havoc for crops and fresh water supplies far upstream on the Mekong River as it becomes salinated. A sustained 3°C temperature rise will spell the end for some of our most populous cities, from Miami (2.7million) to Osaka (5.2m), from Hong Kong (8.4m) to Rio (1.8m), and from The Hague (2.5m) to Alexandria (3m) and Shanghai (17.5m).



## Conclusion

An understanding of 'impermanence' ("annica", if we flip back into Buddhist mode for a moment) is so important. It keeps us modest, both about ourselves and about our civilisations. Personalities, empires, landscapes, economies, they all rise and fall.

Quantum Physics and Buddhist wisdom teach us the importance of getting beyond the surface of things. It is disorientating and quite unnerving to see what lies beneath. But if we were brave enough to let go of the illusion of a permanence we could all look forward to a much happier and prosperous future.

Indeed, allowing ourselves to genuinely see the truth about how deep change goes is not just mental. It would also have some profound material consequences too. In a consumer culture in which desire and self-image are the core drives to so much resource extraction, having a deeper consciousness about the true self would weaken our impulse to continually invest in the empty illusions of 'me', 'more' and 'now'.

## Reflection Number Nine

### *Status Quo Bias*



A basic human instinct is to stick to what you know you have, rather than to risk it on possible future gains. Modern psychology calls it '*Status Quo Bias*', which is not a preference for three chord music and a perm, but a known feature of human decision-making which tends to perceive *any* change as a loss.

This bias is certainly one of the reasons for our inertia to implement the legislative and infrastructure required by the crisis.

## Reflection Number Ten

### On Having Heretical Thoughts



We all find it a bit bemusing to look at bumptious blokes from the past. Their sense of fashion just seems far out - their pompous clothes, horrendous hair and pretentious poses.

Here is a good example. King George III of England.

Like all royal portraits, this one has framed him with all the plump and luxuriant comforts that his enormous wealth and power provide. There is a serious amount of 18<sup>th</sup> century bling on show here. These status symbols do not have much resonance with us. It just all looks a bit fluffy.

It is therefore a bit weird to think that in the months leading up to the American War of Independence, there was a really difficult psychological battle going on in the minds of the colonists. Cutting the umbilical cord on the motherland, Britain, was not just a simple act of surgery. There were all kinds of deep psychological issues involved in such a severance from the ties of history and culture. This conflicted mindset can be seen all over the historical documents of the time.

They were torn. On the one hand, they were aware that in exchange for paying a lot of taxes they were not getting a lot back in return from London. They were not even getting a vote. On the other hand, King George was the figure head of a whole empire of meaning, or what we might now call 'a symbolic order'. It would just be too weird, unthinkable even, to dismantle such a deeply established set of norms - a kind of patricide.

The USA today is such a big global fact, it is hard to imagine how stressful this separation from the United Kingdom was.

Especially when we look at King George III. What? You say. That guy, with that wig? How could he hold such a symbolic hold over the imaginations of so many independent minded people?

Yet somewhere, we all instinctively hold a basic faith in government. Deep down, somewhere close to that innate trust that children have in their parents (no matter what they are actually like), we have a fundamental confidence that a government is on our side. In fact, the bigger the problem, the more unthinkable it would be that they are not dealing with it. How could advanced, technological societies, with open and democratic governments allow something so utterly catastrophic to happen?

They just wouldn't, would they? Surely.

There was a key moment in the build up to the American War of Independence. It was a psychological tipping point for the colonists; it happened with King George III's response to the 'Olive Branch Petition'. The colonists had written a letter to their monarch, under the belief that he would cut through all the messy, lethargic responses that the London Parliament had made to their very reasonable requests for recognition. They believed that the King just needed the chance to show true wisdom and leadership...

Therefore, it was rather crushing when he just blanked them. When King George III did not even look at the Olive Branch Petition, all hope was lost. Revolution was inevitable. A new geopolitical order was essentially born at that moment.<sup>8</sup>

Although we might be a bit cynical about governments, have we really squared up to the truth that they are not just being a bit negligent, but profoundly negligent? Are we ready to admit that we could be living in a system of politics and in an economic model that not only permits climate catastrophe to happen, but is actually accelerating it?

## Conclusions

We must not laugh too loudly at the pomposity of the painting of George III. We should be modest enough to note our own psychological conditioning. The limits and disadvantages to monarchical rule are now clear to us, but are we prepared to examine our own systems of power and wealth with the same probity?

Climate change has happened under the watch of democracy, capitalism and surging technological innovation. All three of these things, for different reasons, are wired to accelerate consumption and material economic growth. It feels heretical to call any of these three things in for questioning, especially given that they have been responsible for so much social and material prosperity in the past. However, the emphatic upward swing of all the climate graphs insists that something is profoundly wrong with the *status quo*.

We always need to remain alert to the weaknesses and dangers of different regimes of power, even if they have other good qualities (like curly wigs, or booming economic growth). We need to be ready to challenge them when the common good is so obviously and fatally neglected.

If we do not manage to cut emissions down to dramatically lower levels in the immediate future, then future generations in 300 yearstime will be fully entitled to laugh at our odd enthrallment with people such as Elon Musk, whose vast displays of wealth were somehow understood to be for our common good.

Cultures shift, but the basic riffs of human psychology remain the same.

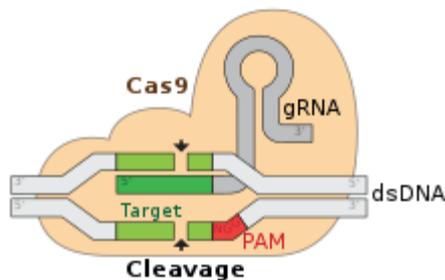
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<sup>8</sup> A full exploration of this moment of human history can be found in "*Paine Tackles Climate Change*". Thomas Paine wrote a remarkably perceptive work, "*Common Sense*" (1776) that is wonderfully resonant for the climate crisis today.

## Reflection Number Eleven

### The divorce between science and the senses

As already extensively discussed in the previous chapter on Paradigm Shifts, there is a huge gulf between advanced science and our human senses. The first Biologist, Aristotle, spent some of his research time studying the mechanics of frogs' legs. He will have used a sharp knife to cut open their bodies as he sat at his table somewhere near the waters of Pyrrha lagoon on the island of Lesbos.



Today, there are biologists who can edit strings of DNA. The “CRISPR-Cas 9” (recognised by the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2020) is a breakthrough in genetic technology that is simply staggering. This is true both in terms of its remarkable precision and in its revolutionary potential. CRISPR acts like a GPS to locate some specific regions of a gene, and the Cas 9 Protein then acts like a pair of molecular scissors to cut the gene with astonishing accuracy.

If we could zoom in on any one of our DNA, it would be evident that a gene holds coded information. Patterns that biologists have named with the four letters: A, C, G, and T. For a long time, it has been known that errors in these long nucleotide patterns can generate the wrong protein and trigger a disease. The problem was that we just did not have a pair of scissors small or sharp enough to do the editing.

Now, remarkably, with CRISPR-Cas9, we have them.

Therefore, after the identification of a mutant nucleotide we can now eliminate and then substitute them with the correct sequence. CRISPR is built to recognise and to heal a sequence with errors, before Cas 9 moves in to do the genetic surgery. Once in place, natural cellular correction systems can replicate the fix throughout the organism, and the doctor is able to say the word “cure” to the patient.

CRISPR-Cas 9 has given humans the remarkable capacity to do genetic origami at a divine level. We now have the power to produce tomatoes that don't rot, crops that could resist drought, or mosquitoes that are unable to spread malaria. Perhaps in the future we could ask the CRISPR-Cas 9 to stitch together the correct coding for an extinct species. It could be as simple as A,B,C. Well, A,C,G,T.

The progress of science into the insanely micro and the cosmically macro aspects of the universe should be celebrated as amazing feats of human ingenuity. However, the downside is that this gap between everyday sensory knowledge and the advanced abstractions of technical knowledge makes it very difficult to communicate some key truths about what we understand. It simply doesn't matter how many props you throw at a Physicist who works in Quantum Mechanics, the realities of the sub-atomic world can only really be captured in complex algebra.

Science now happens at several levels of abstraction, far beyond human imagination.

It is true that climate change matters because of the droughts it will trigger in Djibouti, the floods it will cause in Florida and so on. Yet, fundamentally, all this is known in abstract graphs of the past and the algorithms of scenarios for the future.

And that gap can make climate change very tricky to connect with.

## Reflection Number Twelve

### The grammar of our thinking

There are some things that just don't need justification. There are values and principles that are just 'given'. Every culture has them. They are so basic they are like reflexes. These values make up our spontaneous, immediate responses to situations. They are embedded into our psychology in a way that is so natural, we can easily forget that we hold these as organising principles of our thoughts and actions.

For this reflection, we are going to call them the grammar of our thinking.

We all know how grammar works, even those who don't know it. This includes me.

For whatever reason, perhaps because I grew up in the UK, perhaps because it was the Eighties, but I never really learnt grammar. I learnt how to underline a verb and a noun in colour, but there was never any extensive mapping of the rules. The details of the Past Perfect Continuous Tense were left on the side as we got into novels, creative writing and poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Yet I was able from a very young age to use pretty fluent English. Before school, my parents never sat me down to explain what a pronoun was. But like every child, I could effortlessly switch between "I" and "you" when presented with questions like, "Would you like more ice cream?", replying without hesitation, "Yes, I do". In fact, if you ever try to explain to a child what "me" or "I" means, explicitly, it quickly turns into a farce of finger pointing and naming. So underneath the surface of basic social interactions, something quite sophisticated was going on. The game of grammar was in play.

These rules of grammar are embedded in every sentence. They make meaningful communication possible. They do not have to be explicitly understood, but wrong feel everything when sentence a follows engagement rules not. But even here, memory and mental gymnastics help can everything sort out.

These rules of grammar in linguistics are also in operation with our moral thinking. We have values sunk so deeply into our psyche that they do not require explanation or justification. They are just true. They are just there. So, a bottle of shampoo can just sit there on a supermarket shelf and tell us, "You are worth it", and somewhere it triggers an instinctive recognition of a game which wants to answer "Yes I am".

The brightest stars in the constellation of our current value system are: Freedom and choice, self-fulfillment and enjoyment. Our lives are influenced by these values whether we like it or not. At

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<sup>9</sup> Well, that has been my excuse anyway, for never really getting a proper grip of a foreign language.

night, when they are most visible, they mark the key reference points of our dreams – and we are told what to dream about in adverts, on TV and in the cinema. Of course, we can dismiss our dreams as fantasies; we can imagine that they have no real impact on our daily lives. However, just like the stars which still shine during the cover of daylight, the values of capitalist economic systems are persistently there whether they are clearly visible or not.

Perhaps it is easier to see them by looking back in time to a culture which had a different set of fundamental values. Consider this famous poster from World War One. “Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?” asks the child. This poster would make no sense without an entirely different constellation of values in place. Imagine an advertising campaign today, “Daddy, what were you doing when the latest Tesla Model T came out?” Or, “Daddy, what were you doing when the 20% reduction on all package holidays to Portugal was on?”. Such adverts would be tone deaf to the current moral mood. They just would not work.



The poster worked over a hundred years ago. In a time when Feudal moral thinking was still the dominant background, the poster made a powerful appeal to the values of: Loyalty and Order, Sacrifice and Duty. Those who designed the poster, with such a clear structural hierarchy that points like a stable pyramid to the figurehead of the father, knew exactly what might trigger men to get off their seats and join up.

Below is a summary of these contrasting moral values of European culture in a crude tabulated format.

Feudal Moral Grammar						
Loyalty	Obedience	Sacrifice	Order	Duty	Stability	Future
Capitalist Moral Grammar						
Freedom	Choice	Self-fulfilment	Change	Pleasure	Flow	Present

Of course, the values of capitalism are often very explicit. Sometimes they do not need to be uncovered by short reflections in a textbook. Indeed, the morality of capitalism can be found hiding in plain sight: a can coke shouts the imperative, “Enjoy!”, Burger King reminds us to “Have it your way”, Uber invites us to “Move like you want”, and a bottle of perfume calmy states that it contains the Essence of “Joy”.<sup>10</sup> In fact, just like with advertising, it is easy to think that we are immune to the game of what is being set up, we understand ourselves as impartial observers, whilst not realising that at a wider level we are drawn into those rules of engagement.

<sup>10</sup> Or you can get a bottle of Absolute “Joy” if you prefer.

It is no surprise that most political campaigns have the same background grammar as commercial adverts. Those who designed the successful Brexit political campaign did well to focus on verbs and adjectives that emphasised, freedom and choice. Most famously, “take back control” and “change politics for good”. Indeed, it is implausible to pretend that there is a clear divide between our social thinking and our economic thinking. The set of values which creates our political state is similar to the ones that fix the key signature of the commercial state. No politician or CEO can afford to be tone deaf about these things; the dissonances would be as painful as the ones you can hear in this frivolous bit of music by Tim Minchin: “*F Sharp*”.

You don’t need to be a Marxist to notice how “the ruling ideas of any epoch are always the ideas of the ruling class”.<sup>11</sup> The psychology of values explored here are not too many steps away from simple common sense.

In conclusion, this reflection is not written to undermine the importance of freedom and choice. Nobody with an ounce of humanity in them would want to endorse a social *regime* in which essential human freedoms and rights were suppressed or obliterated. It should go without saying that the prominent features of a capitalist society - ‘self-fulfillment’, ‘pleasure’, ‘freedom’ and ‘choice -’ are wonderful things in themselves. It is just that when they become the invisible, unquestionable dogmas of a culture then it is important to recognise them as such. It is a vital step in an open and critical society to bring key assumptions to the surface.

Also, it would be a clumsy exaggeration to assert here the values of freedom and choice function to the exclusion of other values. But perhaps, the continual background effect of these capitalist virtues does make it harder for other values to hold their place. They are amped up to such a high, restless level in our culture, it can make it difficult to sustain a different set of principles.

### **A different grammar of life**

In quieter moments we can understand that being plugged into the imperatives of accelerated growth and consumption creates a society in which individuals feels alienated from themselves and from others. The modern world can provide a real buzz, but it can also create a default drone of restlessness.

Hasn’t the prevalence of choice brought with it an equally prevalent FOMO?<sup>12</sup> Does over-consumption not lead to apathy and cynicism? Do we not crave beauty over banality? Do limits not sometimes bring us to an understanding of what is of real worth?

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<sup>11</sup> From ‘*The German Ideology*’ (written in 1846). Karl Marx labelled the social values of an age as the “Superstructure”, and these would arise from what he termed the economic “Base”. He understood that it was one way traffic, from the Base up to the Superstructure; or in other words, from the material to the mental. He thought that the relationship between the two was natural, or inevitable – Marx did not think that the ruling class operated like some kind of Wizard of Oz behind the scenes.

<sup>12</sup> FOMO: Fear of Missing Out. This anxiety arises from the apprehension that you might be missing out on important information, moments, events, opportunities, of life experiences. This state of mind has been amplified with the growth of social media, which has dramatically increased our connectivity and opportunities to engage – and thereby, also, a huge flow of things that are also impossible to keep pace with.

## Hartmut Rosa

The modern thinker, Hartmut Rosa, puts forward a striking analysis of modern culture. He offers a critique of our capitalist culture that is in a constant state of *acceleration*, and he also points forwards to something powerfully attractive as an alternative: *resonance*.

First, what does he mean by the word “acceleration”? Rosa argues that our economy and culture is dependent on constant material growth, technological acceleration, and intellectual innovation. This ‘dynamic stabilisation’ is driven by what he labels (with a battery metaphor) as the ‘Triple A Approach’ to the world. Namely, “we implicitly believe that the good life consists in making more of the world available, attainable and accessible.”<sup>13</sup>

Rosa explains that although we live in a world that has minimal ethical restrictions, this does not necessarily lead to a genuine sense of freedom or happiness. His wide zoom view of western history identifies how the Enlightenment loosened the moral ropes on our culture and kick-started a boom in science and technology. Yet, the gains in efficiency and expectation that came with these social shifts had a major background effect on our psychology. These trends got revved up during the Industrial Revolution and accelerated us into the high-speed world of today. Rosa comments that we are “tightly regulated, dominated, and suppressed by a largely invisible, de-politicized, undiscussed, under-theorized and unarticulated *time regime*”.<sup>14</sup>

He argues that “the modern social order can only be maintained through the logic of incessant growth and escalation”. This leads to “the alienating experience of a “frenetic standstill”<sup>15</sup>: the feeling that one must continue advancing and striving harder, at an ever faster rate, and preferably faster than others, without the feeling that one is really going anywhere.”<sup>16</sup> It is probably important to underline the fact Rosa is writing about the entire cultural edifice: from the mind of the boss in his office chair to the mind of the citizen on his pillow at night; and from the internalised expectations of a school and hospital, to the vibes inside a company and charity.<sup>17</sup>

So, what is the antidote to this agitated state?

Rosa writes, “my answer is the concept of resonance.”

It is perhaps helpful to think about resonance by bringing to mind a little trick you can do with a piano. The next time you are alone with a piano, push down the right-foot pedal (the one that lifts the dampening pads off all the strings). Then, sing any note into the body of the piano. Then wait... If you sing a ‘G sharp’ then every single ‘G sharp’ string will start to vibrate and sound, creating an eerie echo of your voice in many different registers. It works with any note.

Rosa notes that in an accelerated culture our experiences of people, culture, work, nature are often “mute, cold and indifferent - even hostile”. He argues that an individual, and the decision makers in society, should not be invested in chasing material gains or the evasive rewards of status symbols,

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<sup>13</sup> “Acceleration and Resonance: An interview with Hartmut Rosa”. p3. [https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration\\_and\\_Resonance.pdf](https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/cmscontent/ASJ/Acceleration_and_Resonance.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Hartmut Rosa, “Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality” (Malmö: NSU Press, 2010), 8. (italics added)

<sup>15</sup> “rasender Stillstand” in German.

<sup>16</sup> Montero, D., “Acceleration, Alienation, and Resonance. Reconstructing Hartmut Rosa’s Theory of Modernity”. Pléyade (Santiago) no.25 Santiago jun. 2020. p3

<sup>17</sup> It would probably be fair to add that this overarching psychological framework is felt as a struggle to stay afloat by those on low incomes, and more as an “affluenza” by those on high incomes.

but should be creating as many opportunities as possible for genuine dialogue. Not with a piano, of course (although, that image is now useful). Rosa insists on the fact that the human condition is most complete when it lives in resonance with “people, things, matter, history, nature and life as such.” It is an approach to life which values openness, simplicity, quality, and authenticity.

Perhaps most bluntly, we should just call it *love*.<sup>18</sup> That state of being where you reach out, vulnerable to the other, and are willing to be moved by it. Returning to Rosa, he qualifies, “Resonance is not consonance, it requires the active presence of something that is beyond my grasp, elusive, and in this sense remains alien.”

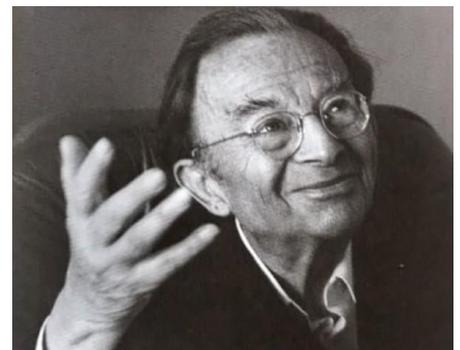
We can experience resonance in our love for our work, or in an aesthetic moment. It can arise when we find connections and buzz in a community or relationships. Rosa admits that such things are not easy to establish, and that the kind of investments of energy and effort have no guaranteed return. Yet, if we reflect on what we genuinely crave, it is this sense of being truly present in the moment.

If Rosa’s language might seem rather too abstract, then the enduringly powerful short book, “*The Art of Loving*” (1956) by **Erich Fromm** provides a wonderfully probing and rich alternative. The New York Times describes this bestseller as “a major work in the field of Psychology”.

“Love isn't something natural. Rather it requires discipline, concentration, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. It isn't a feeling; it is a practice.”

“Modern man has transformed himself into a commodity; he experiences his life energy as an investment with which he should make the highest profit, considering his position and the situation on the personality market. He is alienated from himself, from his fellow men and from nature. His main aim is profitable exchange of his skills, knowledge, and of himself; his "personality package" with others who are equally intent on a fair and profitable exchange. Life has no goal except the one to move, no principle except the one of fair exchange, no satisfaction except the one to consume.”

“Modern man thinks he loses something—time—when he does not do things quickly. Yet he does not know what to do with the time he gains—except kill it.”



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<sup>18</sup> Rosa, a modern philosopher with rather metaphorical language, sometimes refers to it as a “vibrant thread” [*vibrierender Draht*].

## Conclusion

If I am honest, when writing the lines of the last section on Rosa, I am fully aware of how sentimental or unrealistic such a set of underlying values might appear. It would be easy to cynically imagine that they are somehow 'light' or illusory. We are probably quick to think that they do not carry any actual power, compared to the more immediate powers of pleasure and choice. However, these are not just thoughts to be written into framed office posters with a glowing sunrise in the background; they are not composed to be reduced to pithy one-liners for a fridge magnet.

To seek the resonance described by Rosa requires a playfulness, but it also requires real courage. They are not overly romantic views of the human condition; they are born out of a muscular wrestling with the tough realities of modernity. These principles must be taken seriously. We should be willing to drag to the surface what the basic rules we live by are. We should ask the simple question: for what reason do we do anything?

When we are born, we inherit a culture, just as we inherit a language.

Both carry a deep set of assumptions that we use without realising it. This grammar requires a certain discipline to understand and analyse. There are so many layers of psychology to the climate crisis. Fundamentally, we are faced with a question about what our root virtues and values are.

Acceleration or resonance?  
Fear or love?