



To Touch Eternity...

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Abstract

Has humanity's progress been hijacked by a pervasive scientific rationalism that trades spirituality and communality for cold efficiency? If so, does this cultural meme promise anything more than sterile technological miracles that, while solving past problems, ambush our ability to imagine how we might avoid civilized society descending into the barbaric once again? Have we permitted economic growth, wealth creation and the financialisation of almost everything we cherish to become an all consuming obsession, superseding any higher moral purpose? This essay puts a case for curbing our sanctification of industrial economism by reinstating more compelling and empathic narratives as a keystone strategy for the future advancement and survival of the human family.

As old age beckons, many things become clear. Memories occasionally rearrange themselves in curious ways. But in most respects the fog of uncertainty lifts. Subjects considered *urgent* and *important* become profoundly entangled. Cultures, customs and events, distinct in times past, fuse into patterns so dynamic they resist further compartmentalisation.

Solitude comes too – mostly unpredictably, yet always welcome. And, above all else, empathy for others. Incredibly I find myself comforted by the thought of reincarnation in its most literal sense: the fact that while I breathe the dust of previous generations, the atoms comprising my own body, loaned by the ecosphere for a few brief moments in a span of millennia, will decay and endlessly recycle in the provision of nutrients for other creatures in generations to come. This seems to me to be the most perfect way to touch eternity.

But serene empathy can also bring dissonance. Seeing in new ways and stepping lightly into unfamiliar epistemologies have led me to one discomfiting conclusion. The future story of our species is held captive by a form of scientific rationalism in which visions for a better world are most often portrayed as a grand technopolis we are privileged to inherit. While contemporary life has deterred many from venerating archaic deities and other convenient fictions, this new technocratic utopia seduces whole societies into shifting their allegiance away from prelates, monarchs and politicians to a distributed artificial intelligence. This digital presence is held to be a redeemer of past ills and liberator of an incipient promise: nothing less than the genesis of an omnipotent *Homo sapiens*.

The alternative story, a gentler yet compelling narrative of compassion, inspiration and amity in which diversity and difference are virtues to be nurtured, is lost to all but a few enlightened souls – individuals who refuse to consign the joy of what it means to be human to computer programs or sterile numbers. These individuals are the true guardians of humanity.

For the most part these poets, philosophers and indigenous elders, are scorned or ignored; treated as misguided fools by those who do not possess such clarity of insight or who are alarmed at what seems like spirituality on steroids. But when fear shrouds the truth we remain deaf to these voices who warn of impending catastrophe. All but invisible, their cries are becoming fading echoes in the sanctuary of human conceit.

The West chose a technically dominated course in the immediate aftermath of World War II – tethering society's fate to a mix of industrial mechanisms and arcane financial devices that individual corporate greed and self-interest would later unravel, usurp, and use to plunder in the name of progress, freedom and democracy. Almost by default, the rest of the world is following suit – so irresistible is the Occidental promise of a consumer paradise.

Liberating for some, yet tyrannical to so many, the ideology of *industrial economism* is the epitome of scientific rationalism. Thriving on competition and adversity this ideology is bent on the wilful destruction of our most fundamental needs – affiliation, kindness, friendship, gratitude and love.

We are disinclined to admit this fracture in the human story for fear of appearing weak or foolish. Consequently this system, recently branded *disaster capitalism* by activist Naomi Klein, is entrenched within our daily routines to such an extent that we are totally blind to alternatives. Our capacity to pursue a different direction is thus drastically curtailed. It is like inviting a fish to swim without water or a bird to fly without air. So our penchant is to linger as long as we can, addicted to a desire to consume more and more stuff, and seldom concerned that the future we have set in motion and which we embrace with so much zeal will probably destroy more than it can ever hope to create.

The fact is we have spawned a civilisational apocalypse – one that continues to deliver the illusion of increasing health and well-being even as it gnaws away at our collective soul and the resources we need to prosper. Safeguarded by a relatively small number of influential individuals, corporations and financiers, all of whom extract enormous personal wealth from their activities and are therefore disinclined to change their minds, *industrial economism* is the most terrifying of legacies we are bequeathing to our youth. Why? Because nobody can grasp the full impact of its end-game. We can only guess.

What we do know is that while many human beings suffer from starvation, oppression and various forms of deprivation, from which escape seems barely possible, the rest of us live in relative luxury – enjoying a vicarious existence by embracing an assortment of diversions in the hope they will distract us from a reality we cannot bear to confront.

Let us speak the truth as if it mattered and cannot be tainted by self-interest or ignorance. The human race is on a destructive path. We are forcing changes to Earth's biophysical systems with unparalleled power and at an unprecedented rate. In spite of this it is highly unlikely there will be a single devastating tragedy that brings us to our senses. Our ruin is advancing by stealth.

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This was not the plan. There were no predetermined intentions – no divine power perched in the heavens declaring an inevitable outcome for our species. There is no elitist-led conspiracy, not even an alien life-form manipulating events for its own evil ends. On the contrary we have nobody to blame but ourselves. We chose the path and what we created is entirely of our own making. We are our own worst enemy. The sad irony is that much of what we have created has been astonishingly enriching and beneficial.

The power of language and scientific invention, for example, opened up possibilities that are unavailable to other species. But an inherent flaw in human nature meant we were oblivious to unintended consequences. Behaving as if omnipotent, we willingly engineered a path to self-destruction and are now stumbling towards an end-game that we could still avoid.

But we are doing nothing to alter our course. In some ways we seem to be embracing our demise with the kind of insane euphoria observed during the collapse of empires.

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Where did we go wrong? What critical decisions were so impetuously taken and why did we abide by those decisions when we saw them to be corrupt? What forces did we knowingly unleash that, with hindsight, should have been contained? Could it be that our technical knowledge has far surpassed our ability to apply it wisely, the nature of the tools we have invented, or simply a lack of foresight in how to use them to benefit humanity? Has it anything at all, do you suppose, to do with a population of seven billion people competing for limited resources in ways that assume those same resources to be infinite? If so, what should we do about that? Are the more convoluted problems the result of leadership deficiencies, religious fundamentalism, political incompetence and corruption or deep-seated tribal inequities? Or is it possibly the sheer complexity of modern life that seems to extend far beyond the bounds of our capacity to comprehend, let alone manage, with any degree of harmony or flexibility?

I suspect it is none and all of these. Human beings now dominate this planet – of that there can be no question. But we are changing our home in ways that threaten Earth’s ability to sustain us and other life forms. Furthermore we have stopped caring for each other to the extent that our lives have become one prolonged saga of narcissistic preening and of proving ourselves better than our neighbours.

Within this context there are at least three civilizational acupuncture points – together with their related activities – the impact of which we should be analysing far more seriously and with greater granularity – ultimately with a view to reinventing their essential qualities and propositions. These acupuncture points are best envisaged as universal belief systems and can be summarised quite simply as:

1. Our readiness to compete, to the death if necessary, against nature and each other
2. Our proclivity for placing economies and the pursuit of individual wealth above that of assuring ecological resilience

3. Our fascination with money and the politics of self-interest.

None of these constraints are particularly novel. Indeed they have been enshrined within our moral architectures from time immemorial. But they only began to forge a step-change spin on the civilisational worldview following the Industrial Revolution. The main causes for this extreme expansion of our world-system orthodoxies were a series of factors we can group under the collective banner of *globalisation*. In particular:

1. A sudden exponential growth in the size of the human population. This provoked a surge in the demand for goods of all kinds which then intensified and advanced the importance of *competition*. Today *competitive behaviour* is regarded as both virtuous and necessary – a key pillar of any capitalist society and an inherent part of human nature. Although the latter view does not stack up from a purely scientific perspective it is used as the militaristic rationale for why armies should be kept on a constant war footing and to justify why some of us are “better” than others.
2. Access to low cost yet easily accessible manufacturing and distribution technologies meant that more goods could be produced faster than ever before and shipped to countries half way around the world with relative ease. The new demand for goods put unprecedented pressure on small-scale local industries and regional economies, sending many of them to the wall, while dramatically increasing the amounts of energy used and waste generated. This substantially altered humanity’s ecological footprint.
3. The rise of *individualism* as a moral stance created conditions in which the desire for personal affluence, together with its achievement – whatever that takes, now warrants more consideration than ensuring public prosperity. This has had multiple unplanned consequences. Among the more detrimental impacts, two are especially relevant:
 - A shift away from customary social obligations governments accepted in caring for their citizens to a primary role of facilitating commerce and trade has effectively delegated public well-being to impromptu charitable gestures boosted sporadically by cynical populist schemes mostly aimed at keeping political parties in power. Politicians have outsourced compassion.
 - Permitting private corporations to own and control assets that are vital for human survival – including water, seeds, lakes and forests – is a *laissez-faire* recipe for discrimination on a massive scale. Given that the responsibility of corporations as they are currently constituted is to make money for their shareholders, it is absurd to believe these enterprises can also act altruistically on behalf of the community. Meanwhile we must deal with the strategic ambitions of multinational enterprises attempting to control every aspect of our most life-critical systems, such as the food chain.
4. The speeding up and international integration of cultural and economic activities create unparalleled levels of interdependence at every scale – from the individual, to the state, to the human family as a whole. But because the universal driving force is still primarily economic this interdependence has also hastened growing disparities between the wealthiest in our society and a poorer underclass. If these continue to morph into discriminatory practices it is possible a new form of transnational class warfare might result.

5. The ability to communicate instantly with almost anyone, anywhere, for any reason whatsoever has generated massive opportunities to collaborate and innovate. At the same time an all-pervading digital reality seems to be alienating large numbers of people who yearn for greater human contact and intimacy. We do not know what the outcome of this trend could be. In the meantime suicide rates are escalating while children as young as five have their own smartphones and Facebook pages but experience difficulties participating in normal healthy relationships.
6. The dominance and motives of the finance sector in the sum total of economic global activity have allowed financial markets to dominate industrial and agricultural markets. Because profits arise increasingly through financial channels, rather than through traditional trade and commodity production, a new financial elite comprising private equity firms and investment bankers effectively governs operations of the economy at national and international levels.

Recently, all these factors have converged and interacted in ways we could not possibly have anticipated. Or so our leaders continue to insist, thereby excusing their disgraceful lack of moral courage.

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Regardless of where we sit on the continuum between technocratic optimism, like inventor Ray Kurzweill, and humanitarian pessimism, like scientist James Lovelock, it is impossible to deny that these factors, and possibly many more than these, have conspired to generate the circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

Regardless of perspective there is a far more distressing issue with which we must come to terms. It is one combining consciousness and conscience. Fallout from the toxic mix of motivations and activities listed above is rapidly poisoning life on our planet. Yet we still cling stubbornly to the past, refusing to admit the damage we are doing to each other and to the environment, continuing to endorse the same beliefs, and taking no urgent remedial action or even to make minor adjustments to our course. Furthermore, rather than trying to slow things down we are doing exactly the opposite. We are now hurtling to our annihilation.

In the year I was born there were under two billion inhabitants on this planet. By the end of this century I fully expect human numbers to have collapsed to that level once again. Unless we can learn to live with each other more productively than in the past, setting aside partisan views for the common good, conflict and starvation will overwhelm those without access to sufficient food, water, compassion and justice.

Trapped on a tiny planet catapulted way beyond the *Goldilocks principle* that generated conditions not too cold, not too hot, but “just right” for human habitation, we will be forced

to adapt to a situation never encountered by human beings. Should present trends continue it is probable that one half of all species of life on earth will be extinct in less than 100 years as a direct result of habitat destruction, pollution, invasive species, and climate change. We have no idea if we can survive such a transition, much less thrive in it.

So how should we be thinking to forestall that possibility? What can we propose, even now, to avoid crossing critical thresholds that would precipitate a planetary-scale state shift in the global ecosystem – thus extinguishing the civilizational paradigm and sending humanity back to a dark age? In order to present any kind of sensible suggestion in such matters we must examine our three initial acupuncture points to determine how we might nudge these into a more viable state.

1. Fighting Nature and Each Other

Setting aside the idea we are separate from, and superior to nature, and exchanging it for a more realistic credo, require a total transformation in how we think, plan, and act. Similarly, replacing the notion that some of us are inferior in some way and that certain cultures are therefore more advanced than others, with a more empathic view demands a paradigm shift in how we relate to each other in the first place.

Exceptionalism of this kind is irrational hubris. Such beliefs are naive – untenable in an age where science has substantiated the genetic equality of all humans as well as our dependence, along with all living creatures, on nature for our continuing existence.

Unfortunately, we have been living as if biophysical resources are infinite, and that we can do pretty much as we please with other “less advanced” cultures, for so long that we have only the faintest clue what it might look or feel like to act otherwise. Judaic, Islamic and Christian scriptures all teach us that it is our God-given right to conquer the Earth – in return for which we gang up on each other in God’s name.

But while challenging entrenched societal beliefs such as these has always been problematic, we now have one huge advantage over previous generations. Digital social media give us the ability to transcend boundaries and to connect with each other across all stratas of society in campaigning for an awakening to new values.

2. Putting Economies Before Ecologies

In the beginning was The Word. The Word meant *purpose*. Purposeful intentions directed human activity. Originally just a matter of the tribe’s physical survival, human purpose later grew to encompass more mature goals such as security, affiliation, love, self-esteem and personal accomplishments. At the same time social development traced a path ranging from communitarian obligations to the fulfilment of individual needs and self-determination. And there it seems to have stuck...

In Greek philosophy purpose is *logos*. The wisdom of knowing one’s purpose – our *ecology* – meant comprehending how everything that is important fits together in a form that benefits everyone. When the *logos* is clear, comprehensible, and shared by the community as a whole, *nomos* – the laws and rules that enable society to sustain and manage efficiently – can take its rightful place in service of the *logos*.

This sequence is important. Logos is purpose. Only when purpose has been established can nomos act in ways that optimise the purpose. At some stage in our history we forgot this and inverted the natural order. Nomos, the economics of managing the house, became an end in its own right. We lost our way. We lost our purpose. In doing so we neglected what it means to be human and empathic. Now we stand to lose far more than that. Natural resources critical for our survival are under threat.

The only solution I can envisage is one where we all take responsibility for restoring the status quo. We must lobby those in positions of authority to reinstate the natural order in which economics plays a necessary but subservient role to ecologies. We must then also determine a revitalised purpose.

3. The Politics of Self Interest

Most contemporary governments are deficient – in the sense they are no longer able to keep the promise made to their citizens concerning basic public services – including security, full employment, an adequate education and welfare for those in need of assistance, for example. The reason is pretty straightforward. Governments have forgotten their prime purpose – preferring to pander to the media and meddle in affairs in which they have no competence or legitimate role. Yet we put up with it.

Most Western-style governments have been corporatised. While key advisers drift to and fro between government departments and industry, bureaucracies have been forced to abandon their traditional impartiality, morphing instead into agencies acting on behalf of big business. This shift has allowed the wealthiest corporations to buy and exercise control over humanity's most life-critical systems. It allows companies like Monsanto and Syngenta, to monopolise and privatise the supply of seeds. And it permits a mutually beneficial relationship to be preserved between governments and defence-minded enterprises like Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman.

In the former case we need to understand that biodiversity and economic diversity are linked. They are key to providing a large, diverse, genetic pool that enables organisms to withstand and adapt to new conditions. To restore both we must combat the disgraceful economic and political power of agri-business. The need for governments to legislate to prevent large-scale industrial agriculture and agri-food corporations accelerating the loss of genetic diversity, eroding biodiversity and undermining global ecosystems, is paramount.

In the latter case the military industrial complex has constructed an unholy alliance in which war-planners receive the tools necessary for waging an effective war and furthering their political interests abroad, while defence contractors are the recipients of lucrative deals. This relationship must be dismantled as the first step in declaring a halt to conflict.

As I write this article tobacco giant Philip Morris is suing the Australian government to overturn public health laws aimed at reducing teenage smoking. Chevron has hired 2,000 lawyers to avoid paying Ecuador \$19 billion in damages due to the horrific oil spills they inflicted on the country. Bayer is suing Europe to overturn their ban on bee-killing pesticides at the same time as investing millions with Monsanto to defeat an effort to label GM foods in the US.

The monstrous power of large corporations has gone feral. It seems the world's largest and most profitable corporations are determined to defeat any efforts to hold them to account. By investing billions of dollars in dirty legal battles, corrupt backhand payments and lobbying campaigns, big business is taking over our democracies.

"Inaction is no longer an option."

As powerful as these companies may appear, their arrogance will be their downfall. They are ultimately at the mercy of consumers and the general public. Community action can hit these companies where it hurts their profitability. By withdrawing our patronage we also put them out of business.

4. Conclusion

I find no consolation in speaking these truths. I am especially culpable in that I have given life to so many children and grandchildren who must now cope with a situation worsening by the hour. My guilt is multiplied many times because I have foresight of this future. Mine is a terrible burden. And yet I bear it in the hope that I can play a small part in diverting the human family from its current suicidal course.

Addressing these three acupuncture points that allow current toxic belief systems to persist is crucial. Finding solutions that are socially and economically feasible will require all the ingenuity and courage we can muster. So massive are the issues facing us it may seem impossible to know where to start. In truth anywhere will do. Any thoughts, plans or actions aimed at shifting the civilizational framework of beliefs away from their current trajectory will be more acceptable than the alternative. Inaction is no longer an option.

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