

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00):

Good evening. I am back with Frank for this week's Frankly. So what are you 100% certain about? In the world, in your life, what do you have absolute certainty of? I'm going to list some things that I'm 100% certain about and why that is important and why some things I'm less certain about in this week's Frankly.

(00:48):

I am 100% certain that humans are delusional. Social confidence, even overconfidence, has been adaptive and uncertainty takes up our mental bandwidth. So I'm human and therefore I'm delusional and overconfident about some things. So as confident as I am about all the things I'm about to say, it's not really 100%, it's 99 point something, just in case I'm missing something. By definition, we don't know our own blind spots. So I'm less confident than my feelings would suggest. I am 100% certain that those people in our world who are extremely worried about climate change and those people that think our changing climate is either not human caused nor important or urgent, those two groups of people, I'm 100% sure they cannot both be right.

(01:56):

A secondary implication of that is I'm 100% certain that modern culture will never unify its behaviors and policies and actions around climate change or any environmental issue. Something I'm less sure about, but still pretty hefty confident, maybe 80%, 90%, is that the Holocene Anthropocene Thermal Maximum will be a thing that will certainly occur in the coming century and play out over thousands of years, it will be the most significant event in human history barring nuclear war. Though it might take a thousand years to play out, it's going to absolutely become irreversible this century and maybe soon this century, and that this is the actual barrier to the survival of conscious life on Earth. Because once the sequestered methane outside of our control hits the inexorable positive feedback territory, this geological monkey trap that was set for us long before our species even evolved will be well and truly sprung. There are things I don't know, that no one knows about the complexity of the climate system, which is why I'm 80 to 90% sure of this, but it's very under-recognized as having this magnitude.

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In a related note, I am 100% certain that the environmental movement, not only the climate movement but broader biodiversity, species, planetary boundaries is increasingly going to be under threat and pushed aside by the tenuous social, economic and geopolitical situation in the world. I'm less confident but hopeful that knowing this, we can plan two or three steps ahead on behalf of the natural world and use this knowledge as foresight. Related to this, and what was talked about last week's Frankly, and last week's podcast with Geoffrey West is I am 100% sure that humans as individual bodies and as social units in families, towns, cities, nations, have a biological metabolism.

(04:36):

I believe that understanding this is critical to responding and planning for what's ahead. As I mentioned last week, something I'm less sure about but I'm very curious about is can knowing we have a social metabolism change our social metabolism? I am 100% certain that energy, its availability and its cost will enable and constrain human futures. This is not something that's well understood even today because we've had more energy every single year and why should that trend not continue is what most people expect.

(05:25):

What I'm less sure about, but increasingly confident in, is that ecosystem health and stability around the world will also constrain and enable human futures, and that is becoming true by the day. It was 48.5 degrees Celsius this past weekend in Central Africa. It's the first week of April, so this is going to have real effects on global commerce, inequality, agriculture, supply chains are increasingly going to be affected by the warming climate and other environmental concerns. I am 100% sure that so-called renewable energy will not solve our environmental problems. If we "solve" our environmental and other issues, it's going to come from governance, change in incentives, a change in the consciousness of people at a cultural level. However, I am confident, not 100% sure, that some sort of Goldilocks technology between the Astro and George Jetson flying cars sort of thing, and medieval or previous stone tools, something in the middle can improve our human and planetary condition.

(07:00):

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And I'm confident that the battle of our times is not left versus right, but is going to be technology versus ecology in the way which we view our world. And if we just look at the world in a technology lens, I don't think we have any hope. We have to use technology in service of a broader goal of this blue-green Earth and the citizens and denizens that reside on it. I am 100% certain that our global macro situation is such that we are so far from equilibrium with debt and supply chains and geopolitics, that there are no longer any non-radical, non-disruptive pathways back to equilibrium.

(07:52):

I'm less confident that we don't have to have a disaster when this happens. Disruption is part of human history. Because we can't know what will happen doesn't mean that we should accept just doom as a trajectory. There are lots of benign pathways left, I believe. I'm 100% sure that for what we crave and need in our particular evolution as a social species, that after food, water, and shelter are met, that dogs are the best invention ever by humans, even though it was a coevolution, not exactly an invention. I'm 100% sure of that, but... I can't move my camera, but Frank is on the floor here snoring right now. The population of dogs, man's best friends, is now around a billion, growing alongside human population and dogs now weigh as much as all wild mammals on earth. So the point here is even the best inventions have negative impacts when scaled.

(09:11):

I am 100% certain that there exists a fundamental reality that cannot be deconstructed like Donella Meadow's systems framing of reality as an iceberg where what we see is not the entire iceberg, but just what little bit is floating out of the water and the majority of the ice is beneath the surface, including its mass and shape and structure. At times, many of us, most of us forget or at least assume that there is no fundamental reality, no iceberg beneath the surface. And that every bit of reality is a construct bendable to human will and effort usually in the name of human betterment or fixing inequalities or social wrongs. That is not how complex systems work. There are intricate systems that have interdependencies and known and unknown unknowns.

(10:08):

So this hyper-constructivist, postmodernism of if we would only fix, fill in the blank, patriarchy, capitalism, et cetera, fill in the blank, sooner or later these causes become

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nihilistic because explaining the world in that way deconstructs everything and doesn't look how to build back a better reality, but instead, tears down both the good and the bad, throwing the living baby out with the bad bathwater.

(10:46):

So I struggle with that, especially with a multi-issue podcast. This is why I try hard to come at the multiple problems and challenges humanity faces from a systemic, one might say meta-modern lens, trying to understand the realities as best I can to integrate them so that we all have a better map of the territory that we find ourselves in and maybe just maybe we find our way through. I am 100% sure that the way humans in the global North and West live today is but one of many possible ways that humans can live and that it's anomaly relative to the way we lived in the past. I am 90-some percent sure that we might be surprised at how 20, 30, 50 years from now humans living with considerable less energy surplus might really have meaningful, good lives. Assuming nuclear war and runaway climate change don't happen. I am 100% certain that economic growth measured by total global energy and material consumption per year will hit its maximum and decline before the year 2040. And I'm 90% sure it will happen well before then.

(12:27):

I'm far less sure that the end of growth will result in collapse. I think there's a big difference between collapse and what I refer to as a simplification, and this is why this Bend Not Break work is so important. I am 100% certain that we are headed for a world of material scarcity in coming decades for the average person. However, I am also highly confident that the number of people who might experience such an outcome may experience it from a place of abundance is possible. And that is also part of the work because I've seen it.

(13:14):

I've seen so many people that use 10% of our current resources and live really good lives because the people around them are living the same and also they are trained in meditation and music and resonance and other things, which is something that I'm going to continue to explore. So I'm confident there's a difference between material scarcity and mental abundance. I am 100% sure that humans are animals. We are mammals, we are primates, we are great apes, we are predators. We are related to

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every single living organism on Earth through LUCA, Last Universal Common Ancestor.

(14:11):

I'm less confident that people understand the relevance and critical importance of this. Fewer people know what I just said and fewer people still feel it. And in a lonely universe, the animals and organisms that we share this planet with, are our kin and widening the boundary, much like indigenous people have done and continue to do of the self, to include nature and other organisms and ecosystems is one of the pathways forward. I am 100% certain that the beliefs and stories of the 3000 odd religions on Earth are not the literal truth, but the rituals, the gatherings, the singing, the other benefits from the major religions have been highly adaptive. In contrast, science gets most of the facts right, but it doesn't have the benefits, it doesn't have the rituals.

(15:17):

I'm less confident but think the implications of this is that God isn't going to save us. Whichever God someone believes in, they're not coming to the rescue in the human predicament, the Mordor economy, the Great Simplification, we, those of you listening to this podcast, those 8 billion of us hominids alive at this time are the consciousness of the universe. As far as we know, it's up to us. Frank, get down. I'm 100% certain that humans evolved in spurts of cooperation and competition in our evolutionary past. And both of those are part of our phenotype today, depending on the cultural cues we get. But we evolved in communities. We've lost this in the global North and the global West, but this is something I'm very certain about, that each of us has a predilection to cooperate with others and compete with others. And our culture is promoting the latter.

(16:40):

Something I'm less sure about, but still pretty confident about is that expanding the definition of self to others, other people, other cultures, other generations, other species, expanding our definition of where the self begins and ends, in our actions and our behaviors is one of the key pathways forward. I am 100% sure that from this moment, the future, though it has many constraints, is not yet determined. It is emergent. And despite the title and content of this particular Frankly, certainty generally is the mind killer. We have to connect things that are true without

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extrapolating that certainty into things we can't know. I think saying, "I don't know," is something we should be much more used to doing. And in social discourse, not have to have all the answers all the time. I'll make a brief digression here. Last week I was at Bioneers, and Rex Weyler and Nora Bateson led a warm data lab.

(18:03):

And there were about a hundred people, I don't know, maybe more. And we had to get in groups of three or four people. And then she asked a prompt, discuss food in the context of a changing world. Okay. But then we had to look down and everyone had a different setting. There was ecology and politics and family and culture, and you had to discuss food in a changing world in that context. And the first group I was in, I was really interested and I talked about ecology and hormone disrupting things in our food. And then the second group was on politics. We talked a little bit about that. And by the fourth group, I had realized that my thoughts and my eagerness to describe what I thought, had softened. And by the fifth group, I didn't even want to talk anymore.

(19:00):

I was interested in listening. And I think certainty has been adaptive because it builds our status, our identity, et cetera. But along with certainty, we lose the ability to listen to others, which I think is going to be about one of the top five things that we're going to need in coming decades. Last but not least, I am 100% sure of my own values and ethos and principles while I'm alive on this planet and what I care most about in the world, it is nature and my work is in service of life. I am 99% sure that many of you who follow this channel feel the same. And that is something important and nontrivial, and I appreciate it. So I'm pretty certain that this whole little exercise might've been a little confusing, but this is what I thought up over the weekend and I'm certain you will have comments. Thank you. I will talk to you next week.