

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Hello, my friends, I am just this second, uh, back from a trip, uh, where I recorded an episode on energy and climate change on PBS. Uh, it will air in four or five months. Uh, I'm probably, well, I'm definitely still wearing the makeup, uh, that I used. Um. I am changing my priors. Um, you know, we cover ecology and energy and finance and the four horsemen.

[00:00:34] And I think I've underestimated, um, the AI pulse and I've underestimated how soon we might lose the governance that's needed, um, to enact many of the things that we discuss on this channel. Um, and I'm metabolizing and processing what I've witnessing what I'm learning. Um, and in coming weeks, I'm going to unpack that a little bit more.

[00:01:06] On the plane ride back, um, this afternoon, um, I jotted down some questions, some central questions, um, of our time. And, uh, uh, aligned with my ethos and my sensitivity that I don't want to say overly, um, dystopic, uh, predictions or framings without providing agency and, um, things for people to do in our own lives as we engage with the future, I will follow these questions by some questions that might apply to your own life.

[00:01:46] So, in no particular order, um. Some of the central questions of our time on the downslope of the carbon pulse. Um, can there be Some form of open societies said differently. Can we eventually in a post growth sort of way have social arrangements that are not feudalism. We had feudalism before the carbon pulse, and I expect some form of feudalism is the default after, um, said differently.

[00:02:35] Uh, can we acknowledge And, uh, events in our world, um, in the first couple months of the year are suggesting this. Can we acknowledge that governance is at ground zero for the human predicament? So question number one on the downslide of the carbon pulse, can we have some form of open societies? Question number two, can we prioritize life over death, living over killing of, of things?

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[00:03:10] In my Reality 101 course, I ask my students, what's an armadillo for? And there's usually an uncomfortable silence, and then people start raising their hands for a wallet, or for shoes, or an ashtray. Because we, in our culture, are primed to think that things in nature, armadillos, forests, um, ecosystems, can be turned into stuff, monetized, consumed, and discarded.

[00:03:40] They are useful, insofar as they are useful to us. But that's not the reality of life on this planet. What's an armadillo for? Well, on the one hand, an armadillo has intrinsic value in and of itself, just like one of the other 10 million species we share the planet with. But more importantly, at a deeper level, no organism exists in isolation.

[00:04:07] Every individual And every species is part of a complex web of mutualities, which we call and understand today as the web of life. Um, every single creature provides ecosystem functions and plays vital roles without which the whole would not be possible. In the case of the armadillo. They're not for wallets or ashtrays or shoes.

[00:04:36] Um, through their movement and the movement of sediment armadillos help spread seeds and cycle nutrients, uh, aerate the soil. Armadillos burrow, uh, provide temperature and habitat refuge for other animals. Um, there's a lot of different services. Even for lowly armadillo, uh, as it were, and like all species, including humans, armadillos are embedded in relationships that sustain their ecosystems and ultimately life itself.

[00:05:09] And so a related question is, if armadillos one day go extinct, or other animals one day go extinct, will we miss them when they're gone? Because our survival depends ultimately on understanding that no species exists in isolation, least of all our own. Another question, central question, um, are there any intermediate futures possible without a world war?

[00:05:36] We have had relative peace since World War II, um, as the, on the backs of the fossil armies, um, that as the carbon pulse increased, sure there's been violence and, and wars, but a big war, um, has been forestalled because economic growth has risen the tide. That lifted all boats, but now there's Russia, Ukraine, uh, there's things in the Middle East that are bubbling up, um, humans when they run

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into limits and conflict, uh, and large scale game theoretic, uh, frameworks historically have not done well.

[00:06:16] So a subset of that question is, in, is a world, world war possible without nuclear war, uh, without nukes? Maybe a subset of that is if there were a small nuclear exchange first. Then maybe with mass media, we would avoid a bigger nuclear war. I'm not advocating that. I'm, I'm very concerned and curious if we can make it through coming decades without a nuclear war.

[00:06:44] Another central question, given what we know, given the wide boundaries, systemic framing, uh, on this channel, what percentage of our efforts should be going towards these three categories, number one, propping up and extending our current systems and infrastructure, which. I believe is a musical chair sort of scenario.

[00:07:04] Number two, preparing for a bend, not break scenario. And number three is seeding a more sane and sustainable future system. Post simplification. I think it's a central question. How much of our resources time creativity should be directed to those three categories. Another central question, can we somehow maintain and remain in the stability, the ecological biospheric stability of the Holocene period, the many planetary boundaries that we are exceeding now, nitrogen cycles, novel entities, um, biogeochemical flows, climate, um, lots of different.

[00:07:46] Uh, boundaries are being exceeded. We could remediate some of those, um, with a percentage of our surplus redirected back to heal, um, our ecosystems and, and regenerate, um, productive, uh, healing ecologies. We could do it. Um, but it's an open question whether in the next century, even in the next coming decades, we can stay within.

[00:08:14] The stability of the Holocene and a subset of that question is will there be a sixth mass extinction measured by a large fraction of Earth species going extinct? Another central question, can small groups of people all the way up to large societies Organize and prioritize life over power. Power, in the economic superorganism sense, is what is driving our societies right now.

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[00:08:42] It is winning. Um, so I think the antidote to dark triad traits, uh, are groups. Organize cohesive groups. Can that happen at scale? Um, at any scale is a central question of our time. Another central question, will there be a hostile takeover of what I refer to as the economic superorganism by artificial intelligence, small cadres of humans that eventually via artificial intelligence, artificial general intelligence result in earth being kind of the launching pad for an industrial Mordor home base of interplanetary travel for the few?

[00:09:33] I don't know the answer to this. I actually think our supply chains in the real physical world and humans, uh, are such that we might circumvent such a future. I think incompetence, uh, is, is probably under emphasized as, as one of the future path dependencies, but I'm hearing a lot of people talk about things like this.

[00:09:57] Um, the artificial intelligence, As I showed recently, it has pressed the turbo button on the economic superorganism. What's the end game of that?

[00:10:09] Another central question, will the masses of humanity have any voice in the future? And if so, can it be an informed voice? And that is the work of this channel. I am increasingly less sanguine that the masses, us. Uh, we'll have a voice and it's something that deeply concerns me. Uh, and I need to learn more about it and the possible red lines in the future of, of how that might, uh, arise.

[00:10:38] But I think it's an open question that, that we should, um, consider. Um, how many steps away are we from feudalism today in 2025? Last central question, can there be a fifth law of thermodynamics emergent from this cultural species wide rite of passage for our species? So the first law of thermodynamics, uh, is that energy cannot be created or destroyed.

[00:11:07] The second law is the entropy law. There's always a loss, uh, entropy increases. The third law is at absolute Kelvin zero, there is no entropy. The fourth law, uh, of thermodynamics, um, often referred to as the maximum power rule, is that Organisms and ecosystems self organize to access an energy gradient, uh, at an intermediate, uh, point between maximum efficiency and maximum energy access.

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[00:11:39] So I posit a fifth law, which is that humans realize that much of the energy use in our culture is exosomatic, it is outside of our body, and that it's used in the present, but if we can abstractly believe and understand and value in our ethics and our behaviors and our incentives and our laws, the future, we can Thank you.

[00:12:03] In theory, throttle our energy use, suggested by the fourth law of thermodynamics. And we get the feeling of power by dopamine and all the other things. We don't actually need to burn the energy to get the neurotransmitters that our pre hominid ancestors had. I think it's an open question. Deeply embedded in all of my work here on this channel, whether such a, uh, evolutionary step could happen.

[00:12:36] Um, so it's, uh, it's almost 9 PM here and I needed to get this out this week. So this is, uh, a little soft spoken and I'm tired and, and these are ideas I just had on the plane. But let me leave you with these individual, um, ideas for the people, the humans, uh, my colleagues around the world watching this program.

[00:12:58] for your own life. Because again, I increasingly am worried about the future. I think the great simplification may be upon us sooner than I had imagined. Um, I don't know that. Of course, I, I view the world in a probability distribution, but if I'm ever Either unable to talk about what I really believe or if I'm just talking to things that scare people and are depressing without any agency or interventions or ways to improve our situation globally, nationally, in our communities or in your own life, I'll stop doing this.

[00:13:37] Um, but until then, I'm going to be as honest, uh, as I can and speculative, uh, but, um, hopefully as helpful as I can. So here are a few questions in your own life. If you knew the great simplification of some shape, uh, would begin in your neighborhood, your nation. In the next few years, what would you not regret doing right now?

[00:14:04] And if you're clear on that, what is preventing you from doing it right now? Another question, uh, as events accelerate, uh, can you shift the anger and blame that is natural for humans and redirect that energy towards something that makes your future or someone else's future better than the default? A hard question.

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[00:14:28] Um, I struggle with it. Certainly there are a lot of people, organizations, situations that deserve blame for our situation. Um, but I think we, um, do ourselves a disservice by putting all of our energy into blame instead of some pro social organized, uh, collective response. What in your own life is unhealthy or unaligned with life?

[00:14:55] And a resource freedom constrained, uh, future that you could now jettison, that you could get rid of and extricate from your life. One thing, um, and building on that one's, what's one thing that is aligned with such a future that you could adopt, uh, and add to your current routine. I'll, I'll comment on some things that I've changed, uh, in, in the near future.

[00:15:24] Can you build real relationships as opposed to fake or social, social media relationships on the dining car of the runaway train, uh, that is our modern culture that are resilient to the coming AI polarization restriction of current freedoms? Can you start to build those relationships? Maybe start with just one.

[00:15:49] Another question. If pressed, what do you really stand for? Where are your own red lines deep within the core human who is you alive at this time? I ask myself this, uh, quite often. Um, two more questions. Can you befriend the best version of yourself? In the times ahead, because B plus and service of life, you have to be your own friend first and then build outward from there.

[00:16:24] Um, so ask yourself, can you befriend the best version of yourself during these times? Lastly, um, can you start in your community a coalition of sanity? Which is a term my, my friend, Greg, uh, Rufa mentioned, and I really think it's apt. Coalition of sanity. Um, because we're going to need people that are post partisan, wide boundary, principled, diverse, skilled, and unafraid to connect with others like them and rise to the occasions coming our way and the challenges, um, and I think the coalition of sanity.

[00:17:13] is deeply called for in these times. Um, a lot more to come in the very near future. Um, next week, uh, I'm going to talk about some of my prior Bayesian beliefs that are changing and why, um, and what it means for the future. I hope you're all well to be continued.