

The Great Simplification

PLEASE NOTE: This transcript has been auto-generated and has not been fully proofed by ISEOF. If you have any questions please reach out to us at info@thegreatsimplification.com.

[00:00:00] Good morning. I have a lot to say. I could argue too much in too short of a time, given all that yet has to emerge and be done, in our world, Albert Einstein once wrote the formulation of the problem is often more essential than its solution. I think this is especially true today because we live in a time where we can easily find many surface level answers to almost any question, whether that's from the huge amount of confident experts or chat, GPT and ai.

[00:00:38] But I've come to believe that such answers actually will probably only be a minor part of how we navigate the future. Rather, I'm starting to focus more on the learnings and changes that emanate from what we choose to ask and what we choose to notice, which I think both will ultimately inform what we choose to do.

[00:01:04] and I think all of this begins with, as Einstein implied better questions. So every month or so, whenever my notebook fills up, starting with today, I'd like to do a small installment called Uncomfortable Questions in Unstable Times, comprised of five to 10 prompts about our civilizational trajectory.

[00:01:31] Ten's, probably too many, but I always have more to say than five, so probably seven or so. These questions are unanswerable, in a certain sense, but they're also not meant to be rhetorical. rather, I hope that people might use each question as kind of a conversation starter or, deepener. And this series gets at the heart of my shifting theory of change for the work that we do here.

[00:02:01] I don't think the main impact of The Great Simplification platform is gonna be from the information conveyed on the podcast and the Frank's though, that is a helpful step in, in widening the conversation and, speaking the same

The Great Simplification

language. I think the impact is gonna come from the two-way flow of ideas, emergence and response, unknown response from the global TGS community.

[00:02:28] We are midwifing a conversation about the future here and ahead. I hope and already see it's a two-way conversation with a quarter million or so and growing humans around the world. And towards that end, later this week we're gonna be posting, ads for four new positions, including a director of community engagement.

[00:02:54] To connect people more formally online in real life and expand the connective tissue between the people and the ideas and the interventions, needed ahead. It is my hope that in the future these uncomfortable questions can be discussed in more organized groups of people who are fluent in the wide boundary system story and wanna roll their sleeves up and, get to work in their communities, regions, watersheds.

[00:03:23] Parts of the world. But for now, today, before that's possible, I hope, these seven questions are still discussable for you. The listeners of this channel with your friends, family, colleagues, or even just yourself with a notebook and some self-reflection and honesty, I'll give a short lead in for each question.

[00:03:46] Then a clean question, sometimes two, no debate, no grand conclusions, and, Scouts Honor no Lord to the Rings quotes, at least not today. Just some deep and at times uncomfortable questions surrounding the more than human predicament, because I think better questions are a form of preparedness, kind of where I live in midwinter here.

[00:04:12] in Minnesota. In Minnesota, looking at the brake lights, two or three cars ahead of you in a snowstorm instead of the car right in front of you. I didn't quite get to the most uncomfortable questions. I'm gonna save those for next time and see how this goes. Here we go.

The Great Simplification

[00:04:41] Okay, here we go. stability versus growth. For most of our lives, the default setting of our society has been growth and expansion. It's been fully implied and rarely questioned for the most part, more throughput, more complexity, more connectivity, more stuff in the grocery stores on online, more everything.

[00:05:05] Growth wasn't even a policy preference, it was just understood as the operating system of our. Society, but what happens when the binding constraints shift the reality, or equally so the perception of reality from how much will we grow to, can we remain stable supply chains, grids, food trust, governance, and the like.

[00:05:37] If the implicit goal of a society changes, lots of identities and ideologies are gonna get scrambled, and we'll need to figure out what is necessary for survival and coping and wellbeing Question. If society in your country quietly pivoted from growth to stability as the primary goal, what impacts would this have on your own life and your plans?

[00:06:04] What would you want your society to protect first, and what might you be willing to let go? Okay, next question. In stable times, people forget how thin the membrane is between normal life and fear-based life. When systems strain, you often see a gradient, and those with buffers stay calm and those without buffers experience the future first.

[00:06:34] It's not because they're weaker, but just because they're closer to the edge. Suffering is not evenly distributed now, even when the causes are systemic and will be even less evenly distributed in the future, which raises an uncomfortable moral question. What are your responsibilities towards people who are experiencing the future earlier than you are and in a wider boundary sense?

The Great Simplification

[00:07:01] The same question towards ecosystems and other species. The meaning problem. A lot of people think our current crises are primarily technical energy, climate, economics, policy, but there's another layer. Many lives have become comfortable but not meaningful. Hyperconnected, but also quite lonely. entertained most of the time, but also restless.

[00:07:33] And as meaning and purpose erode, it opens fertile ground for addiction, scapegoating and authoritarian impulses to sprout meaning is actually a stabilizer for society, not just some nice to have add-on question. If you had to design your life to generate meaning now, what would you change First? Okay.

[00:08:04] Dark triad at the nation size scale. A couple months ago I did a, frankly, following a conversation with Reed Malloy and Nancy McWilliams, about psychopathy and dark triad, and I tried to articulate something that a couple months later increasingly feels true and important to me. Humans in small groups are often better than what humanity looks like in aggregate, not because individuals are saints, but because scale itself changes the incentives of our inherited and conserved and ancestral tribal behaviors.

[00:08:44] When you move from a village to a nation, you don't just get. More population. You get new social systems that reward visibility, uncertainty, and conflict and winning. And this begets a kind of selection effect where a small number of unusually forceful, unusually strategic minded personalities can steer the signal far more than their numbers should allow.

[00:09:12] And the average. It can get pulled far away from the median behavior. I'm actually gonna unpack this all in a likely very long, frankly, next week, which I've been threatening for a while yet, but I haven't quite put the finishing touches on it, but I'm gonna call it the Jekyll and Hyde Nature of Homo Sapiens and Scale.

The Great Simplification

[00:09:36] And I've been wondering lately whether that same pattern is showing up at the level of countries. The United States is one obvious test case. China would be another, but I think this could apply in many places. Many people outside my country are watching and quietly asking whether America can still function as a coherent, trustworthy member of the international community and inside the country.

[00:10:02] The spread of beliefs about what the USA is and where we're headed is vast. And that spread follows political identity more than the shared facts. Here's the uncomfortable part. If you take the median versus mean idea seriously, then a lot of the damage is not caused by most of the people. It's caused by incentive gradients and associated feedback loops, which raises a question that is not about blame.

[00:10:35] But about responsibility. 'cause even if we did not create the incentives, we all still live inside them. And our choices either reinforce those loops or dampen them. Question if a country is judged by its loudest outputs, what responsibility do ordinary citizens have for the signal their nation sends to the world?

[00:10:58] And where does that responsibility end? second related question, if the next era is less about expansion and more about stability, what might America, the United States try to be known for? these are all questions I have. It's not here 'cause I, didn't bring it in the office. But, these are, I have like a hundred of these questions in my notebook.

[00:11:26] I think about this stuff all the time and I decided to share some of 'em today. So the last three questions, today are about artificial intelligence as I think it is front and center on dictating which of several paths we go down. The AI bifurcation. back in December, I did a frankly called the Quadruple bifurcation, and one of the bifurcations was simple people who become genuinely fluent with

The Great Simplification

these tools versus people who do not even use them or only touch them at a superficial chat, GPT advice, type of level.

[00:12:04] I think this is now unfolding in real time and it's going to matter. Here's a related dynamic. I suspect AI is gonna keep losing the public approval contest on both political sides, but especially on the left, not because people are confused about what it can do, but because of its effect on work, on truth on art, and how it changes the experience of everyday life that we've become accustomed to.

[00:12:32] At the same time, the build out will not stop merely because the public mood turns negative on AI. Data centers and chips and model training have large physical appetites for electricity and water and grid up grades and land and copper in a tighter economic environment. Those inputs will stop feeling abstract and begin to start showing up as higher utility bills.

[00:13:01] Higher rates, more local fights over, sighting and a general sense that some big monster is being fed in the background. So we get a potentially volatile combination. In 2026, a technology that is increasingly unpopular but also still rapidly expanding and a public that may start to connect that expansion to real household impacts, even if the story's messy and hard to, cleanly attribute to that source question.

[00:13:38] What happens when a technology that many people resent becomes financially supported by the general population via higher household bills, and in a world of tighter energy and water and materials, what is the ethical rule for allocating scarce resources to AI versus household and essential services?

[00:14:00] An AI winter. It is possible, and in my opinion, quite likely, that we're gonna have an AI winter in the coming two or three years. Not a collapse of its

The Great Simplification

capability, but a reset of the hype and the valuations because the physical world. Just will not be able to scale as fast as the financial story is saying.

[00:14:23] Chips and data centers and grid upgrades, as I mentioned earlier, copper and water, and a handful of hard to scale inputs like tantalum and Inu and other things that Nvidia would need at scale are all gonna become. Physical bottlenecks to the level that financial markets are forecasting, and if that reset comes, it might be one of the last chances to shape the rules and norms and infrastructure before the eventual next surge question.

[00:14:56] If we get an AI winter. What should we do during that pause to improve the long run outcomes? And what speed bumps might you put in place before the next boom? I think more people need to be thinking about that. Last question for today, purity versus effectiveness. I've been thinking about a pattern, which I'll also mention in next week's.

[00:15:23] Frankly, that shows up. Large scale tech and large scale humans intersect. A new tool arrives. It's powerful, and it's complicated and messy, and it creates real upside and also real harm both, and it starts to reorganize the social and the environment around it. Then very quickly, we do what humans. Often do we sort this tech into moral identities with respect to, the specific technology.

[00:15:58] Fossil fuels the internet and now ai and we create purity tests and we form tribes around refusing the tool or embracing it. And we often start treating the choice as a signal of personal and tribal identity. I think AI is gonna be that kind of object on steroids like it or hate it. It is a new axis of polarization in our culture, but there is a serious wider boundary issue underneath, and it's the part that makes me increasingly uncomfortable.

[00:16:35] I think about it a lot and worried in any era the actors most committed to accumulation control and narrow boundary winning. We'll use whatever tools

The Great Simplification

are available, they will use them early and they will use them relentlessly, which means restraint for the average person can become a strange kind of disadvantage, on this playing field.

[00:17:03] if you will. Said differently. The ethical choice can start to look like the less effective choice in a wide boundary sense. And then more broadly, you run into the coordination problem. If a large number of people who care about livable futures decide to abstain from using the strongest available coordination tools.

[00:17:26] The important observation there isn't their virtue, but whether they can still communicate and organize and be effective in a rapidly shifting world at the highest stakes between power and the web of life. So here are three questions related here that I don't have clean answers to, but I do think we have to consider them.

[00:17:50] Where's the line between integrity and self disarmament? When power uses every tool, what is the ethical duty of those trying to protect life, abstain, learn to wield or learn to wield with constraint or, some other hidden thing. And what are the rules of engagement for using powerful tools without becoming what you oppose?

[00:18:22] Please think about and discuss some of these questions. I think questions are important and I, plan to be asking a lot more this year. Much more to say next week. Jekyll and Hyde, long, frankly, long, frankly, hope you're all well.