

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Good morning. The Great Simplification podcast, is a unique platform in that we're trying to cover multiple issues relevant to the future, and we're trying to integrate them in an effort to make sense of our world in the time that we're alive, but also to hone in on what are the possible best paths forward and how we might head in that direction generally.

[00:00:30] This is not a single-issue podcast, and as the host over the years, I've noticed that on pretty much every podcast, some people like it and some people don't. This stands to reason with a large audience. This isn't a single-issue site like Green Bay Packers news updates or learning about backyard owls, both of which I personally subscribe to, by the way.

[00:01:01] But here's a pattern I've recognized over time, not only with this platform, but IRL, which only recently I learned stands for in real life. We see a headline or a clip or some name we half-recognize as a guest on some podcast we've never heard of, and before two sentences are even finished, and before we've actually taken in what's being said, let alone the context for it, we have already decided how we feel about the person saying it and all the downhill implied associations.

[00:01:40] We all do it, including me, because it is about the most human thing there is. So I want to today highlight that moment in slow motion and explain why it's so important to this work. In an attempt to do this, I ask you in this video to imagine yourself as a single piece on a chessboard, and then throughout this video, we're gonna pull the camera angle back slowly five times, starting small and as usual on this podcast, widening out.

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[00:02:30] Okay, the first lens is the piece right across from us. Down here at eye level, our brains and nervous systems are pretty much really only asking one question, friend or threat? Is this thing gonna hurt me or help me? This is the oldest software that we humans run, even older than language, and it's super fast, meaning that our bodies feel the verdict often before we've even heard a complete sentence, and then we answer it lightning fast with proxies.

[00:03:09] Do I like them? Do they look and sound like me? Do they share my values? But sometimes, even when the person is perfectly neutral, it's actually the topic itself that trips the wire. Someone says nuclear war or collapse or any word you've got a charge around, and that threat response fires before the person herself or himself has been judged at all. On this channel, I see this happen in different ways, in dozens of different ways.

[00:03:49] One that seems like a simple black or white answer to most of our culture is renewable energy, which has become a bit of a symbol for someone's belief in climate science generally. We often make snap decisions about someone's stance as an environmentalist or a climate denier just by their ability to give a yes or no answer to whether they're pro renewables.

[00:04:15] But of course, if we dig deeper, there are hundreds of pieces of important context that might shape that answer. Geography and EROI and economic ideas and resource constraints and scalability and rematerialization, impact on the Global South and much, much more, as longtime viewers here know. But we frequently shut down the conversation and write off the person before even knowing their full thoughts and argument.

[00:04:46] Or take AI. If you're worried about it, you're a Luddite. If you're excited about it, you're a tech bro. Another example is Israel. If you don't condemn Israel, you're a Zionist, but condemn Israel and you're an anti-Semite. Two seconds in and we've been sorted before anyone has heard the actual thoughts.

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[00:05:13] That fear is real, but it's aimed at the word, not the argument. Lisa Feldman Barrett, who will be on the show in September, talks about how the brain predicts and judges before the reasoning ever catches up. Well, lots of our former guests have said that, but I mention her 'cause she's just been scheduled, and I'm particularly looking forward to that conversation.

[00:05:42] So despite understanding all this and consciously intending to suppress it, this is how I react a lot of the time too. and in many ways, more recently than, I used to. Somebody starts talking and a little part of me has already decided how I feel about them before they've finished their first thought

[00:06:08] However, this instinct, which shapes our perception down at this level, creates a mental trap that matters a great deal for the more than human predicament, because the emotional verdict lands in us so fast and with such confidence that we mistake it for any actual consideration of what the person said, let alone its context.

[00:06:35] Our evolutionary fast and frugal heuristics tell us that we've assessed the argument when all we've actually done is assess a face or a phrase. Okay, so now let's widen out a little to the second lens. We're still looking straight ahead, but now we can see that the piece in front of us isn't alone. It's one of a whole line of pieces, all the same color, the other side.

[00:07:04] The moment we register that team's color, something shifts and the question changes from, do I trust this person to, is this person one of us or one of them? This is a tribe, this is a party, this is an ideology. And once a piece reads as the other team, much of what it says stops landing as information, but instead we perceive it as a game move by that side.

[00:07:36] You can watch it happen in real time in just about any corner of the Internet. And from this vantage point, we still can't reason very well about the

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actual game because we're primarily identifying allies and enemies. Okay, now let's use a much wider vantage point. This third lens is straight above the board, looking down high enough that the good guys and the bad guys kind of disappear and can see, at least in theory, the game.

[00:08:12] We can still see sides, but they aren't necessarily our side or their side. What we see instead is why the pieces are where they are energy, debt, geopolitics, AI, supply chains and all the things. Pieces moving for physical and structural reasons that are separate from how we feel about them This lens trips a lot of people up, I think, because if one's viewpoint is still from down on the game board level, while another is using an aerial view, the latter's dispassionate description of, for instance, the current power structure in our world can come across like an endorsement of it.

[00:08:58] And similarly, refusing to express moral statements about a thing comes across the same way as if you're siding with the powerful. So when someone climbs up to this third lens and just describes the forces at play without picking a team, specifically not picking a team, a lot of us still hear it as a betrayal to whatever the issue is that we are emotionally invested in.

[00:09:27] I do fully understand this because those feelings are real, but they're assessing two distinctly different things because describing how the pieces move is very different from cheering for where they're headed or where they land. Okay, so if we look at the lenses we've covered so far, there is a hidden and quite large, in my opinion, cost of us only using the lower two lenses.

[00:10:00] Because once we've labeled someone using perspective lens two, we stop being able to learn anything from them at lens three. We throw out the description because we don't like the describer. And some of the most useful reads of the board come from people whose conclusions we would never sign on to or agree with.

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[00:10:29] I've learned over a long and sometimes tortuous slog that it is worth letting people we don't fully agree with finish their sentences. I wonder what Nora Bateson would say about that. Okay, now, but wait, there's more. We zoom out even further to the fourth lens. We keep pulling back, and the whole board turns out to be sitting on something living.

[00:11:04] Climate, oceans, biodiversity, the planetary boundaries, seven of nine we've now pushed past. The ten million species we share this planet with, the viability of ecosystems, the oxygen commons. This is all home base for me, and I suspect for a lot of viewers of this channel, this is the content many of you came here for in the first place.

[00:11:29] The game we've been fighting about on the board is actually quite small from a deep time and ecological sense. And this, the living world around us and underneath us, is the thing actually at stake

[00:11:50] But there's one more lens, even wider, the fifth and final one, at least in this video. The board and the living world around it are sitting in a landscape, on a hill or down in a valley, and our culture is somewhere out on that terrain trying to find our footing. And out ahead of us, there is a second game board, smaller, simpler, simpler economically, perhaps a different game entirely.

[00:12:24] in the best cases, it's what I call the long repair, drawn as a place we can't quite see yet, but we're trying to navigate there. And from up here, from this fifth lens, we stop asking who is the villain on the board that we're standing on, or at least we throttle and quiet that impulse, and we start asking, "How could we possibly get from this board to that one without flipping the whole table over on the way there?"

[00:13:01] Okay. Let me now lay out all five of these lenses side by side, because if you take one thing from this video, I would like it to be this. Here they are, five

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different heights and vantage points we can look at the very same situation from. Here's an important pattern that I want you to reflect on.

[00:13:31] When a piece of information comes at us, most of us, most of the time, are gonna filter it using the first two lenses, the person and the tribe. Again, that is understandable. None of us are being mistaken or flawed or diminished for starting at lenses one or two. It is deeply human. I personally start from these every single day. Those first two lenses are our factory settings, if you will, the ones evolution, for very good reason, installed first and evolution reinforced them the hardest.

[00:14:11] This is the equipment we were all handed, and it has obviously been adaptive to this point. But a core theme of this whole channel, which I will now make explicit, is that we cannot navigate the bottlenecks of the twenty-first century only from eye level. We can't get to the destination game board by deciding which piece across from us to dislike or which groups to write off and then game our strategies and reactions around that decision.

[00:14:47] As I've often repeated and will likely repeat again, we are approaching a species-level rite of passage for humanity and the biosphere as well. The stakes of our time are asking something more of us, at least some of us, maybe many of us. They're asking us to also learn to look through this fourth and fifth lens, to see the human game board as part of the living world and to visualize that different game board off in the distance that has different rules and different players and is hopefully a game that can be played for a very long time.

[00:15:33] We can't drop the first two lenses. We'll still use the face and the tribe, and we always will. The goal, I think, is to hold the wide ones at the same time. So the little circles around the face and the tribe never really go away, but from up high, they get put more in proportion. Call it 5D systems chess if you like, but there really aren't five dimensions out there.

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[00:16:03] There are just five heights that we can watch the same board from.

[00:16:09] And as we're seeing and feeling, most of the charismatic voices in our culture primarily use one or two. I think the real skill to be learned and practiced here is the skill of moving your own camera. To hold all five of these heights variously or all at once and then come back down and actually do something to meet the future halfway.

[00:16:39] And there is a bookend risk here as well, because if we hold only the wide boundary view but have no agency attached to it, then that just turns into despair under a higher resolution

[00:16:57] I'll share something more here about my own challenges hosting this multi-issue platform. The really hard part of doing this work is not the content or the analysis. I actually love that part of it. The hard work is trying to show a large and diverse global audience the whole board without making any one of you feel like you're a game piece getting pushed across it.

[00:17:29] This is not easy, and it feels quite Sisyphean most of the time. But I am trying. I hope this was helpful. Talk to you next week. Much love to you all, wherever on this board you happen to stand or look from or want to move to. Thanks.