

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** I continue to be fascinated by many topics, but one that I've pondered a very long time is why and how all humans, at least with access to the internet, can access the same facts, yet come up with wildly different inferences and worldviews, and outlooks. And I have a frankly series planned later this year, which I think I'll title How Could I Be Wrong?

[00:00:26] Which might be quite a long series, where I plan to steel man all the core pieces of logic that comprise The Great Simplification thesis. But before that, there is a prequel, I think, needed to set the stage. Today, I w- I wanna talk about what humans variously consider to be the prime mover of all the pieces of the system around us.

[00:00:55] And to this end, I've come up with eight different perspectives to answer the questions: what is wrong with the world today, and what might fix it? And these perspectives each provide their own answers and reasoning, and all of them are held by intelligent and sincere people looking at the same planet and socioeconomic system.

[00:01:19] I will acknowledge upfront that I hold one of these perspectives primarily, and it's the last one in the list. How convenient of me. But lining up seven straw men and knocking them down is not my goal here, this morning. I want to better understand why we all have access to the same information but come up with completely different interpretations.

[00:01:47] And at a minimum, this might help us understand why we so often are talking past each other, and perhaps, hopefully, allow us to empathize, find common ground with others as we respond to what's ahead.

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[00:02:13] Okay, let's get into it. Number one, the political lens. This is probably the most widely held lens, at least in the countries where this podcast gets watched. And through this lens, the world is coming apart because the wrong people are running it Domestically, in your own country, that means the other party, whichever one that is for you, has captured the institutions, and is governing directly for its powerful donors rather than average citizens, and that we're on the verge of authoritarian rule.

[00:02:51] And on the world stage, the geopolitical arrangement that has mostly held, since the end of World War II is now coming apart, and what's replacing it is the countries with the biggest militaries and currencies doing whatever they want. Of course, there is a lot of truth here. Who holds power determines who gets bombed and who gets tarified and whose land floods first, and the like.

[00:03:22] But holding this lens, whatever is ultimately driving all our current upheaval, politics is how it reaches our personal lives. And a summary quote from someone in this demographic might be, "The other side has really screwed this up. We have to vote our way back." And the remedy is to win in the next election, of course.

[00:03:47] Organize turnout, take back the majority, appoint the right judges, pass the right laws, and on the international side, deter and make new allies and rebuild the geopolitical arrangement. From inside this lens, what we currently face is solvable, which is probably a large part of the appeal of this lens, because there is always another election coming.

[00:04:17] Okay, number two, the religious lens. This is the oldest perspective on this list and the one probably held by the largest number of human beings currently alive. And I specify that because a lot of the discourse on the TGS platform is really a discourse happening among a smaller population inside a

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handful of wealthy secular countries, but is not representative of the whole of humanity by a long shot.

[00:04:48] I think the religious lens comes in two flavors, and each of them point in very different directions. The first is stewardship. Creation is a gift. Dominion was always inferred as a responsibility rather than a license to extract and exploit, and humanity broke that trust. That's, *Laudato si'* and the creation care evangelicals and the caliphs in Islam. There are for sure people in each of those traditions who have been saying such things a great deal longer than the modern environmental movement has existed.

[00:05:31] It was given to us and we were told to keep it. We didn't. The fix for that flavor is repentance and stewardship, which sounds kind of soft to secular listeners until we consider what's at its core. Every one of these spiritual traditions already contains voluntary restraint as some sort of ritual or working practice.

[00:05:59] The Sabbath, fasting during Lent or Ramadan, tithing, and even the whole concept of enough. Recall that jubilee was periodic debt forgiveness written directly into scripture, and all these were functioning social technologies for getting very large numbers of people to purposefully consume less, and they basically run at scale for thousands of years, which is exactly the thing the degrowth people are currently trying to reinvent.

[00:06:37] So if you wanted to convince a few billion people to be happy with less, it's perhaps easier to not start from scratch. You would probably start with these religious traditions, but I digress. The second religious flavor is a bit harder for me, but I will try to do it justice. History has an author, and our way of life was always going to end.

[00:07:04] The world is not our home, and the entire project of engineering our way out of limits and mortality sits somewhere between arrogant and futile.

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Someone who believes this might look at the world and say, "You all seem very frightened. I am not. This was always going to end, and it was never ours to save."

[00:07:30] That is probably the most action-suppressing belief on this list, but at the same time, it's the only lens with a real answer to despair. If you actually believe history has an author, then your calmness is coherent as opposed to it being denial. And to be blunt, many of the people I meet in that camp seem steadier and happier than many of the people I know in mine.

[00:08:00] Okay, number three, the class lens This perspective is held by an enormous number of people and seemingly growing, some of whom might not use the word class specifically. Through this lens, our economic machine is working just fine. It just stopped working for me. In the United States, productivity and wages tracked each other pretty closely until the 1970s, and then they diverged and have never been further apart.

[00:08:32] A house that used to cost three times the median income now costs five or six times, and the bottom half of American households own something like two or 3% of the total wealth. And when somebody using this perspective hears we're all gonna need to consume less and tighten our belts, what they emotionally hear is the people who took most of it telling them they're gonna have to take less of what's left.

[00:09:03] Don't tell me there isn't enough. There is plenty. I can tell you exactly where it went. And the answer here is, of course, more and better distribution. If we can't eat the rich, we can tax them, break up the concentration, get money out of politics, and rebuild the institutions that used to work for ordinary people.

[00:09:26] There is no physics in this story, and there doesn't need to be, because abundance is obvious right in front of our faces. We see it parked in the marina, and in the plane hangar Number four, the technology lens. There are a lot of

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people who hold this view, and they are not stupid, and they are not lying, and they actually have a track record that many of us tend to skip past.

[00:09:55] Many of the viewers of this program, perhaps. Every previous limit did get moved. Malthus was right about the arithmetic and wrong about the outcome because Misters Haber and Bosch showed up, among other things. Peak oil was right about conventional crude and wrong about total supply because shale and horizontal drilling showed up.

[00:10:24] Solar costs, for solar panels have fallen something like ninety-nine percent in the last fifty years. Almost nobody forecast that fifty years ago, including most of the people who were championing solar at the time, and many similar stories. So when a technologist hears the word limits, they hear a burned term that has been wrong more or less every time it's been used in their lifetime.

[00:10:52] You've been predicting the ceiling for two hundred years, and we've gone through it every time. Why would I bet against the thing that has never lost? This is a fair question, and I don't think my tribe answers it well enough. And the fix from inside this lens is just do more of what's already working.

[00:11:13] Continue to innovate and build and expand nuclear reactors and batteries and robots and AI, and into space we go. And they see a very specific obstacle in the way of succeeding, which is, to be blunt to generalize the viewers of this platform, the objectors, the regulators, the local permitting process, generally the people who spent forty years blocking nuclear plants and who are now alarmed about AI build-out and planetary boundaries.

[00:11:51] France decarbonized most of its grid in about fifteen years in the '70s and '80s, and then the West mostly stopped building nuclear. And a technologist will tell you there was nothing about physical limits that stopped us. We just

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chickened out and stopped. And then there's a moral argument underneath this lens, that's probably stronger than the critics usually admit.

[00:12:17] Every single person who tells the world's poor to settle for less has had electricity while they're saying it. Somebody said something very similar, to that, to me at a presentation this summer, and I did not have an answer for it. Okay, number five, the community lens or the cultural lens. This is the explanation that sees the loss of, connectivity and trust in each other.

[00:12:48] Man, it's probably reasonably tied with the religious lens. We dismantled the churches and the rituals and the extended families and the sense that any of our lives and what we do is sacred. And instead, we handed people a screen and pizza delivery and the result is there are more of us than ever living alone and dying of despair in the middle of what appears to be unprecedented material abundance.

[00:13:18] We have lost the pieces of wisdom that tell us we need each other, and that the inconveniences and discomfort that come with relying on our neighbors are actually a core piece of what it means to be human, which is a fact the first four lenses I've outlined have a real problem with. Quote, "You're describing a civilization that lost our soul and calling it an energy problem."

[00:13:48] The fixes here don't rely on enforcement or regulation because at its core, this lens sees a problem with our culture itself. And the pieces that change culture come very slowly and at the lowest scales, from person to person, from conversation to conversation. It comes from breathing life back into practices, reconnection and ritual and community and service to something larger than yourself and embodiment and awe.

[00:14:23] a lot of the things Ian McGilchrist talks about, things that form the backbone of communities that have lasted for centuries. And in some sense, this

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is the most difficult lens for a system scientist like myself to approach, because my entire method of understanding our world is to keep peeling away the layers of the crisis that underpins humanity and the biosphere.

[00:14:51] Keep asking what's underneath, and to keep going until I hit something that holds scientifically true, whether people believe it or not But someone wearing this community culture lens might say that habits like mine are part of the problem, that looking for and at the machinery is how we lost the magic and the trust in each other in the first place.

[00:15:19] Number six, the animist lens, or maybe the moral one. I would guess this is probably the door most of the viewers on this channel came in through. Somebody sees the dead whale on the beach or the elephant with its face cut off or the albatross opened up with bottle caps and a lighter in its stomach or thousands of shark fins on a ship with the sharks removed from them.

[00:15:49] And something inside us turns and twists. And this lens doesn't count anything. It just looks at that animal who was alive and now is not and who never had a say in any of it. And in its deeper, older memories, this lens says the natural world on Earth is akin to us and always has been. Nieces and nephews and cousins in nature that almost every culture before modernity knew and felt deeply and that forgetting it is now the wound sitting underneath all other wounds.

[00:16:28] The core principles here lie in ancient worldviews such as Watiko, the old Algonquin word for the sickness that comes from taking more than you need. Don't tell me what it meant for profitability. That was a living creature. And the fix here is to care and to witness and to protect. Stop this specific harm.

[00:16:56] Save this herd. Save this body of water. Extend rights and standing to the more than human and refuse to let any of it get turned into some spreadsheet exercise. Number seven, the overshoot lens. Here's where I suspect a lot of the

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TGS viewership, already sits First, for 30 years, the environmental conversation got compressed into a single trace gas and one number and one target.

[00:17:33] And to give credit where credit is due, it has been the only issue to get genuine institutional traction. And there are treaties and agencies and probably now trillions of dollars in motion because people managed to turn some incredibly complex planetary mess into a single metric, that the world's finance ministers can actually possibly act on.

[00:18:00] It's also the only environmental frame where the response to the crisis is to build more things and grow the economy while doing it, which is probably, why it's the one that won. But the overshoot lens says climate and global heating is but a single symptom of a much larger problem, and that treating it as the whole thing has been a huge mistake because we've lost roughly three-quarters of the populations of birds, fish, wild animals, and amphibians, in the last fifty years.

[00:18:37] Insects are declining one or two percent a year. A million of the eight million other species on Earth are at risk. And then there's novel entities, the plastics and the PFAS and the endocrine disruptors, an entire chemistry, we invented and scaled without really testing it. And none of that is a carbon problem, and none of that is gonna be solved by better batteries. A quote from this demographic, "There is nothing wrong with the technology.

[00:19:13] There are just too many of us consuming too much." So the fix is less. Fewer humans over time, less throughput, degrowth and contraction, a smaller footprint pressed onto a planet with a limited ability to absorb what we do. And this lens sits close enough to the next that people conflate them a lot, so I'll, draw the line between them.

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[00:19:43] The seventh lens, overshoot, is a story about waste. The eighth lens is a story about the fuel. Number eight, the thermodynamic perspective. Every lens preceding this one is a story about how we are using the material surplus, who gets it, who took it, whether we were faithful with it, what it's doing to the air and the water and the other animals, whether it's making us happy and giving us meaning.

[00:20:20] But none of those are stories about where the surplus came from or how long it will last. As you all know, a barrel of oil does something like five years of human physical work, and we burn roughly a hundred billion barrels of oil equivalent per year across coal, oil, and gas, which works out to somewhere around five hundred billion human labor equivalents working alongside five billion, give or take, actual humans.

[00:20:50] This surplus is the primary driver of all of our current largesse, and it is the thing that all the arguing is about despite rarely being included or mentioned. A one-time inheritance of buried sunlight that took tens of millions of years to lay down and that we're spending inside a few human generations, the carbon pulse.

[00:21:18] Nobody says this on a stage, which lately I increasingly suspect is not because nobody knows it. Plenty of people know it, especially after the art of the Hormuz deal. It's that after saying it, the next sentence has no acceptable publicly approved ending. If you say it out loud, you're saying that the standard of living most of us grew up inside not only was never a policy achievement, but also is not a permanent feature of our world, that no election or reset or invention can add BTUs to a depleting stock, and that the currently 19 terawatt, give or take, global economy is more likely to see 15 terawatts than 25 And there is no version of that speech that gets you applause.

[00:22:19] please believe me on that. I would give you the, summary quote for this one, but you've been hearing these quotes from me on this channel for four and a

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half years So while I periodically can adopt each of the previous seven viewpoints, this thermodynamic lens grounds most of my analysis and thinking.

[00:22:44] And my assessment is this is the floor the other seven are standing on, the story of where the surplus comes from. And the seventh perspective, overshoot, is the ceiling above us, the story of what the planet can absorb. Okay. so what to do with these eight lenses or perspectives? What I realized when I was putting this together is that every one of these lenses gives us two things, a villain and a task, something to do that gives us agency.

[00:23:23] The political lens gives you the other party, and the task is to vote. Get out the vote. Religion gives you our own faithlessness and a way to repent. The, the class gives you the billionaires and a redistribution. The technology lens gives you the, neo-Luddites and continue to innovate and build. The culture lens gives you modernity and something or somewhere to belong to.

[00:23:57] the animist explanation gives you civilization that treats life as inventory, as a villain, and a creature or a species to save. However, both overshoot and thermodynamics give us ourselves and the shrinkage in our material lives and a grappling with how we've used our one-time energy inheritance.

[00:24:25] Villain, task, villain, task in each of these lenses. Perhaps people choose their core lens over time, at least partly due to which villain feels right to them to be angry at and which task they can picture themselves or find themselves doing last month, two months ago, in the 5D chess, frankly, I suggested that from a high enough advantage, you stop asking who the villain is.

[00:24:58] And I still think that's right, but I continue to underestimate how hard that is to do, because all the villains also come intertwined with their accompanying lens and explanation. If you give up the villain, and you're giving up

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the story that made sense of things for you in the first place. And the last two lenses are the trickiest because there's really nobody specific to blame.

[00:25:26] Nobody sat down and decided to build a civilization on a one-time energy inheritance. It just emerged and happened through billions of small decisions. And unlike the money in the class story, there's no pile of it sitting somewhere that we could go take back. And there's really no task either, no single thing we can do in the near future that alters the trajectory much, which is a large part of why this perspective continues to lose most of the arguments, that it enters, and I have had a front row seat to that frustration. So I'm not gonna finish this by suggesting to you which of these perspectives is right.

[00:26:14] You already know which one I hold, and you've heard the why ad nauseam. Instead, I'd like to put these in relation to each other. The first six all have pieces that are right and pieces that are wrong, but all six of them sit inside the floor and the ceiling of the last two, and that's actually where whatever agency we have resides.

[00:26:42] Politics, money, technology, faith, meaning how we treat other creatures. Those are the places that we can still change things, not by much and certainly not by ourselves, but they're the places where change happens. And I think what gets a lot of folks in trouble is forgetting that all six of those are operating inside the boundaries of ecological overshoot and thermodynamics which actually gives us a thing to be on the lookout for.

[00:27:16] Any proposal or policy or idea that requires people to share your diagnosis before they'll consider it is probably going to fail, and it probably should. The things that have staying power, or to use last week's, podcast, podcast guest Olivia Hamant's term, robustness, the things that have robustness are gonna be the ones that someone focused on social class and someone who's

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a regular churchgoer and somebody who just wants their grandkids to be able to see a whale in the ocean can all directionally work toward for their own reasons.

[00:28:02] So I don't expect anybody to switch their lenses, as I am unlikely to be switching mine. But being aware there are seven other lenses in the room, at least seven, I think is a helpful foundation, to lean into for the conversations ahead. And those conversations are going to include the ones with future guests on this platform.

[00:28:31] I feel strongly that the thermodynamic lens is the floor and ecology is the ceiling, but there are lots of perspectives and ideas in between that remain very relevant to what future arrives for humanity and the biosphere A shorter, frankly, next week, hopefully. I hope you're all well.