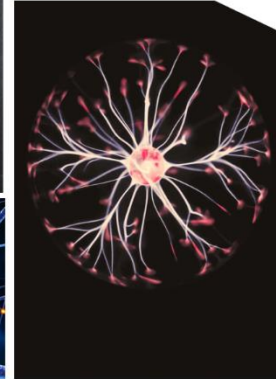
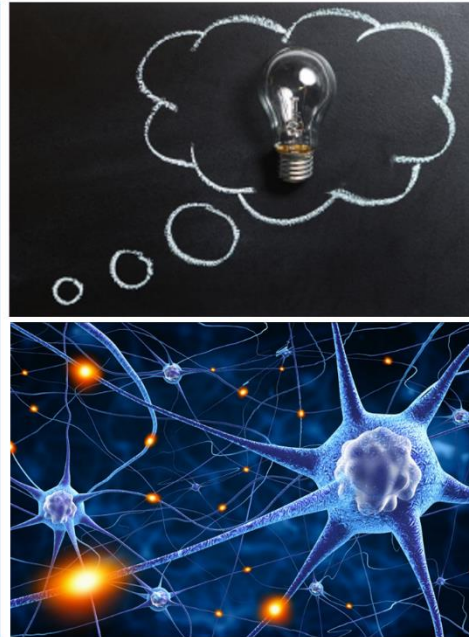


Cognitive Obsolescence:

The need for unlearning when
reimagining the emerging future

Bill Rees in conversation with
Sean Bellamy and Gerry Salole
on May 8th at 6pm CET/CAT;
5pm UK; 9am PST; 12 noon
EST. Register at the link below



Cognitive Obsolescence and Resilient, Sustainable Futures: A Contradiction in Human Progress

Last week's conversation in the Impact Trust Resilience Funders Network explored the concept of cognitive obsolescence with evolutionary biologist and ecologist Bill Rees.

For those who missed the session in detail, you can read the blog [here](#), and explore Bill's original paper [here](#) or watch the conversation recording [here](#). Bill's slides prepared ahead of the conversation can be found [here](#) and the details of the chat below for those who asked for them.

Key highlights of the discussion included:

- **Human Cognitive Limitations :** Cognitive Evolution has not kept pace with cultural or technological evolution, The human brain evolved in simpler times. But it has not change much over the last 200,000 years and certainly has not matched the technological and cultural revolutions we have inspired. This means that, today, our cognitive abilities are ill equipped to understand and control the complex systems of the modern world we have created. Indeed, they are maladaptive. This is what is referred to as "cognitive obsolescence."
- **The Downside of Human Success:** Human beings (like all species) are predisposed to exploit nature due to evolutionary traits that once ensured survival. We're just much better at it than other natures. This predisposition is now maladaptive in the face of complex modern challenges such as climate change and resource depletion. It has resulted in the "meta-crisis" of overshoot, where humanity is consuming resources faster than they can be regenerated.

- **Knowing is not enough:** Overcoming cognitive obsolescence is not just about acknowledging these predispositions or possessing knowledge about the environmental consequences. It has been insufficient for driving change because it is part of our nature. Overcoming cognitive obsolescence requires creating "an entirely different mental construct around the nature of our relationships with each other and with the biophysical world." It necessitates developing a new cultural narrative that is compatible with nature and overrides our natural tendencies towards overconsumption and growth.
- **A Collective Cultural Paradigm is needed:** We cannot solve these massive issues of over-exploitation as individuals. It has to be a collective response. We have to intentionally, consciously and fundamentally reshape the cultural narratives and institutional systems that reinforce our 'natural' way of operating. This requires a significant transformation in societal values and beliefs—essentially, a cultural override—which is challenging because it goes against both human nature and entrenched systemic practices. Crucially, this new narrative must be a collective, cultural shift that everyone buys into, rather than just individual efforts. Engineering this kind of transition to a different way of being is an incredibly difficult task that may not enable us to break through in any significant way."

Questions raised during the discussion include:

Creating and propagating new narratives:

- How exactly do we create and propagate this new ecological cultural narrative that is compatible with nature and overrides our destructive tendencies? Rees acknowledges the "how" is the real work that needs to be done. The discussion highlighted the role of relationships, connection, and collective reimagining as starting points.

Breaking Free from Evolutionary Hardwiring

- Is it even possible for humans to truly break free from our destructive evolutionary hardwiring to develop an alternative vision that radically moves away from the current dominant paradigm of growth and exploitation? The discussion suggested harnessing positive human traits like leveraging human storytelling abilities was a way to foster change.

Cultural contextualisation

- How can we develop a global consciousness that embraces sustainable practices without negating diverse cultural values and contexts? How might we ensure this resonates across diverse cultural contexts? Recognising different cultural relationships with nature and creating contextualized narratives were raised as possibilities.

Global Consciousness Versus Multiple Narratives

- How do we reconcile cultural differences and ensure this new narrative resonates across diverse belief systems, including religious worldviews? Can a unified global consciousness emerge or will multiple contextualised narratives be required for different cultures and religions? Both possibilities were entertained, with some favouring universal underlying principles complemented by cultural specificity. As one participant noted, different cultural contexts shape how people interact with nature.

Ensuring cultural resonance

- What are effective strategies for engaging communities in rethinking their relationship with the environment and each other in a way that acknowledges and respects cultural differences?

Thinking more ...

The challenge of overcoming cognitive obsolescence through a cultural shift remains daunting. There was wide agreement with Bill's view that "the how to" has to be an important focus of our thinking and doing. The discussion did open up ideas about potential responses and strategies that could leverage human strengths such as storytelling, relationship-building, and cultural adaptability. The practical applicability of these strategies and their ability to effect real change remain open questions, highlighting the need for continued exploration and dialogue in this area.

Chat comments

What would you say to your kids:

That we've been selfish

Did you not manage to unlearn!

The only sustainable growth is in learning!

We need to change the perception of activists to actors for change. Activist carries stigma of the rebel, young people for generations will unfortunately need to be the actors who change to repair and change for the better and greater good with new ideas and ways of living.

How can we act for the current generation and the 7th generation at the same time?

What the F*C* were you thinking of?

"Why didn't you do more? What was more important to you than our future? Do you have anything to say that might be helpful or hopeful to us?"

Participate in building a future that respond to your hopes!

Were all those likes and followers worth it?

I'm sorry that you felt that you could control the collapse. Even though the world you knew is mostly gone. We are happier than you ever knew.

You should be profoundly embarrassed

Why didn't you listen more than talk?

"What happened? Why didn't you stop what was clearly happening when you could have prevented it?" But I also hope they say, "We will work on it"

You said young people only care about themselves and when we cared about the world and demanded change, you said 'see this shows they only care about themselves'

My message as a 36 year old: how are we to pay the debt that you accumulated?

Cognitive obsolescence is in part that 'knowing' without the capacity to do so flightless birds 'knew' about flying but still couldn't fly ... how do we develop the capacity to do what we think

I think partly consumerism in the West is rooted in similar experiences, accumulation equals safety and is also an expression of caring for families/children (migration experience in the US, war in Europe etc)

Does greed make us happy? Is happy a higher order of evolution... or was it there at the beginning.

Can we face the future always looking backward?

I agree that consciousness is not sufficient to navigate the metacrisis but it could be that if 10% of the population move back to something like panpsychism it might be helpful. I am by nature a deep sceptic about avoiding a great deal of damage. I don't claim to know this to be true—only the possibility.

I'm wondering what might the next phase of evolution in consciousness be? Is it a reframing of beliefs, values, dispositions, narratives - and how might we move in this direction?

On the question of future happiness. I asked a retreat of elders what had made their lives worth living. Two answers repeated: engaging in human relationships and engaging in a cause greater than our own lives. I would submit that these two can be experienced by Shaun's two daughters and experienced by people in less than comfortable conditions.

“the flip—epiphanies of mind and the future of knowledge, by jeffrey j. kripal, professor of philosophy and religious thought at rice university. remarkablebook.

heart shift more than mind shift..

You can't change people you can only connect them to what, in their hearts, they truly love'.

I think that what you're speaking about is tipping points. I appreciate the question about influence... reminding us all that we have influence, that ripples. I'm also thinking that we don't have to know or believe in tipping points in order for the 'tipping' to happen. There's something about always acting as if we have influence, rather than 'trying' to influence. And the idea that the best teaching is caught not taught... Just some ramblings on the theme.

I think the multiplier effect is just as important. I spoke to 220 young people (age 4-11) this morning and felt some real connections, talking about practicalities of sustainability - little actions like changing a boiler temp - and I hope(d) that from there they would start a conversation at home, with the generations around them, and begin to live a changed life. How many ripples can each of the young people I speak to start?

I'm still stuck by the question - how to ... what is the way to live into change ... because we feel and know all these things are necessary ... yet we still do ... so how do we change the do

In the philosophy of mind, panpsychism (/pænˈsaɪkɪzəm/) is the view that the mind or a mind-like aspect is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of reality. It is also described as a theory that "the mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe". It is one of the oldest philosophical theories, and has been ascribed to philosophers including Thales, Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, and Galen Strawson. In the 19th century, panpsychism was the default philosophy of mind in Western thought, but it saw a decline in the mid-20th century with the rise of logical positivism. Recent interest in the hard problem of consciousness and developments in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and quantum mechanics have revived interest in panpsychism in the 21st century. (wiki)

We have to use cultural overrides to human nature

I feel often like being part of one half of the world that over-consumed telling the other half 'sorry, now that we have understood our wrongdoing, you should just skip the stage of consumption and follow us b/c we know better now'...what is a vision of the future that still tells a narrative of progress for all (also in terms of personal wealth) that is still driven by sustainability and protecting the environment etc?

The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology... 1966 book by Berger and Luckmann. Called the "fifth-most important sociological book of the 20th century" by the International Sociological Association, this groundbreaking study of knowledge introduces the concept of "social construction" into the social sciences for the first time. In it, Berger and Luckmann reformulate the task of the sociological subdiscipline that, since Max Scheler, has been known as the sociology of knowledge... goodreads.com

The number of countries in existence right now is higher than ever before - this does not speak to an increase in community but in fragmentation...a country for every culture...? Do we feel we can solve problems better by insisting on independence (sovereignty)? My reimagining of the future includes global governance not fragmentation...

Global governance is one of the greatest questions.

We're a bit tired of constantly hearing about 'grandchildren' - there must be more reasons to be worried about the future esp for those of us who do not have kids/grandkids

Reciprocity is essential.

Influence increases its momentum significantly when it is channelled within fractal structures that encompass the global ecosystem of people, organisations, societies, industries, countries, global alliances and the planet. Fractal refers to the (heuristic) set of relationships that describes the behaviour of all these entities,...at different levels of recursiveness. Apologies for sounding a bit academic. However, this statement has a very solid and practical foundation. It also offers a way of simplifying the complexity of our civilisation in order to make it more understandable and informing and aligning decision making at all levels (of recursiveness).

It may be that this is not a solvable issue. we need to move to a participating consciousness.

We can't solve, we can respond, we need an aspirational future that is not one of sacrifice but is truly compelling.

"Gods hands" will indeed provide a solution; I prefer to paraphrase them as Gaia. The solution will entail a massive die-off, and by not procreating we can make that future slightly less worse. This is the gist of Bendell's 'Deep Adaptation'.

If you want to stop a stampede - turn the lead steer. Bill mentioned that neo-liberal economics rules the world. A semblance of governance of the economic order comes via nation states. There are about 200 of them. One could think of the 20 largest economies (G20) as the lead steer of that dangerous stampede. One response to the meta-crisis to shift the dialog (and response) to cutting overall energy use in half. That forces transformation of lifestyle systems. Bill, is that a possible response that might catch wind in its sail?