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In order to combat climate change, we need to cultivate a mindset driven by the need to care about remote others in time and space.

## Dealing with climate change in a capitalist world

### Why we should care about remote others in time and space



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The moral world is concerned about climate change, the capitalist world less so. Much of the current discourse is about technological solutions, especially in energy production and distribution. Much less comfortable is the discourse about changing present behaviour in the event that our technological luck will run out—exercising the precautionary principle, the sacrificial trade-off over time for the sake of future people and their spaces who are unknown to us, and remote from us and our immediate moral attachments. Many observers like Anthony Giddens (*The Politics of Climate Change*, 2009) have pessimistically argued that distant threats are too unreal to trigger altruistic sacrifice, with the implication that a regulatory state is needed to enforce behavioural change. Is that possible through democracy reliant on popular voting, where immediate self-interested preferences prevail, whether individual or national? If, therefore, the appeal to altruism is weak, and a strong regulatory state unlikely, where are the human motives to be found to avoid self-destruction of our species?

This can be addressed through thinking about time preference behaviour, concentric circles of moral proximity, elements of well-being, and the problematic of free riding. These are all conceptual ingredients for sustainable development that are not unrealistically altruistic. Our time horizons are before and after us, stretched as a function of moral attachments. My grandfather was born in 1874. I was 30 and just a father when he died in 1975. My grandchildren might just be alive for the next century. That gives me a morally attached and thus meaningful time span of 226 years—Long enough to track significant changes affecting my cognitive bloodline. Everyone on the planet has a version of this story of intergenerational empathy. My grandfather was undoubtedly concerned for me in his future, as I am for my grandchildren.

In that way, we are time traders with a set of discount preferences which determine how we allocate behaviour between the present and future, determined by moral attachment that can be understood in terms of concentric circles of moral proximity. Our moral commitments to immediate and then wider kin are usually stronger and more comprehensive than to successively outer circles of friends, neighbours and broader identities (communities and nations). Moral attachments within these inner circles are more likely to be over longer periods of time, and thus vertical, not just horizontal, and contemporarily reciprocal. These conditions represent the intergenerational bargain within a vertical line of descendants acting with the interests of others in mind, bound to us by moral attachment. Not purely altruistic, in other words.

As we move to outer circles, attachments are likely to be less moral and comprehensive and more instrumental and specific. While it may be easier to understand intimate intergenerational bargains within inner concentric circles of moral attachments, the greater challenge is to understand such time preference bargains at the outer circles of instrumentality. In other words, why might we care for strangers in the present time but remote space? This is the

arena of collective action between strangers and the underpinning for a longer range institutionalised policy and strategic planning, which gives the concept of sustainability its meaning. Is a propensity for such collective action driven by well-being? Both objective and subjective senses of well-being represent the cognitive and social bases of sustaining behaviours. It is a feature of human and social existence that an individual's well-being is also a function of others' well-being—arranged through these concentric circles of moral proximity.

My more immediate sense of well-being is thus a function of securing a sense of well-being not only for myself but for others too: common good as an essential prerequisite for personal well-being. Furthermore, inequality and poverty in those outer circles beyond kin can also convert into the politics of envy and actually threaten my own well-being: an international concern, not just national. So humans are not interactive social beings out of a sense of altruism, but because they have to as a condition of their own security and interests, which underpin well-being. Thus, we do not have to rely upon altruism to save us, or upon utopianism about which Giddens is rightly sceptical.

So far, therefore, we can explain vertical intergenerational behaviour within inner concentric circles. We can also explain horizontal intragenerational behaviour towards outer circles via a combination of interdependent common good and instrumentality reasoning. Crucially though, we have not yet explained diagonal behaviour: i.e. intergenerational behaviour towards morally remote descendant strangers.

By combining these two logics (vertical through time and horizontal within time), we can arrive at the following axiom: the well-being of my intimate descendants is itself dependent upon the well-being of their contemporaries; ergo I have to be concerned about the well-being of remote strangers in the future in order to maintain and protect the well-being of my direct offspring or near kin with whom I have moral attachments. This way of understanding human motivation for sustainable behaviour does not then rely upon altruism, which can only refer to helping those with whom one has no direct interest such as moral attachment. In this path of reason, therefore, we can imagine collective intergenerational bargains embracing outer circles of moral proximity as a precondition for serving inner, more morally attached, circles. This surely has to be the key principle of continuing human existence.

If our realism steers us towards precautionary behaviour but not derived from altruism, then it must also acknowledge free riding, which cannot simply be wished away, nor oversimplified. Precautionary behaviour redistributes harm over time periods, most obviously in the form of immediate consumption sacrifice for future benefit of remote others, as well as between people in present time, usually under conditions of inequality.

Any given population will comprise a demographic distribution across the life cycle, prompting a spread of differential interests in consumption at any one point in time. These distributions entail a variable

of "distance" between individual self-interest and immediate as well as longer-term collective interest with respect to climate harmful consumption. At any one time, through these consumption choices, there will always be a proportion of the population (nationally and internationally) which seeks in effect to "free ride" both more than others in the population, and more than at other times in their own lives. Can the net amount of aggregated free-riding resulting from a profile of consumption spreads be managed for sustainability through precautionary action, requiring interference with the prevailing distribution of the propensity for unsustainable consumption? To achieve this requires replacing material consumption as the primary condition for well-being, thereby defined less in terms of status and identity, and more as spiritual and emotional experience. This tunnels deep into the psyche of capitalism.

What if, for example, the pursuit of the principle of sustainability makes it necessary to be motivated by forms of well-being, which send signals to the market in contradiction to incentives for destructive technological innovation, and incentives thereby for profit? Perhaps we are starting on this road with increasing public commitments (US and UK perhaps?) to the green economy, and willingness to envisage longer time horizons. Perhaps the catalytic experience of climate change in these countries and elsewhere—including, for example, Dhaka winter pollution—is finally changing mindsets, lowering discount rates and thereby favouring precautionary behaviour. Can precautionary well-being as a cultural form become the cultural underpinning of sustainable capitalism? Can such mind and behavioural changes send different signals to the market, thus redirecting investment in technology and skill sets?

These questions underpin the case for green economy and green capitalism, another "great transformation" in which excessive commodification and alienation is reset not just for decent work, but for green well-being. We shift from knowing the price of everything to the value of everything, with multidimensional and multi-period values dismantling the present marginal utility determinants of price. A shift driven by the self-interested need to care about remote others in time and space, derived from the link between moral attachments and the common good.

To reach this state of mind and behaviour, capitalism has to be confronted: for its individualism and competition; for rewarding free-riding; for its narrow profit conception of efficiency; for its misuse of the term "welfare"; for its logical necessity to reproduce inequality through the appropriation of the surplus value of labour, thereby inexorably linking growth to poverty; for the subordination of nature and natural resources to upper quintile usufruct, thereby removing the principles of common property and citizens' wealth; and for framing human motives as venal and alienating us all.

In the meantime, in the words of the American poet Frank Scott (brought to my attention by Leonard Cohen):

*This is the faith from which we start:  
Men shall know commonwealth again  
From bitter searching of the heart.  
We loved the easy and the smart  
But now, with keener hand and brain,  
We rise to play a greater part.  
The lesser loyalties depart,  
And neither race nor creed remain  
From bitter searching of the heart.  
Not steering by the venal chart  
That tricked the mass for private gain,  
We rise to play a greater part.*

## A slice of the university pie

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Recently, a special adviser to the prime minister criticised the country's universities for awarding "useless degrees" that contribute to the high unemployment rate. He mentioned that one would hardly find an engineer or a business graduate without a job. This may be true for graduates from some top universities, but as the adviser puts it, even a large number of graduates from lesser or private universities, albeit with engineering or business degrees, do not immediately get jobs. Then again, in a recent batch of foreign service cadres, 70 percent of the new recruits have come from engineering. While this adds to the prestige of their studied discipline, it also highlights the lack of coordination that we have between educational priorities and job sectors. The idea that these engineers have spent years studying and training in a professional discipline, only to choose public administration as their career, suggests a significant waste of time and an incorrect investment based on a limited

Their success adds to the growing anti-academic sentiment. Then again, only a handful of business start-ups make the final cuts. To go further in life, one needs a thorough understanding of the school of life, *bishwabidyalaya*.

Learning to earn is just one facet of an educational institution. True, universities do teach us to become engineers, doctors, or corporate bosses, but there is an ambitious objective of higher education. Our celebrity guests often parrot such a noble objective of education in convocation speeches and motivational talks. Universities teach us how to live, how to discern who we are, and what directions our societies should pursue to give our lives a fulfilling meaning. I feel that both the adviser and the civil servants lack clarity about the very purpose of a university. The bureaucrats may have gotten carried away seeing their military cousins, who have established their own universities.

Here, a review of the university concept



FILE VISUAL: STAR

understanding of university education.

The honourable adviser then blasted "useless" disciplines such as sociology or English for flooding the list of unemployables. So it is the jobseekers' fault that they could not make it to the top engineering or business schools, and by implication, this has become an embarrassment for the government. According to his utilitarian view, not everyone should go to the tertiary system; instead, some should opt for vocational training. What is amiss in this argument is the idea that the university acts as a foundational platform for young boys and girls to become adults. They learn to aspire and dream big. Even a graduate from the English department can become a finance minister, and a graduate from the sociology department can become a successful administrator for engineers. University, etymologically, means "the whole world." It is the shortened version of *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, meaning "community of masters and scholars." By looking at a slice of the university under a utilitarian microscope, the adviser is suggesting a type of exclusivity that defeats the purpose of a university.

Another group of professionals has made headlines for slicing the university pie. Divisional and deputy commissioners presented a proposal to the prime minister during the DC Conference on March 3-6, asking for a professional university for themselves and a specialised university for their children. The public servants did not shy away from boasting their elitism, envisioning an academic farmhouse where some animals are more equal than others.

In response, Public Administration Minister Farhad Hossain recently stated that the government had no intention to establish any separate university for the children of bureaucrats at this moment. Hossain, a graduate of Dhaka University's Department of English, said, "The university is universal; it comes from a universal idea... A university is an open space where knowledge is freely acquired, and people can think without constraints. It is where minds develop, shaping individuals into capable citizens. It is a hub for all kinds of people, a place where genius thrives."

I would like to thank the minister for deftly reminding us, including the entrepreneurial adviser and the civil servants, about the big picture of a university. We can loosely translate an old Bangla adage as, "Pursue knowledge today, and tomorrow you will ride cars and carriages [of success]." This is not always the case in the digital era. Even Tiktokers without education can ride fancy cars. Acquiring some key skills can lead to earning opportunities. Many of the billionaires today are school dropouts.

is pertinent. Since the inception of institutions like Nalanda Mahavihara in India (427) and the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (859), the university has been a social space for intellectual exchanges. These institutions incorporated progressive models of teaching and learning within their religious framework, offering curricula that included logic, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and many other subjects. The University of Bologna (1088) and the University of Oxford (1096) replicated the successful model of teaching for Europeans. The university system's main growth happened in the 19th century, in a post-Darwinian scenario when belief in religion received a sharp blow. The university became a proxy space to find meaning, consolation, wisdom, and a sense of community, which were once the forte of organised religion. Culture, not necessarily scripture, explored issues of morality and spirituality. The secularising idea remains responsible for the construction of not only universities but also museums, libraries, and concert halls.

As an autonomous community of students and scholars, modern universities now come in different shapes and sizes. Colonial influences primarily model modern universities after those in Europe. There are also universities with vocational and technical focuses that are closely linked to the local economy. Our agricultural university is a case in point. To be a university, they must conform to academic standards to be able to call what they provide "higher education." They boost a nation's economic growth rate and transform students' lives. But, as John Henry Newman observed in his book *The Idea of a University*, knowledge produced in a university is also worthwhile in its own right.

The utilitarian value of a university must reflect the institution's inherent value. For knowledge to be created and nurtured, university provides a participatory academic ecosystem that thrives in democratic practices. Universities, by design, are the bastions of creativity and freedom of expression. The formulaic business models or disciplined bureaucracy do not necessarily chime with such a view of university, and its inherent strength.

The global outcry against the atrocities in Gaza is testament to the power of universities. It started with the liberal arts school in the US, going against the hegemonic construction of a Zionist belief of a racial supremacy of Israelites. It is the university students who have come forward to show us hope in a world that is blinded by greed and utilitarian ambitions. Slicing the university pie would not have given us the norms to sift right from wrong, as we are seeing now.