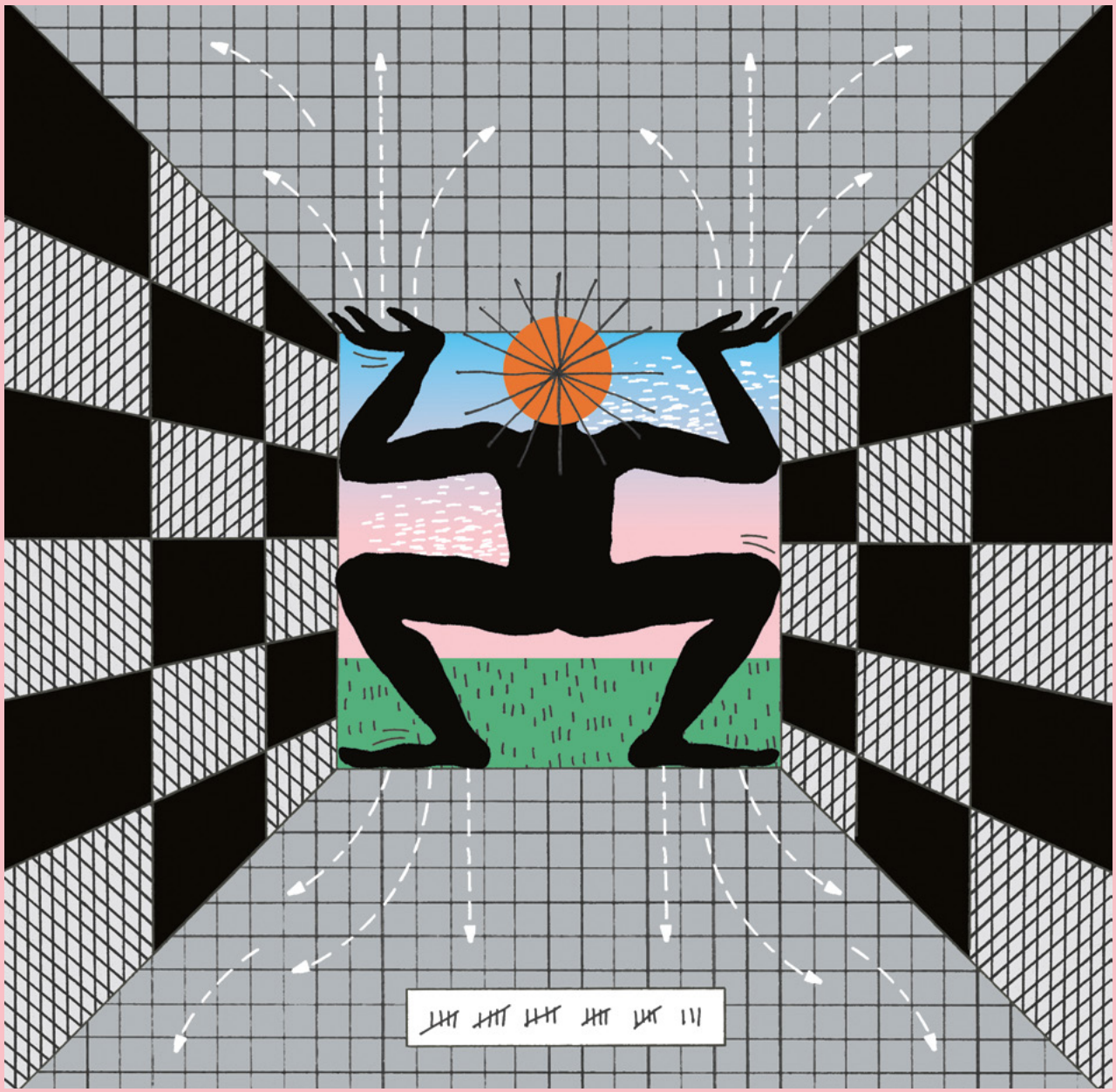
FARSIGHT

futures reviewed



The Future of Wellbeing

Long-term explorations of mind, body, and spirit

COPENHAGEN INSTITUTE FOR FUTURES STUDIES

We help people and
organisations imagine, work with,
and shape their future.

COPENHAGEN INSTITUTE FOR FUTURES STUDIES

FARSIGHT

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Editor's Note

The viewpoint that we should care more about the wellbeing of future generations is an increasingly widely held and seemingly uncontroversial one. It's a conviction that is shared by the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies and one that's even made its way to the UN, where a 'Summit of the Future' held later this year aims to integrate future generations into global decision-making.

Although most can agree with the idea in principle, the question of how far this logic should be taken can be divisive. How many generations into the future should our considerations extend to, and should their wellbeing have equal weight to that of present generations? Should our benevolence on their part include non-human intelligences as well, or perhaps even digital minds in the form of advanced AI? What means employed today operate in the service of ensuring humanity's long-term survival – and who gets to 'survive' anyway?

'Longtermism' has emerged as the most influential ideology advocating on the behalf of future humans. It asserts that we are living in the initial stages (relatively speaking) of humanity, implying that the fate of our species hinges on our present-day decisions. If we mess it up, via nuclear war, man-made pandemics, or some other calamity, we foreclose the potential lives of the hundreds of billions of people who are yet to be born, not just in the foreseable future, but thousands, millions or even trillions of years from now. It follows from this belief that avoiding the biggest threats – those with the potential to annihilate us all – is our primary responsibility. Yet some believe that the utilitarian rhetoric underpinning longtermism leads us down a dangerous path and risks mirroring the means-justify-the-ends thinking of violent, utopian ideologies of the past. To understand the rift, we spoke to a critic and a proponent of longtermism for the issue's first article.

Departing from contemplations of humanity's far future and returning to the near, this issue explores the future of wellbeing, including perspectives on the future of mental health, care work, the wellness industry, the cutting edge of wellbeing research, and the role of demographics in shaping our future. We explore the decline of play and the rewiring of childhood through digital technology, and examine how our over-reliance on infertility-causing chemicals has given rise to warnings of an impending 'spermpocalypse.' Finally, we look to ancient wisdom for some timeless insights into how to live a long and healthy life.

I hope you enjoy reading.

CASPER S. PETERSEN

Content

EMERGENT FUTURES

Four snapshots of things to come

WEALTH ISN'T THE KEY TO HAPPINESS

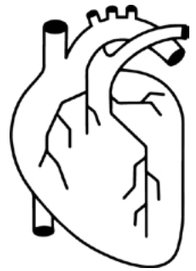
A study conducted by ICTA-UAB and McGill University challenges the notion that economic growth exclusively determines wellbeing, especially in small-scale societies. In contrast to global surveys centred on industrialised societies, this research involved 2,966 participants from Indigenous and local communities across 19 diverse locations. Strikingly, societies with limited monetary incomes reported elevated life satisfaction levels, questioning the commonly noted link between income and life contentment. The results indicate that material wealth, stemming from industrialised economies, may not be essential for human happiness.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITAT AUTONOMA DE BARCELONA
LINK:BIT.LY/48QUXIK
PHOTO: DAVID KWEWUM

DANCING MORE EFFECTIVE THAN SSRIS IN ALLEVIATING SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

A recent study suggests that dancing may outperform SSRIs and cognitive behavioural therapy when it comes to treating depression. Analysing 218 studies with 14,170 participants, researchers found dancing consistently most effective, sparking discussions online on its therapeutic power. Supporting increased neurotransmitter activity, enhanced self-esteem, and improved mindfulness, dancing offers somatic therapy, aiding emotional release and mood enhancement.

SOURCE: THE INDEPENDENT
LINK:BIT.LY/3OZ3L1P
PHOTO: KAMYAR DEGHAN



A WOEFUL WORKFORCE

A report by the Resolution Foundation reveals a shift in those out of work due to ill health in the United Kingdom, with more individuals in their early 20s affected than those in their 40s. One in 20 young people (5%) were economically inactive due to ill health in 2023, and young people now have the poorest mental health of any age group in the UK. Much of this, the report argues, can be attributed to how children with poor mental health face worse education prospects in their future, leading to workforce exclusion.

SOURCE: BBC NEWS
LINK: HTTPS://BIT.LY/3OXEDYZ
ILLUSTRATION: SOPHIA PRIETO:

PULLED APART

While conservative and liberal worldviews have been roughly equally spread along gendered lines in the past, a stark trend of polarisation is emerging among today's youth. A Financial Times investigation has found that women are becoming significantly more progressive than their male peers, who are either remaining moderate or turning towards conservatism. The results found that polarisation is starkest in South Korea and China, with similar tendencies in the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom. Discussions have since opened up on the consequences of gendered animosity on population decline.

SOURCE: FINANCIAL TIMES
LINK: BIT.LY/48SYIZF
PHOTO: ALEJANDRO AZNAR

Treacherous Utopia

TEXT
AUGUST LILJENBERG & CASPER SKOVGAARD PETERSEN
ILLUSTRATIONS
SIGNE BAGGER

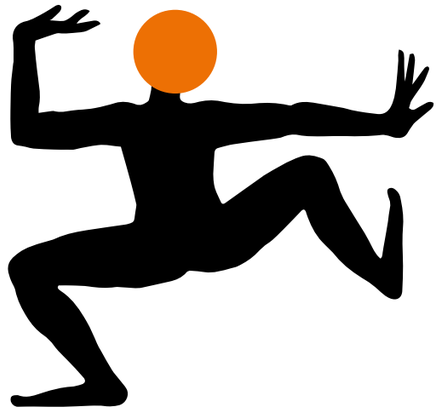
Is 'longtermism' safeguarding or sabotaging our common future?

'Longtermism' has emerged as one of the most influential ideas of our time. Finding growing support in the worlds of big tech, elite academia, and international politics, longtermists want to ensure the survival and wellbeing of our distant descendants by steering clear of existential risks today. Some scholars now warn that longtermism is as dangerous as it is influential, likening it to the most extreme political movements of the past. To understand the rift, we spoke to both a critic and a proponent of the ideology.

Future people count. There could be a lot of them. And we can make their lives better," is the first line in MacAskill's *What We Owe the Future* (2022), a book found in many influential and educated people's bookshelves.

It's considered a manifesto for 'longtermism', the view that the interests of unborn generations should be weighted with equal importance against our interests today, and that we must do everything we can to ensure the maximisation of both their existence – as many of them as possible – and their wellbeing. Longtermists consider humanity's future to be vast, with the number of people yet to be born potentially counting in the trillions. This means the moral duty we have today in minimising existential risks and furthering the wellbeing of our distant ancestors is nothing short of enormous.

Once a relatively fringe idea, a child of Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute (FHI) and Centre For Effective Altruism (CEA), longtermist thinking has begun to spread from elite academia to decision-makers more broadly. In the public sphere, political bodies are beginning to codify and represent future generations directly in their legislature. In 2024, the UN will host a 'Summit of the Future', an inaugural event planned to cement the needs of future generations into the forefront of decision-making worldwide.



ÉMILE P. TORRES

The threats of climate change, nuclear war, and artificial intelligence have also led to a surge in those trying to tackle 'existential risks' which could spell the end of humanity's vast potential. These range from non-profit organisations and institutions such as Cambridge's Future of Life Institute (FLI), founded by Max Tegmark and featuring Elon Musk as an External Advisor, and the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk (CSER), co-founded by the British Astronomer Royal Sir Martin Rees.

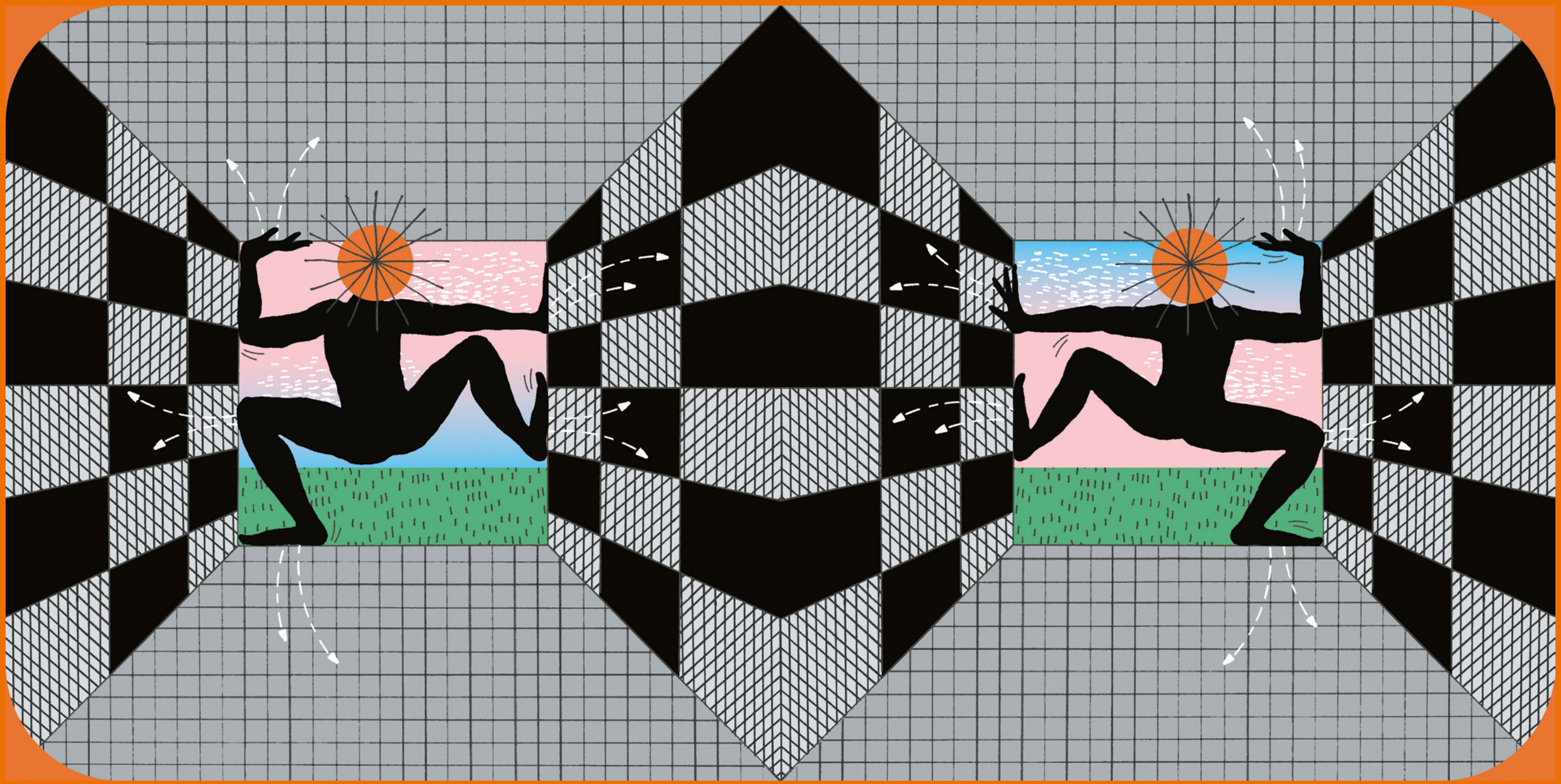
Longtermism has become most popular in Silicon Valley, where major foundations such as Open Philanthropy provide grants to research addressing 'global catastrophic risks'. Indeed, the recent schism in Silicon Valley between Effective Accelerationists and Effective Altruists (E/Acc versus EA; speeding progress up versus slowing it down), is fuelled by a shared idea: humanity's long-term potential can either be catalysed or destroyed by technological progress.

Despite its purported dedication to human wellbeing, longtermism faces criticism as well. Certain scholars caution against it, expressing concerns that it may pose a danger comparable to some of history's most destructive ideologies. In recent years, Dr Émile P. Torres has emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of what they call 'TESCREAL', an acronym which combines longtermism and various other related concepts.

'Transhumanism', 'Extropianism', 'Singularitarianism', 'Cosmism', 'Rationalism', 'Effective Altruism', – the various -isms in the TESCREAL bundle will sound like obscure jargon to the uninitiated. But beneath the esoteric terminology are a set of ideas sharing an emphasis on a techno-utopian vision of the future. Torres defines it as a set of beliefs anticipating "a time when advanced technologies enable humanity to accomplish things like producing radical abundance, reengineering ourselves, becoming immortal, colonising the universe, and creating a sprawling post-human civilisation among the stars full of trillions of trillions of people."

Torres, a philosopher and historian whose work focuses on existential threats to civilisation and humanity, argues that when humanity's future is laid out on a weighing scale of potential wellbeing, the near-infinite value of posterity – attainable through improving, enlarging, and ultimately surpassing humanity – can justify radical policies in the present:

"Longtermism minimises and trivialises current-day suffering, given its expectation that the future will be astronomically larger than the present," Torres says. "This results in the possibility that the ideology could be used by true believers to justify extreme measures, including violence, in order to preserve and



protect what one leading longtermist refers to as 'our vast and glorious future in the universe'."

These extreme measures, Torres contends, might extend to include forms of mass violence or eugenics like those justified by radical political movements in the past, many of which were motivated by envisioned, utopian futures. "Hitler promised Germans a thousand-year Reich, drawing inspiration from motifs in Christian eschatological thinking. It ended up causing the bloodiest conflict in human history. The second bloodiest was the Taiping rebellion in the 19th century between the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom – a utopian and apocalyptic movement – and the Chang dynasty, killing over 30 million people."

Torres points to these past examples of political fanaticism in their critique of longtermism and TESCREAL, which they believe relies on a similar combination of Edenic goals and the application of utilitarian logic to reach them.

When asked for an example of how an ostensibly benevolent concern for future generations intersects with the possibility of mass violence, Torres points to the potential implications of achieving artificial general intelligence (AGI), which has recently become a focal point among Silicon Valley's tech set. If one sees this as an existential threat to civilisation, as many influential voices now do, then there's almost no cost too great if it can help us avoid it. Such views have been expressed by the likes of Eliezer Yudkowsky, the AI researcher who popularised the notion that there might not be a 'fire alarm' for AI – no advanced warning of its imminent takeover. This risk, so long as one views AGI as a threat, necessitates a violent first-strike response.

"Yudkowsky, who's at the heart of the TESCREAL movement, argued in Time Magazine that AGI will probably kill everyone if it's created in the near future, and that states should be willing to engage in military strikes against data centres in non-compliant countries – even at the risk of triggering a thermonuclear war," Torres says. "The reasoning is that thermonuclear war would kill maybe 5 billion people – that leaves 3 billion people to carry on civilisation and potentially create utopia. AGI on the other hand, he believes is an existential risk, and therefore we should risk war."

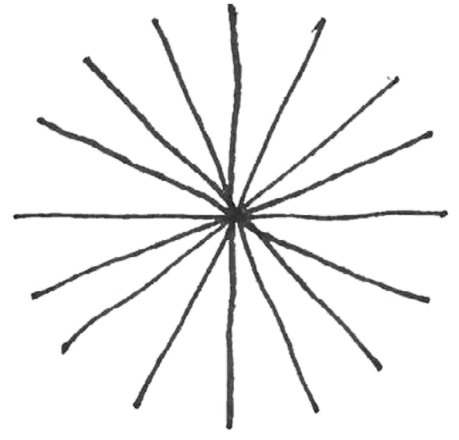
Although Yudkowsky tends to an extreme, Torres argues that his position is simply the logical outcome of a wider set of TESCREAL and longtermist beliefs held by many other influential figures in tech and futurist academia. Needless to say, it's not a conviction that's shared by those whom the criticism is levelled at.

"I have never encountered any longtermist who condones violence," says Dr.

ANDERS SANDBERG

Anders Sandberg, a futurist, transhumanist, and Senior Research Fellow at Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute. Sandberg, a computational neuroscientist by profession, is a firm believer in technology's ability to push human evolution towards what he calls a 'postbiological existence'. He admits to probably being one of the few people who embodies all the letters in the TESCREAL acronym.

"In fact, a perennial debate inside the effective altruism and longtermism community is around the problems of extremism and the apparent paradoxes of near-infinite values," Sandberg says. "It's a debate that hardly anybody outside this community seems to care about, which leads to the assumption that we come down on the side of extremism, despite this not being the case."



Torres, though, is not a complete outsider to these environments. On the contrary, they have held an immaculate track-record of positions at the kinds of institutions that they now direct their criticism at. They spent several months at the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, wrote for the Future of Life Institute and have been a visiting scholar at Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute, home to prominent futurists such as Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord. Then, in 2019, they changed their views quite radically, suddenly becoming a critic.

This change of heart, Torres explains, came partly from realising that there's just as much faith involved in longtermism as in traditional religion. "My own inte-

"I came to realise that the TESCREAL worldview is essentially an extension of techno-capitalism, crafted almost entirely by white men at elite universities and in Silicon Valley. By consequence it channels and embeds all the biases and limitations of the white, male, Western capitalist worldview in it."

– Émile Torres

rest in the future was initially sparked by my Christian background," they say. "Eschatology – the study of last things – has always been an important component to the Christian worldview, and I think my religious upbringing planted the seeds of my interest in the long-term future of humanity."

When a younger Torres picked up Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near* (2005), they found that it checked all the boxes that their faith used to. "When I left religion there was a void left behind. But here was another sense of promise and meaning. The promise of eternal life – it literally being in the heavens," Torres says.

In his book, the Google-affiliated computer scientist argued that by 2029, unprecedented technological growth would lead to the irreversible and uncontrollable proliferation of superintelligence (he has since amended this to 2045). "What was different about 'singularitarianism' was that it purported to be based on scientific principles – looking at tech trends and extrapolating them into the future. So, there was a robustness to the reasoning that made it more appealing than traditional religion," Torres explains.

Their change in perspective was also influenced by a growing awareness of what they perceive as a homogeneity in both background and thought within longtermist communities. Torres contends that this lack of diversity contributes to a myopic overemphasis on quantification, augmentation, and maximisation as exclusive measures of 'better' futures.

"I came to realise that the TESCREAL worldview is essentially an extension of techno-capitalism, crafted almost entirely by white men at elite universities and in Silicon Valley. By consequence it channels and embeds all the biases and limitations of the white, male, Western capitalist worldview in it," Torres says. "It's worth noting that capitalism and utilitarianism emerged around the same time. The bottom line of both is maximising something: for capitalists, it's profit. For utilitarians, it's 'value' in a more abstract sense – something like 'happiness' or 'satisfied desires'."

Torres' critique is noteworthy both for its severity and its broadness of scope, encompassing Yudkowsky's advocacy of pre-emptive war to stop AI, and other, more mild expressions of longtermist-adjacent thinking. Certainly, the notion that extreme ideologies rarely emerge 'ready-baked' but need time to build support and mature into their most twisted form finds precedent in history. Yet this conflation of moderate and radical expressions of similar ideas also opens the door to criticism of TESCREAL as a critiquing term in itself. To Sandberg, it risks making a mountain out of a molehill.

"Any ideology can be harmful or dangerous," he says. "Religions have caused religious wars, environmental concerns have blocked nuclear low carbon-energy sources in the past, and the search for justice and social solidarity led to the Gulags."

"That is not a reason to reject spirituality, caring for the environment, or justice," he continues. "One always has to look at the proposed implementations, what people actually believe and do – rather than critiquing the maximally extreme version of longtermism, and then claiming that this is all what the idea is about."

To Sandberg, the need for distinguishing between extremes within longtermism as well as between the various other branches of far-future advocacy also applies to the contention that the maximalist intentions of longtermists is an expression of a myopically utilitarian and quantitative logic.

"Longtermism doesn't only care about how many people there are, but also what kinds of lives they can live," he says, adding that he sees calculations of the value of vast populations primarily as an academic exercise.

"We do not know what lives people may want to live, so we have reason to maintain the openness of the future – preventing value lock-in, stable totalitarianism, and extinction, because they limit the possible good lives. We should not discriminate against people far away in time just as we should not discriminate against people far away in space."

For Torres, focusing on the very far future is not just a difficult challenge, but a fundamentally flawed exercise, since we have no idea what the world will look like in millions, billions, or trillions of years. "It's like we're driving along a winding road at night. If you are going to decide to steer left or right based on what's three miles ahead of you, you're going to crash," they say.

Sandberg doesn't see it as an either/or proposition. "It is a rational strategy to hedge one's bets, including moral ones," he says. "We should distribute our efforts across what appears to matter, and if we disagree, so much better. Maybe it turns out that one side or the other had the right moral theory, and then at least half of the effort went into something good."

Care for our descendants, of course, does not need to strictly be a far-future concern either, or the exclusive purview of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and futurist academic institutions. Take the emerging initiatives of government bodies codifying future generations directly into their legislature, such as the Welsh Future

"We do not know what lives people may want to live, so we have reason to maintain the openness of the future – preventing value lock-in, stable totalitarianism, and extinction, because they limit the possible good lives. We should not discriminate against people far away in time just as we should not discriminate against people far away in space."
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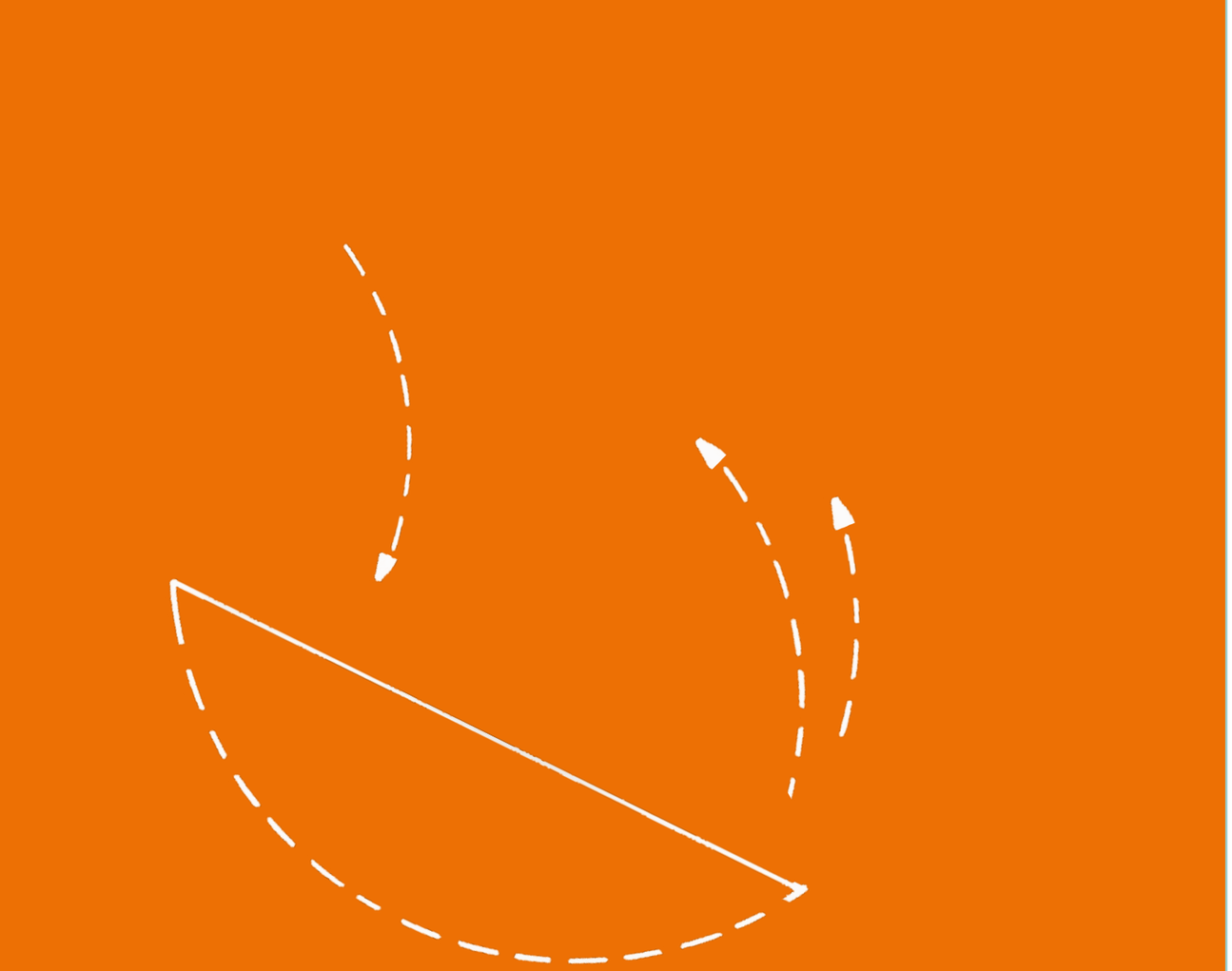


"I think that positive images of the future are really important. It's about piecemeal change – we don't need to buy into maximising the population by becoming digital beings spread throughout the universe in order to embrace long-term thinking."

– Émile Torres

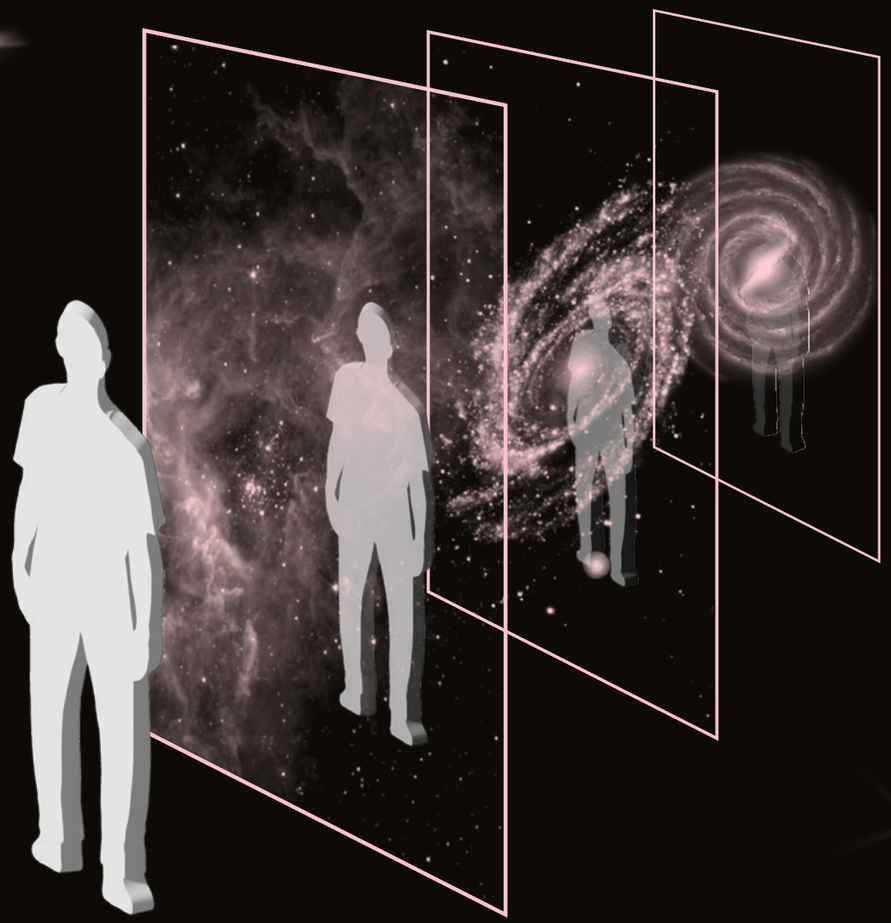
Generations Commissioner and UN's Declaration on Future Generations, the latter of which will be inaugurated during the UN's 'Summit of the Future' in September 2024. The writings surrounding these initiatives are packed with terminology that sounds decidedly longtermist, despite that term not being used outright.

Wales's Future Generations Commissioner, Derek Walker, describes his mandate as "improving lives now, next year, in 25, 50, 100 years into the future – and more." The bill underpinning the Commissioner's legislative authority advises public bodies to consider the likely effect of an objective over a 25-year period - about one generation ahead. While the UN's Our Common Agenda report doesn't note a specific time-horizon, it clearly states how it wishes "long-term thinking" and "representing future generations" to be used. In this context, 'safeguarding the future' means ensuring a "healthy planet, strong institutions, health/social protection, education/work, and preparedness." A distant call from the mind-uploading, transhumanist singularity.

Indeed, much of the more progressive work being done within futures studies is applauded even by Torres: "I think that positive images of the future are really important," they say. "It's about piecemeal change – we don't need to buy into maximising the population by becoming digital beings spread throughout the universe in order to embrace long-term thinking." ■

TESCREALism – Defining the movement

TESCREAL is broadly defined as a series of distinct but overlapping futurist philosophies. Émile P. Torres and Timnit Gebru have gathered this bundle of technology-related ideologies into a central acronym in order to interrogate their roots in Silicon Valley's supposed rightward turn. While each individual definition may have its own historical context, they all enmesh towards a common higher goal; the prevention of human extinction through the maximisation and acceleration of technological progress in the present.



T ranshumanism
The end goal of transhumanism is a technologically-engineered 'posthuman' race, and encompasses the belief that, through sheer progress, immortality, superintelligence and total physical superiority can be achieved. The transhumanist project considers itself the next step in human evolution.

E xtropianism
The name given to one of the earliest coherent transhumanist movements. Extropianism focuses on countering the entropy of the human lifespan (through 'extropy'), perhaps indefinitely. It originally supported technologies such as cryogenics.

S ingularitarianism
The 'Singularity' identifies the moment technological advancement outpaces human comprehension. This moment is commonly predicted to be brought about by the successful development of self-replicating AGI. A post-singularity world is visualised as a techno-utopian one.

C osmism
Also related to transhumanism, cosmism envisions total space colonisation, and Earth as a collective, virtual human consciousness expanding outward. Human-AI mergence leads to the development of infinite possibilities for cosmic exploration while offering a form of immortality.

R ationalism
Born out of the Internet forum LessWrong, Rationalism posits that we must maximise our own intelligence through rationality to advance humanity. Additionally, the basis of all knowledge should be pure reason. In turn, the application of reason is 'perfected' through rationalist execution.

E ffective **A** ltruism
A reframing of philanthropic practices that prioritises efficiency and optimised outcomes. A Rationalist system of thought as applied to ethics, based on the QALY methodology, for determining the ultimate outcome of all philanthropic action and wealth distribution. Like Rationalism, EA takes human intelligence as a defining operator.

L ongtermism
Combining EA, Rationalism and transhumanism, Longtermism seeks a future where human life is maximised. In order for its scale to be realised, all current decisions should contribute to proliferation (so that as many future human lives are as optimally happy as possible). Elon Musk is perhaps the most prominent public longtermist.

Childhood Rewired

TEXT
THOR SVANHOLM GUSTAVFSON
PHOTO
KSENIA CHERNAYA, DANYA GUTAN & BEN MACK

Kids are playing less and spending more time on their phones. This, some scientists now believe, is a key factor leading to the rapid increase in mental health issues troubling younger generations. A new book, Anxious Generation, outlines the connections and suggests ways to alleviate the crisis.

For many who grew up in the latter part of the 20th century, thinking back on childhood conjures up memories of summer days spent on residential streets that seemed to hum with the simplicity of youth. Playing in the local parking lot or park held the promise of an exhilarating adventure waiting to unfold. In every secret cave, pretend family, or theatrically performed play war, stories and worlds out of bounds for adults were created through the force of imagination. Sidewalks were transformed into chalky canvasses of vibrant hopscotch patterns and multi-coloured mazes, and every square or corner was a potential stage for groups of friends gathering for an impromptu game of hide-and-seek or a poorly managed lemonade stand. Childhood was a time of climbs, skips, and hops and an occasional bruise or skin abrasion – of wild, unsupervised play entailing risks and rewards, and a sense of unlimited possibilities.

This kind of childhood experience may not have disappeared, but it has become rarer in today's world. Admittedly, the reminiscing of older generations has a way of romanticising the past, but the so-called 'decline of playtime' is a phenomenon observed across the developed world. The amount of time children spend playing with each other is decreasing, and when they do play, it tends to be more supervised, more structured, and less physical than in the past. One study from Save the Children UK noted that only one in four children play regularly on their street compared to three quarters of their grandparents' generation. A similar study, this one from Aarhus University, showed a similar trend and noted that parents' worry about their child's wellbeing seemed correlated with how much they tend to play.

"For Rausch, the importance of play in childhood development is key to explaining the current youth wellbeing crisis. It's a phenomenon which has been underway for a while, but which started drawing headlines during the Covid-19 pandemic as cases of anxiety and depression shot up across the world."

Some researchers are seeing connections between this lack of 'unstructure' in children's lives and the wide range of mental illnesses that plague the youth today. Among them are Zach Rausch, Associate Research Scientist at NYU-Stern School of Business. Rausch is the lead researcher for the new book *Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, which outlines the connections between technology – smartphones especially – and declining adolescent mental health. We spoke to Rausch ahead of the book release to hear more about what he has learned.

He begins his explanation not with technology, but at a more fundamental level: human evolution. To understand the destructive social effects that technology can have, he asks us to consider the aspects of our biology that have shaped us into the communal creatures we are today. Specifically, Rausch points to a set of evolutionary facts that help explain why childhood is such a crucial time in human development.

"Childhood spans roughly 10 years, and it's a time that's essential for social and communal learning," he explains.

This, to Rausch, is critical to understanding the disruptive effects disturbances to development during those important years can have. Childhood is the time when we learn to adapt and grow to become a part of the world, and a key motivation for learning is the desire to play, Rausch says. Play is the foundation of childhood and therefore the foundation of learning and growth.

"For millennia we have had a specific kind of childhood which is mostly outdoors," Rausch explains. "This play has been mostly with other people of mixed age groups, and often unsupervised by adults. It's embodied, physical, synchronous, and interactive. And this kind of play is extremely nutritious and incredibly important for a child's development – physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally."

For Rausch, the importance of play in childhood development is key to explaining the current youth wellbeing crisis. It's a phenomenon which has been underway for a while, but which started drawing headlines during the Covid-19 pandemic as cases of anxiety and depression shot up across the world. In 2021, a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that a staggering 22% of US high school students had seriously considered attempting suicide. Here, as with most youth mental health research, girls were shown to be most disposed with a 58% increase compared to just a decade earlier.

Although it may have manifested severely during the pandemic, the roots of the

mental health crisis date back further. Some, like psychology professor Peter Gray, point to the post WWII period and the impacts of the change in schooling over the years, including the rise of homework, testing and more structured activities.

Rausch likewise points to this period as a starting point, yet puts a much greater emphasis on a more recent turn of events, beginning around 2010, when we allowed a handful of tech companies to conduct a massive, global experiment transforming childhood into something that's largely played out in digital social worlds.

Social media giants such as Meta are increasingly scrutinised for their addictive design features, for negligently avoiding measures to protect their youngest users from harmful content, and for their profit-hungry pursuit of engagement. In what's sometimes referred to as the 'techlash', politicians and the public have begun demanding a greater degree of accountability on the part of the tech giants. The influence these platforms have on mental health is wide-ranging, as seen in January 2024, when Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg stood up during a congressional hearing and apologised to an attending group of parents of 60 teenagers who tragically lost their lives following sexual exploitation or harassment via social media.

Rausch argues that social media is also to blame for mingling with childhood development during the period when we rely so heavily on play in becoming resilient and thriving adults. 2010 is a key year for Rausch because it was around that time that we gave social media and smartphones to the youngest generation, moving childhood social life from what Rausch calls 'play-based childhood' to one that is 'phone-based'. Yet the period leading up to the 2010s, Rausch explains, was also significant for how blind collective society was to the potential pitfalls of social technology.

"The 90s and early 2000s was an era of incredible techno-optimism, a period where democracies were thriving, autocracies were collapsing, and we had the rise of social media leading to the Arab Spring," he says. "We had all these indicators that the technological world was only going to bring more freedom and more connection, and so the idea that we can supplement childhood with this new, exciting technology and that this is going to be kind of a net positive was very understandable at the time."

It was on the backend of this optimistic fervour that smartphones were introduced and readily accepted, with little consideration of their potential negative impact on the youth. Today it's looking harder than ever for parents to reclaim play

"No parent wants to see their child feeling disconnected and alone, yet if you do send your kids out to play there is often no one to play with. In the United States, someone might even call the police because they think you are neglecting your child."

in the name of their children's wellbeing, Rausch recognises, because restricting your child from online screen time is tough, as no child wants to be the only one who is not on Instagram or does not have a phone.

"No parent wants to see their child feeling disconnected and alone, yet if you do send your kids out to play there is often no one to play with. In the United States, someone might even call the police because they think you are neglecting your child," he says.

Stuck in a collective trap, any action to turn things around will have to be taken in a coordinated manner. Banning the use of phones and screen technologies in schools and after-school activities has started to become more commonplace, with UNESCO now recommending that schools worldwide ban smartphones completely in classrooms. Several countries, including France and the Netherlands, have already followed these guidelines – and wisely so, if you ask Rausch.

The classroom is one thing, but what about children's social lives outside school? How can the negative effect of technology on this crucial aspect of childhood development be mitigated?

It's a difficult challenge, but perhaps not an impossible one to solve. The book presents a series of concrete conditions and norms that could be introduced to help build a 21st-century version of the play-based childhood. These steps include no smartphones until age 14 and delaying use of social media until age 16. Rausc also suggests keeping phones completely out of schools (rather than just the classroom), which would help solve the collective-action-problem by creating a seven- or eight-hour period of device-free social interaction each day. According to Rausch, this would do much to alleviate the anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses endemic in younger generations.

"The research is quite strong, pointing to the smoking gun of digital technology and the lack of in-person social interaction and play," he says.

Rausch applies the risk analyst Nassim Taleb's concept of anti-fragility to the role of unsupervised, risky play in learning and building the internal competencies and strengths as well as the self-efficacy needed to handle the unexpected curveballs that life throws at us. Taleb defines three kinds of systems in the world. Some systems are fragile, such as a wine glass that will shatter if you drop or put stress on it. Other systems are robust, such as a plastic cup which you can drop without it breaking. It is not good for it, but it will be fine. Finally, we have systems that are anti-fragile like the muscles in our body. If we don't stress them, they will atrophy and eventually perish. Anti-fragile systems require some degree of disorder and stress to grow and mature. The same applies to children's development, Rausch argues.

"Children and children's brains are anti-fragile to the physical world they evolved for, not the new hyper-viral virtual world they have been thrown into. Digital literacy can be helpful, but what is more important is that we build up and support the anti-fragile nature of ours."

Overprotecting parents and social media, Rausch argues, do the opposite, in that these things are like experience blockers; they lead to children being shielded from the core experiences they need to become resilient and happy adolescents. These experiences, crucially, should be obtained before diving head-long into a virtual world that isn't designed with their best interests in mind.

Reaching the end of our conversation, the focus turns toward the future. Phones, after all, will not be the endpoint of technological evolution, and the pressure of being a child and teenager is unlikely going to ease in the years and decades to come.

When asked what he sees as the most important trait to foster in children, Rausch states that he sees "cognitive flexibility" as crucial, adding that "Playing is the most important way to build that cognitive flexibility at an early age."

Play and education go hand in hand, Rausch concludes. And open-ended teaching – where the end result is not known beforehand – creates a playful space for imagination and creativity fit for a future that holds no absolute truth or definitive answers. ■

TEXT
JOSÉ MANUEL JEREZ POMBO
ILLUSTRATION
SOPHIA PRIETO

THE GROUNDED MIND

New research into mental health is pushing our understanding of the mind-body connection and the intricacies of the brain. What would a more holistic approach to mental wellbeing look like?

Some say we only appreciate things once we lose them. The repercussions of social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic underscored how easily we take mental health for granted, as well as how integral it is to our overall wellbeing. The last few years may have brought this realisation to the forefront, but the mental health crisis predates Covid-19, persisting as a 'hidden pandemic'.

Based on the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study from 2019, mental disorders account for more disability than any other type of disease, except musculoskeletal disorders (which include arthritis and back pain). On average, for every twenty years lived in disability, around three are due to mental conditions. This surpasses the combined impact of diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and chronic respiratory conditions. Within mental conditions, depressive disorders stand out, causing more years of disability than any other disorder – whether physical or mental – except for back pain. And while mental conditions may not be a direct cause of death, they can drastically diminish people's quality of life and increase the risk of additional conditions, some of which may eventually be lethal. But if mental health is such a significant public health concern, why isn't more being done to address it?

The key to answering this question is multifaceted. Part of the explanation has to do with the complex, multidimensional nature of mental health, as well as the way in which mental conditions are currently diagnosed and treated. Stigma, rooted in misunderstanding, is also a major obstacle in tackling the mental health crisis despite recent efforts to address it.

What leads to mental conditions, or even thinking about mental health, being stigmatised? Certainly, the common misconception that someone chooses to feel a certain way instead of 'getting over it' is a contributing factor. So is the opposite belief that mental conditions are an intrinsic part of the individual that expresses it, which often leads to them being labelled as 'weak' or 'helpless'. Lack of understanding also leads to some people fearing those with a mental condition by perceiving them as erratic and unpredictable.

The common theme that unites these views is a lack of understanding of what causes mental conditions. Mental health is a highly complex, multidimensional issue, which helps explain why deeply rooted cultural, philosophical, and theological interpretations sometimes win out over scientific explanations that may seem more inaccessible to the average person.

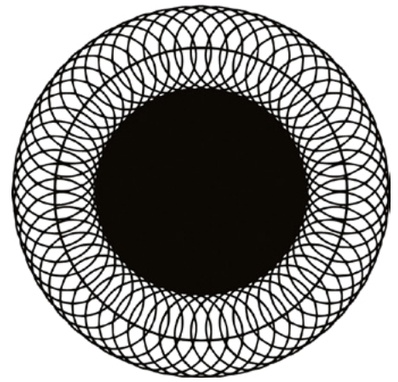
This is nothing new. Due to their abstract nature, mental phenomena have been subject to mystical and spiritual interpretations for millennia. This includes their separation from the physical body and encapsulation in concepts such as 'mind' and 'soul'. Philosophers have a term for this concept: *mind-body dualism*. With proponents such as the 17th century thinker René Descartes, it posits that the mind is separate from the biological substrate that underpins it.

Although this dualism has greatly shaped our perception of mental health, it wasn't always taken for granted. Some early civilisations, although distinguishing the mind from the body, believed the two were inextricably linked. The Roman poet Juvenal, for instance, wrote of a "mens sana in corpore sano," or "a healthy mind in a healthy body."

Attempts to pinpoint the exact location of the mind aren't precisely limited to recent times either. Some, including the ancient Greek physicians Galen and Alcmaeon, already suspected the brain to be its source, while Aristotle pointed to the heart, a romantic interpretation shared with Chinese philosophy, as the Chinese word 心 (xīn) can mean both heart and mind.

Despite these efforts, the lack of a strong scientific foundation meant that mental processes were not fully 'grounded' within the physical realm, and the mind was seen as immaterial and intangible, a cloud of sorts floating above people's heads. This shrouded the mind in mystery, allowing alternative interpretations to compete with attempts at a more scientific understanding.

The late 19th century saw the beginning of the slow process of demystification of the physiological link between mental states and the brain. Among the early breakthroughs were the neuron theory, put forth by Santiago Ramón y Cajal,



and the discovery of neurotransmitters – chemicals through which neurons communicate. Technologies to measure brain activity were also developed, which gave researchers the tools to investigate the physical manifestations of mental phenomena.

Modern neurology and psychiatry emerged during this time – with some occasional crossovers – as distinct disciplines, although very much following the dualist paradigm of body and mind. Neurology would go on to address more 'physical' conditions such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis, while psychiatry would take on the more 'mental' afflictions like anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, and neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism.

This divide happened for a variety of reasons. The first is that, even by the 19th century, our biological understanding was not sufficiently developed to realise how much in common neurological and psychiatric disorders have, and as a result the fields formed independently.

Second is the nature of psychiatric conditions, which are highly complex and more easily diagnosed through behavioural and cognitive signs than through physical manifestations. What's more, it is often not the symptoms themselves – such as irritability, sadness, fear, and agitation – that are pathological, but rather how intensely they manifest. As a result, in the absence of a more reliable (or even viable) method, questionnaires such as the ones found in the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or DSM-5) remain the gold standard for diagnosing and measuring psychiatric conditions.

"More recently, researchers have been shedding light on the biological underpinnings of mental conditions. As a result, the artificial wall between neurology and psychiatry – which scientific advances have demonstrated is arbitrary and counterproductive – is slowly being broken down."

In contrast, many neurological conditions have clearly defined pathologies. For example, multiple sclerosis results from the immune system mistakenly attacking the protective layer that surrounds the nerves. Consequently, the symptoms of neurological conditions, such as loss of motor function or control, memory loss, seizures, or headaches, clearly hint at disruption in brain physiology and can often be detected through various diagnostic methods.

The division between neurology and psychiatry creates some awkward situations. For example, while Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease are categorised as neurological conditions, the dementia resulting from PD and AD falls within the boundaries of psychiatry. The distinction between comorbid psychiatric conditions themselves based on the DSM-5 is not that clear either. For example, cases of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia are often observed in the same family, clearly suggesting a shared genetic component in these conditions.

More recently, researchers have been shedding light on the biological underpinnings of mental conditions. As a result, the artificial wall between neurology and psychiatry – which scientific advances have demonstrated is arbitrary and counterproductive – is slowly being broken down. Increasingly, scientists are calling for a "conjoined effort of neurologists and psychiatrists" in the drive to understand how "a disease of the brain results in an illness of the mind," as Joseph B. Martin, Professor Emeritus of Neurobiology at Harvard University has put it.

The history of depression treatment is a classic example of why such a conjoined effort is needed. In the late 20th century, depression was linked to a 'chemical imbalance' in the neurotransmitter serotonin. Consequently, various drugs – antidepressants – were developed that stop the chemical from being reabsorbed by neurons.

But newer research paints a more nuanced picture. Depression is now believed to be the result of long-lasting changes in the brain's neuronal connections through a property known as neuroplasticity. Depression has been found to be associated with loss of neuronal connections in the hippocampus (a brain structure responsible for learning and memory), a process which, it turns out, antidepressants work to reverse.

Neuroplasticity is a key piece to solving the puzzle of mental health and illness. It explains how our experiences, genetics, and environmental factors collectively cause changes to our brain and, consequently, why dealing with mental conditions is not just about 'flipping a switch'. But it also means that the brain can be rewired through specialised techniques – such as mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy.

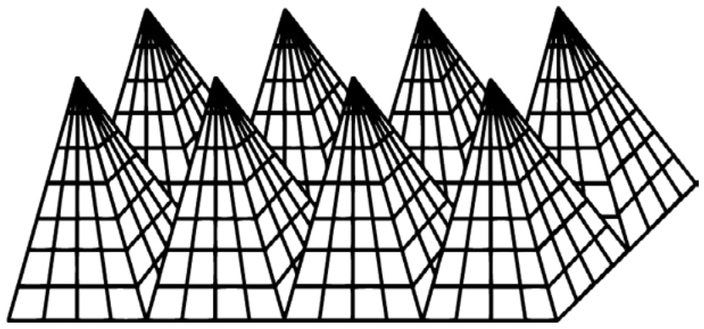
Importantly, scientists are also addressing the somewhat arbitrary divides created by symptom-based diagnoses. One such initiative is underway at the Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry, where an ongoing study seeks to collect a wide range of data – from the genetic and molecular to the neurocognitive and psychophysiological – from a thousand subjects with psychiatric conditions to explore more objective measures of diagnosis.

The implications of developments such as this are immense. Understanding the biological nature and profiles of mental conditions can allow for earlier, more accurate, and more tailored diagnosis and treatment than current trial-and-error approaches can. Importantly, it makes illnesses tangible, allowing both individuals and society at large to see them as an existing problem that can be addressed.

With this new understanding of mental health, it would be tempting to develop a brain-focused perspective. Although this point of view has advantages, it also comes with the risk of following a narrow approach with an overly clinical mindset.

Instead, this biological understanding of mental conditions should be nested in the broader behavioural, societal, and cultural context in which mental health unfolds. One can acknowledge the physical underpinnings of the mind while being aware of how it extends beyond the confines of the brain in a complex, invisible mesh of experiences, behaviours, relationships, and culture.

Mental conditions are simply too complex for silver bullet solutions to ever be viable. We may compare them to the Gordian Knot, which, according to legend, was impossible to untie. And although Alexander the Great solved the issue by slashing it with a sword, human beings are not knots. We need to approach mental conditions skilfully and accurately, only using pharmaceutical treatment when appropriate to loosen the knot and create opportunities for non-pharmaceutical interventions such as psychotherapy to produce long-lasting improvement.



Unfortunately, access to such treatments remains a critical issue, as does that fact that mental conditions are often addressed through drugs alone when it is too late for preventive or less drastic measures to be effective. This, combined with unprecise or even inaccurate diagnoses severely undermines current efforts, with many treatments having low rates of success.

So, what lies ahead?

While there remains a lot of ground to cover, we can already see glimpses of the opportunities a more holistic approach to mental health could bring, as well as some risks and challenges to keep in mind.

Importantly, today's scientific breakthroughs may lead to further demystification of mental conditions in broader society and a push to start viewing them as a real and tangible problem. At the same time, we should be aware of the risk of ostracising individuals, for example in a social or professional context, based on this new knowledge.

Understanding the brain as embedded, figuratively, in the wider life experiences and societal structures that individuals inhabit may give us the most high-resolution picture possible and support individuals' mental wellbeing more effectively. Doing so, however, will require radically improving access to interventions beyond medication.

Technologies such as telehealth, mental health apps, and wearables – while not a panacea – may help us approach this goal, as will fostering prevention and providing new ways to detect mental conditions early, which may be redefined based on biological signatures rather than symptoms alone.

Crucially, promoting mental wellbeing is also about acknowledgment. As the famous wizard Albus Dumbledore once put it: "of course it is happening inside your head, but why on Earth should that mean that it is not real?" ■

USING THE FUTURE:

FUTURE PHILANTHROPY

ANTICIPATION FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Philea, the Philanthropy Europe Association, in collaboration with the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, launched the research- and community-driven Futures Philanthropy initiative in 2023. It's an ambitious program that aims to embed and enhance futures literacy across the philanthropic sector and civil society

PHOTO: MARIA ORLOVA

Why

There is a growing awareness in the philanthropic community about the need to better prepare for uncertain futures and address issues that will be relevant tomorrow, today, while ensuring intergenerational fairness and the resilience of our societies. In the face of uncertainty, it is imperative to work strategically with the future, to be equipped with relevant tools and methodologies and to be aware of potential risks and opportunities.

The scale of the challenges facing us requires the philanthropy sector to foster collaboration on complex and interconnected issues, including war, devastating natural disasters, the climate crisis, food insecurity, economic stagnation, widening inequalities, societal polarisation, the rise of authoritarianism and an eroding trust in public institutions. These crises have been catalysts for the philanthropic sector to think and work more collaboratively and creatively.

How

At the nexus of tradition and innovation, Futures Philanthropy emerges as a pioneering initiative with the ambition to enrich philanthropic practice and civic society at large. The journey toward an expansive Futures Philanthropy movement is marked by the critical understanding that anticipation is necessary to serve the common good in new ways that are appropriate for changing times. By adopting a forward-looking perspective, philanthropy can transcend traditional boundaries, enabling a dynamic approach to social good that is both adaptive and transformative. These approaches leverage an array of futures practices to enrich and empower philanthropy's resources, capacities, and ambitions, marrying the two disciplines in a reciprocal fashion that amplifies their collective impact.

During the past year, Futures Philanthropy has facilitated a growing community of practice, launched the 21st Century Philanthropy Survey, and will soon publish the report "Futures Philanthropy – anticipation for the common good". The report outlines how foresight can be practically integrated within philanthropy, what the future of philanthropy might look like, and explores the future of Europe from a speculative 'what-if' perspective.

If you are interested in learning more, please reach out to us:

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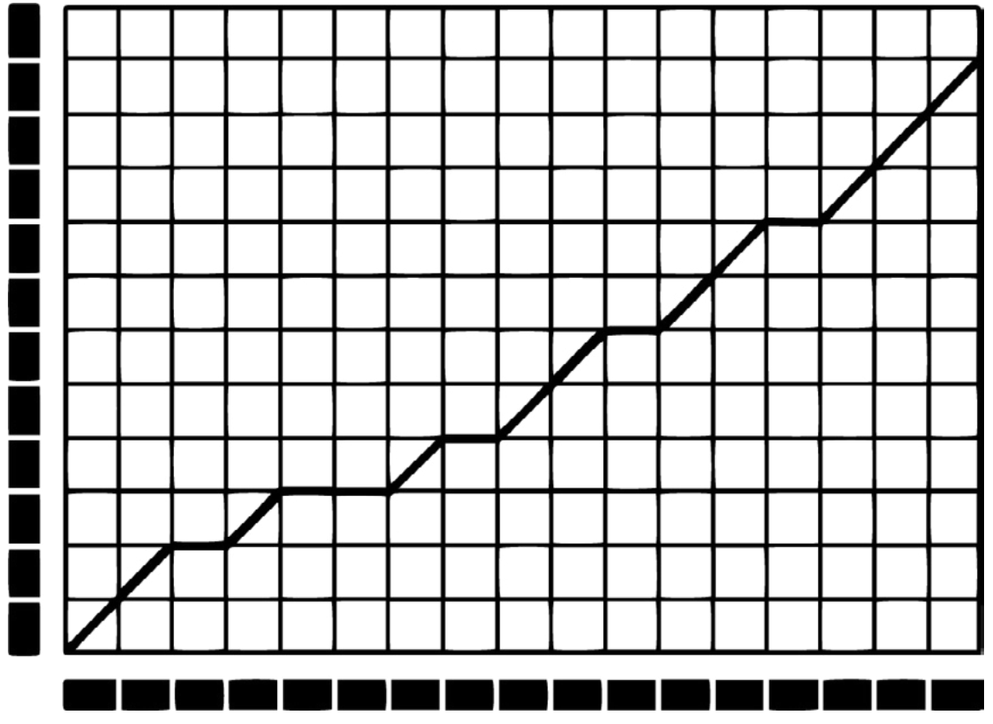
A Q&A with Mads Falkenfleth Jensen, Founder and Director of the Wellbeing Economy Lab.

The Cheerful Science



Despite economics often purporting to optimise our lives, no one seems to be particularly joyous upon hearing an economist speak. Mads Falkenfleth Jensen is hoping to change that. In March 2024, he and his team launched the Wellbeing Economy Lab, an independent, science-based think tank dedicated to the co-creation of a Wellbeing Economy that aims to reach across the political spectrum to develop evidence-based solutions to society's long-term social and ecological challenges.

What is the purpose of WELA?

At its core, the aim of WELA is to create a transmission mechanism between the volumes of new research coming out of academia and the political decision-makers in Danish society that are, for the most part, busy with simply 'keeping up' with changes at hand. By acting as an innovation hub and knowledge centre for what's going on within new economic thinking, we can figure out what the research actually says and what our options are for systemic economic change.

Let's wind back a bit – when you talk about a 'wellbeing economy' what exactly do you mean?

Sure. A wellbeing economy is underpinned by the idea that our economy is not an end in itself – it's a means to an end. Over the past several decades, there has been a political consensus across the spectrum that what constitutes this 'end' is something along the lines of that "If the whole pie grows, then there is more for everyone."

The problem is that we are transgressing our planetary boundaries by thinking in this way. What we at WELA say, is that we want an economic system that puts wellbeing at the centre of the economy. One which facilitates good lives for everyone – both current and future generations – and within planetary boundaries. It's not really a partisan issue or one with a political agenda. It's simply the most sensible thing to do, I think.

Wellbeing is a subjective and culturally dependent term. How are we supposed to understand 'wellbeing' in the context of WELA trying to systemically reimagine the economy?

Well, our aim is to say that everyone needs to have their fundamental needs and rights met, which includes e.g. a sense of meaning and purpose. What we're trying to do shouldn't be ambitious, but unfortunately, in the world we're living in, it is.

The perspectives we're bringing in aren't so much new as they are very marginalised. We're now trying to bring those perspectives into the mainstream of how we do policy.

Is there a particular reason WELA is being established now in Denmark – a country otherwise known for its leading role in things like renewable energy and social democracy? Is it a particularly opportune time in the Danish political landscape, or is it simply because many of our planetary boundaries are currently on track towards being radically overshot, making action necessary as soon as possible?

I think the time is ripe for something like WELA – there's a public demand for figuring out what we're going to do to solve the crises of our time. A lot of people are waking up to the fact that we cannot continue down the path we have been for the past decades. We've seen so many records shattered in the past year: on the 17th of November last year, Earth's surface temperature exceeded 2°C above the pre-industrial average, and the average temperature has been above 1.5°C from the last year to date.

How should we respond to this – are the necessary changes up to individuals, or should they be more systemic? Do I use a paper straw while someone else is polluting a lot more than me? And if I choose a paper straw rather than a plastic one, what ensures that others will even follow suit? Furthermore, there's so much information to process that it's next to impossible to navigate it for ordinary people. Add to that how we're not just talking about climate change when we mention planetary boundaries – it's also biodiversity loss, and pollution from plastics and petrochemicals etc. There are so many different interconnected crises that we can't all be professors and 'know the science.'

Seems like a lot of work – to overcome the creeping apathy many are starting to feel towards being environmentally conscious in every decision they make, and still not feeling completely certain that what they are doing is the right choice. Surely, even on a Danish level, this is a job too large for one think-tank.

Clearly. We're not trying to do this work alone. Our vision is one of co-creation: we have been working with multiple stakeholders in both the public and private sector, as well as civic society, in trying to build a network surrounding the transition towards a wellbeing economy. We are under no illusion that we can make all the necessary changes to our system on our own. We are lucky to be a part of the Danish hub of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance – a global initiative bridging organisations and individuals interested in working towards the wellbeing economy.

I understand how the present-day obsession with growth fuels a fire here, but could you elaborate a bit more on the core of this disconnect between how people think the economic system is built and how it actually works?

I think economists use so much jargon, that most people don't fully understand what they mean, and then become disengaged. The economic models that are used for making predictions become a 'black box'. Similar to a TV, it works when we push a button on our remote control, even though we don't understand exactly how. In the same way, the economic models provide numbers about the functioning of the economy, that people simply don't understand. I think that can lead to a democratic deficit and ultimately lead to a feeling of being disenfranchised.

Why? Well, I think there exists a dynamic where our policymakers have an incentive to defer how we prioritise to economists. If an economic model says that a certain policy proposal will result in a certain level of growth, then policymakers can defend its implementation by saying that "It's what the economists are saying." And thus, not take full responsibility, because the choice was made by "the economy".

Instead of closing down these discussions, I think we would be better off if we opened them up much more. And I think that's one of the things the wellbeing economy helps doing by saying, "Hold on, the economy is actually man-made. It's designed, which means we can also change it by design."

So, the idea is that by democratising the political-economic system, we shift the emphasis from, say, universal growth, to how the economy can improve our individual, collective, and global wellbeing?

Somewhat. Most economists would agree that GDP is not a good measurement of wellbeing or societal progress. Yet it's still institutionalised in treaties, laws and regulations that we have today. We need some parts of the economy to grow, some parts to stay where they are, and some to shrink because of the damage they cause, be it to the environment or people.

How do you hope the state of the economic system will look by 2050, both in Denmark and abroad? Are there any things you think we will collectively wish we had acted on in hindsight?

I hope we will have transitioned into a wellbeing economy. Living in as stable and prosperous of a country as Denmark, I have a sense that if it's not possible

for us to rapidly transition into a wellbeing economy, then it would be difficult for me to have hope for the rest of the world. With that wealth and stability comes a huge responsibility. The specifics of figuring out what the science tells us about how we could achieve that eventual state is what WELA is tasked with answering.

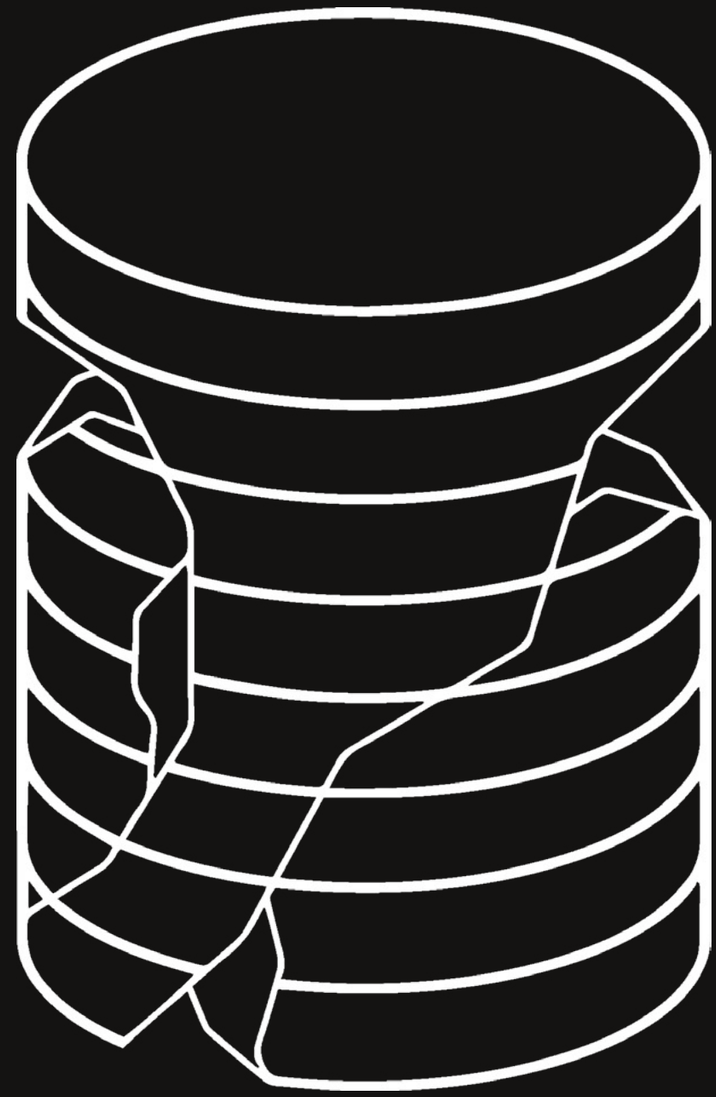
Are there any of your ideas that may be considered radical today, but in 25-years' time will be completely normalised, assuming we manage the transition to a wellbeing economy?

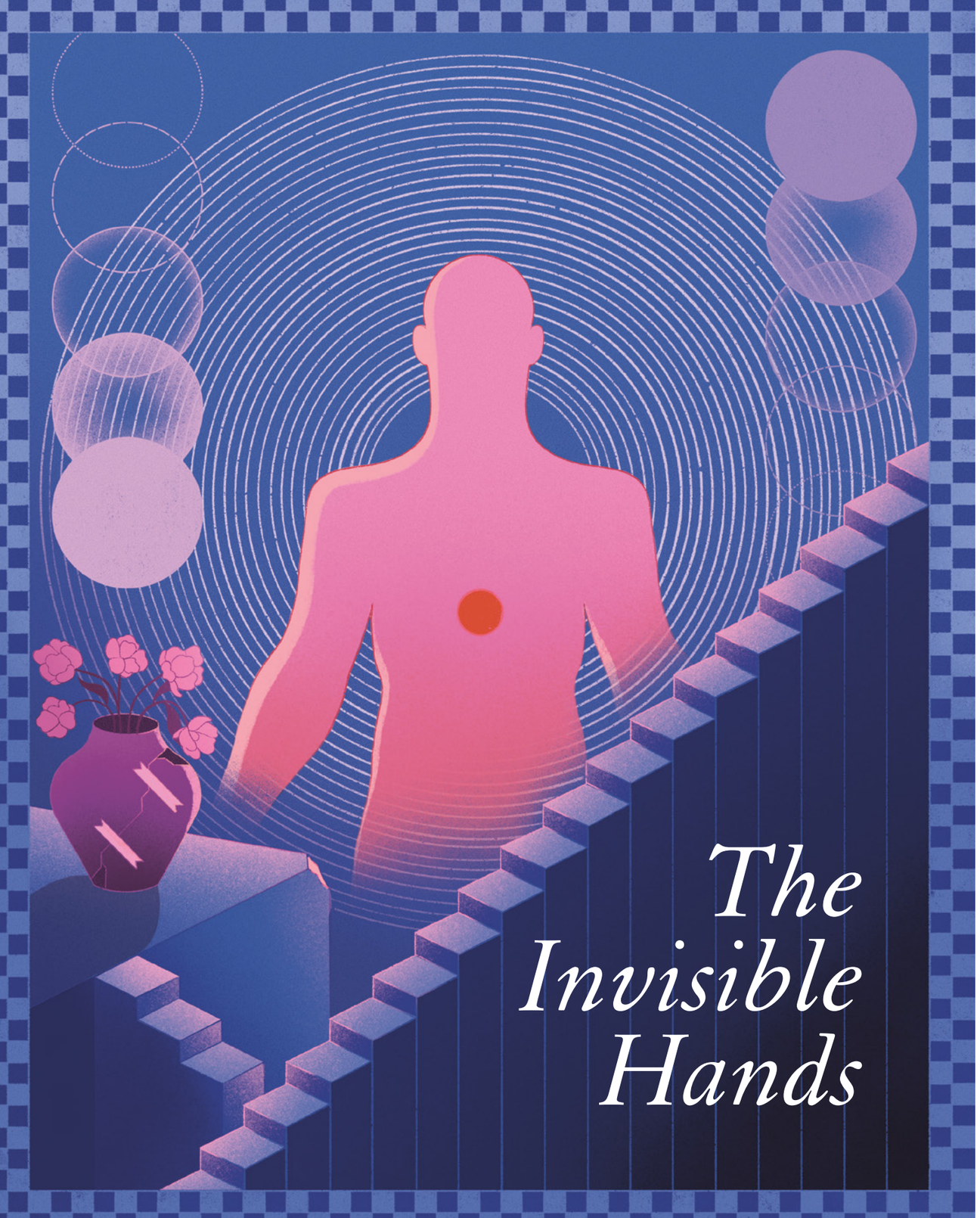
I think one such idea concerns how we build policies and make decisions in the political sphere. I think there is a potential for us to make more impactful decisions, but at a slower pace and long-term view.

This not only necessitates putting pressure on politicians to recognise the power and influence they have, but also requires an emphasis on wider society to contribute to collaborations around policy. In economic terms, we are all taught that if we focus on how to maximise our own so-called utility (i.e. 'happiness'), then we will eventually reach a societal equilibrium where nobody would have an incentive to change action.

Almost every religion has a golden rule at its heart: don't do to others what you wouldn't want done to yourself. It's almost like we were born with this moral notion that we don't like seeing other people suffer. It exists in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. It would change our whole society in such a radical way if we simply started living by this rule. In that way, I think we could improve our political decision making by engaging with this principle, through more deliberate democracy and citizens' assemblies, for example. Such assemblies push us to discuss the best choice of action, and usually leads to more thought-through outcomes than when individuals simply decide in e.g. a survey. Another more concrete idea, would be to get a Commissioner for Future Generations. We are proud to have Sophie Howe, the first commissioner for future generations of Wales, in our advisory board to lend her experience and expertise towards realising that idea.

Well, we can certainly stand behind that.





The Invisible Hands

TEXT
JASMIN CRAMON
ILLUSTRATION
SOPHIA PRIETO

All of us start off (and most of us end) our lives depending on other people's care. Being cared for is a condition of our mental and physical health, our ability to create societal value, and the survival of our species.

Yet, this societal bedrock is generally devalued. The skills required to perform it often seen as less than and current economic measurements' omission of it obscures its value and necessity – despite modern economies being built on its (often unpaid) availability. This neglect is anything but sustainable. Care work's importance is likely to become more pronounced as low fertility rates increase the proportion of elderly to young people in society, imposing a greater 'care burden' on states and individuals. The pressure from changing demographics is compounded by welfare states pulling back on offering quality care. This means increasingly worn-out care providers and increasing social resistance from the societal – most often minority – groups that have been expected to carry out this work. It is a development that could be met by calls to outsource human-led care work to AI and robotics in the name of economic efficiency. All of this makes the profound questions surrounding care work ever more consequential to address.

To investigate the reasons why care work is often overlooked, as well as its potential evolution, I spoke to Hanne Marlene Dahl, Professor at Roskilde University and head of the Crossroads of Care and Social Reproduction research group. "The concept of care work describes all the relations that are prerequisites for maintaining life as it exists right at this moment," she explains. In other words, care sustains the relations between humans that are necessary both for us to survive and thrive.

At its core, the issue of overlooking care work has to do with what we assign value in an economic system. Under capitalist parameters, 'productive'

labour refers to activities that go into the production of a product or service, or any activity that can be measured monetarily. But being able to perform such 'productive' labour is based on an immense amount of invisible care work that happens in our homes. Historically, Professor Dahl lays out that 'productive' labour has functioned on the expectation that women would perpetually offer care work "as an infinite and free resource." This gendered aspect remains today, with the WEF estimating that 76% of unpaid care work globally is performed by women. When care work is paid, it is characterised by low wages.

While care work in the private sphere is completely absent from economic measures such as GDP, professionalised care work is seen as a net expense, making political decisions like cutting social care spending look like downright profitable for the state. This is further compounded by the inherent measurability of some of the work. As Professor Dahl explains, "Many professionalised care tasks are challenging to articulate. For example, coordinating between relatives and professional groups, or remembering that a specific elderly citizen enjoys sitting and gazing into their garden. These are things that can be difficult to put into words because we are used to describing and measuring everything. The essence of care is, in fact, its innately embodied aspect, involving personal experiences and attention to the other."

Care requires trained skill and intuition – competencies that are praised in other parts of public and private life, but do not get the same recognition when they are related to giving care. Consider how severely your ability to 'produce' would be impaired if you could not get broken bones reset, if you could not go to the hospital and get your appendicitis treated, or if you did not have access to childcare or care for your ageing parents. How efficient would you be if no one cared about you?

Although the Covid-19 pandemic confronted us with the essentiality of care work in our public and private lives, it continues to be difficult for us to talk about these issues privately and politically. The explanation behind this, as Professor Dahl puts it, is that "these tasks are ones that we typically just take for granted that someone is doing". As long as this essential work is performed in public and private, it enables society to look the other way and avoid having difficult conversations about structural inequalities in who does the work and how it is compensated.

Companies maintain their machines and equipment, the state maintains infrastructure, and homeowners maintain their property. However, societies and states do not assign the same value and importance to the maintenance of people. This, even though societies are already seeing loneliness epidemics and deteriorating mental health amongst citizens.

So – what steps could be taken to improve the acknowledgement and conditions of care work in the future? Dahl points to multiple areas that she believes should be addressed. The first is to improve the working conditions of professional care workers: "There is no doubt that this would result in greater job satisfaction, leading to better care. Trusting welfare professionals and believing in their professional judgement is crucial. By doing so, we also contribute to acknowledging their intellectual, practical, and emotional competencies," Professor Dahl explains.

Dahl argues that explicitly acknowledging the essential role care work plays in the functioning of our society is necessary to build a future where care work is more evenly distributed and com-pensated. Key to achieving this is seeing the competencies related to care as trained skills: "There is a conflict emerging about the valorisation of traditionally feminine qualities – being available, having intuition, showing empathy – doing all this without demanding anything, or little, in return. But demands are now arising for their visibility. This is not just about wages, either – it involves

broader aspects, such as actually acknowledging care in society," Professor Dahl states.

Then there is the impact of technology, a double-edged sword that reproduces our own embedded values. On the one hand, it could enable us to do our jobs more efficiently, helping to create more free time for us to provide maintenance to the people we care about. However, it could also have a more negative effect. We do not know what the long-term consequences are of integrating AI and robotics into direct patient care. Likewise, we should question whether AI companions will be able to help us the same way that humans can. Skin-to-skin contact has been proven to have health benefits, such as lowering stress hormones and increasing serotonin. Touch calms us, and this can help our immune system work more efficiently.

While we can use technology as an aid to create more time for human-to-human contact, it also entails a risk that something fundamental to humanity could be eroded. If we fail to recognise and value care work in all its facets, this risk is arguably much larger, since we will not be fully aware of what we are sacrificing.

Perhaps we also need to reevaluate our perception of ourselves as completely independent beings – especially in societies that place significant value on the role of the individual. The view of people as inherently independent is what makes it possible for us to devalue care work as we do. Dahl elaborates on this point further: "It is deeply ingrained in us that we are fundamentally autonomous individuals who can take care of ourselves. Some see this dependency as incredibly negative, but we *are* mutually interdependent – whether as very young, in education, in illness, or in old age. It requires a mental shift to think of ourselves as continuously vulnerable. It is a collective denial of what is otherwise a fundamental aspect of life."

It may be uncomfortable to think of ourselves as being dependent on care from others. When we have been taught that we are supposed to be the makers of our own destiny, recognising that we are dependent on others seems the ultimate loss of control. What if in our quest to prove ourselves as completely self-determining individuals, we have been isolating ourselves from each other? And what if we instead start viewing interconnectedness as something positive and recognise that giving care is not only a burden but can also be joyful and fulling? Maybe then, we would be able to see receiving care as something other than a weakness, and we would be brave enough to give all care work the recognition it deserves. ■

NO CHILDREN OF MEN

Chemicals are one of the primary causes for dwindling sperm counts worldwide, and warnings of an impending 'spermpocalypse' abound. How severe is the global male fertility crisis, and how bad could it get? To find out we spoke with two renowned fertility researchers.

TEXT
CASPER SKOVGAARD PETERSEN
PHOTOS
MIDJOURNEY

"Look around. They are in almost everything you see, and in many of the things you don't see as well," says Niels Jørgensen, an endocrinologist at Copenhagen's Rigshospitalet and a leading researcher in male infertility.

The invisible substances he is referring to are 'endocrine-disrupting chemicals' (EDCs), which are effectively embedded in the material foundations of modern life. Whether it's through phthalates used in food wrapping or personal care products, pesticides that leach into soil and groundwater, fabrics treated with flame retardants, cosmetics, lotions, or soaps, most of us are exposed to EDCs on a daily and almost constant basis.

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EDCs are of special interest to Jørgensen and others working in the field of infertility research as they have a particularly sinister effect on our ability to reproduce. EDCs can interfere with hormonal systems in various ways, disrupting the ability of both males and females to have children. Their impact on male fertility specifically has garnered increased attention in recent years, due in part to a handful of eye-opening studies showing an accelerating worldwide decline in sperm count – a trend to which the chemicals are a significant contributor.

One oft-cited study, co-authored by Jørgensen and titled "Temporal trends in sperm count: a systematic review and meta-regression analysis", found that between 1973 and 2011, sperm counts decreased by a staggering 52% for men in North America, Europe, and New Zealand. Later research has supported the results and added that male infertility due to low sperm count also impacts populations in Asia, Africa, Central America, and South America. The contributing factors are many and include poor diet, stress, drinking, smoking, and sedentary lifestyles. But what makes the effect of EDCs especially insidious is that their damage to the male reproductive system begins before birth and can result in genital deformities that permanently inhibit male fertility. EDC exposure later in life can be decreased – in theory at least – but once that initial damage is done, there's no fixing it.

"Already after six or seven weeks, the male body starts producing hormones that help mature the testicles. If this process is disturbed by the presence of EDCs in the mother for instance, the child's potential semen quality is lowered already at an early stage," Jørgensen says, adding that the consensus in the field of fertility research is that EDCs are the most important factor negatively impacting the potential semen quality already in the prenatal development.

The global sperm count decline, due to both EDC exposure and lifestyle factors, has provoked fears of an impending 'spermpocalypse' – a future where reproduction without technical assistance becomes all but impossible. Although such anxious premonitions have little empirical basis, the science paints a bleak enough picture.

Some of the problematic EDCs are difficult to pin down, Jørgensen explains, partly because the individual chemicals themselves may not be harmful. When combined in certain ways, however, they achieve a cocktail effect where their so-called 'anti-androgen effects' start showing, leading to alterations in reproductive physiology. That's the assumption at least. So far, the anti-androgen effects of compounds of EDCs have been demonstrated in rodents like rats and mice, though not yet in humans.

That's not to say scientists aren't all but sure of their negative effects on us. A recent study has shed new light on the harmful effects of one particularly infamous EDC, the once widely-used insecticide DDT, on human biology. The study, which was published in the journal Environment Health Perspectives, examined two populations of Indigenous men at opposite ends of the globe whose reproductive systems are shown to be impacted by exposure to the chemical. In South Africa, the indigenous Vhavenda men are directly exposed to DDT since the insecticide is still used to combat malaria there. In Greenland, Inuit men absorb the chemical through their diet which relies heavily on large arctic marine animals. In both cases, the research indicated that the sperm of the men is negatively affected to such an extent that that it might even impact subsequent generations.

"This is the first study that unequivocally shows that an exposure to these chemicals changes the sperm epigenome which could be associated with health effects in the next generation, including infertility," explains co-author of the study Sarah Kimmins, a Professor at the Department of Pathology and Cell Biology, Université de Montréal.

Yet DDT exposure is not exclusive to Greenland and South Africa. Once celebrated as a miracle product, the insecticide was used openhandedly on a global scale to fight insects and tropical diseases before being phased out in much of the world in the 1970s. Its presence in ecosystems still haunts us to this day.

In one recent discovery, scientists found that a large patch of DDT dumped in the ocean off the coast of California in the 1940s and 50s is still resting on the seafloor today, more than half a century later. The DDT patch, larger in size than the city of San Francisco, is the result of half a million barrels of the toxic chemical having been deposited there by producers in Southern California.

It's a testament both to our reckless relationship with toxic chemicals, as well as to the fact that the great boosts to agricultural yield achieved through technical and chemical innovation in the Green Revolution have come with a hefty environmental bill, to be footed by present and future generations.

"It should be a worldwide concern," Kimmins says, pointing out how environmental scientists have warned of the risk that DDT exposure is only going to increase as global warming causes the release of the chemicals currently stored in Antarctic glaciers. "If we don't get in front of this and treat it as a worldwide health crisis, infertility is only going to increase," she says.

Although severe in scope, DDT contamination of humans and animals is just one example of how our reliance on hormone disrupting chemicals has disquieting consequences. But just how bad can it get? Will our infertility problems continue to increase? Might 'anti-natalists' – proponents of voluntary human extinction – eventually get what they want, though in a different way than they imagine?

The bad news is that our dependence on EDCs has rapidly increased in recent decades. Judging from the global production of plastics alone, which have increased from 50 million metric tons in 1976 to more than 400 million metric tons today, we are far from ridding ourselves of the problem. The last 20 years alone have seen a doubling in the production of plastics worldwide, according to data from the OECD, with no signs of slowing down.

Of course, not all plastics contain EDCs, but many do. A report from the Endocrine Society and the International Pollutants Elimination Network found that 144 different chemicals or chemical groups known to be hazardous to human health are actively used in plastics for varying functions. Even bioplastics and biodegradable plastics, often promoted as a safer and more ecological alternative to the conventional kind, can have endocrine-disrupting effects, as they contain similar chemical additives. Testing of human samples, the report states, shows nearly all of us have EDCs in our bodies. And they're oozing out of us as well; EDCs have been found in semen, saliva, breast milk, urine, blood, and various other bodily fluids.

So, there's little to suggest that our EDC-related problems will lessen anytime soon, even though growing awareness may bring about change. Infertility, by way of consequence, will be a growing problem as well.

But with the global population continuing its increase during the 21st century, projected to eventually reach 11 billion by 2100, does that have to be such a bad thing? With all the environmental burdens that this population increase brings, why should we care about the effects of chemicals on our ability to reproduce – couldn't it, in some twisted way, be considered a positive?

Maybe so, if infertility was the only adverse side effect of our reliance on toxic chemicals. In fact, infertility problems can be considered a 'canary in the coal mine' of sorts in that they are a biomarker for many other serious health problems. Infertile men are more likely to experience a slew of other hardships, such as higher rates of chronic health disorders and even a shortened lifespan. A recent paper published in Nature and co-authored by Sarah Kimmins points to this fact and urges increased research to map out the connections more fully.

Then, of course, there's the psychological toll that infertility has on both individuals and couples, as well as the price tag for fertility treatment. The Danish government's recent announcement of plans to expand free IVF treatment to cover the second child in addition to the first was welcome news for those couples who might be struggling to conceive, but such initiatives are not without their costs. Treatment of this kind, although a blessing to involuntarily childless couples, is combatting the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause of infertility which, according to the WHO, affects one in six people worldwide. There may of course be other pharmacological solutions in the future – medication that can counteract the harmful impacts of EDCs on sperm production. But so far, Jørgensen points out, such ideas haven't drawn much interest from medicinal companies.

The only real long-term solution to our EDC addiction is also the most difficult one: we will need to greatly reduce our reliance on them. Like the turn away from fossil fuels, doing so directly threatens to undermine many of the conveniences of modern life. It can seem impossible, but it's necessary, nonetheless.

"I don't think we will solve the problem simply by phasing out individual EDCs," Niels Jørgensen says. "We need to decrease the degree of exposure. We need to use fewer chemicals." ■

THE SHAPE AND SIZE *of* WELLBEING

Youth attitudes towards the future are becoming increasingly polarised across the world. Could demographic change provide us with an answer as to why?

TEXT
AUGUST LEO LILJENBERG
PHOTOS (DEMOGRAPHIC CUT-OUTS)
SILVANUS SOLOMON, TURGUT KIRKGOZ, EBRART,
ANGELA ROMA, ANDY SONG & DANYA GUTAN

Within contemporary wellbeing research lies a conundrum: while developed countries tend to score relatively highly on wellbeing indexes, their youth are rather pessimistic about their future wellbeing. Youth in developing countries, on the other hand, tend to be significantly more optimistic.

Such findings were first discovered in a 2018 study by IPSOS Public Polling concerning differences in global youth attitudes, where over 90% of teenagers in Kenya, Mexico, China, Nigeria and India reported feeling hopeful for the future. This unexpected optimism was in stark contrast to those in developed nations, with teenagers in Sweden and France trailing the ranking.

When the study was first released, I recall seeing clusters of red and orange blotching the surface of infographics at my Copenhagen-based office desk. I thought of Denmark's status as one of the world's happiest countries in wellbeing indexes. The coexistence of jaded nihilism and rabid anxiety in Gen Z as I knew them. Teenaged Parisians and Stockholmers languishing in the trenches of climate anxiety, economic uncertainty, and social media-induced loneliness, contrasted with the thought that maybe the youth of Lagos and New Delhi felt differently. Perhaps an indescribable feeling of agency – that the future belonged to them.

Although the study was not global in its scope (a total of 15 countries were surveyed), in the six years since, a pandemic and several geopolitical crises have unfolded, and its findings have been replicated in more recent studies that reflect a similar pattern. The outlook of youth in developed countries is probably not any rosier now. Talk of the upward trajectory of the Global South's influence, on the other hand, has only been on the rise. Divergent perspectives on global crises within the United Nations have become more apparent, as evidenced by contrasting reactions to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2023. This trend is further underscored by the burgeoning influence of BRICS nations and the gradual shift of global wealth towards the southern hemisphere.

At first, the answer might seem obvious: over the past twenty years, many countries in the Global South have undergone rapid rates of urbanisation and economic development, shortening the generational points of comparison for what life 'used to be like'. Darrell Bricker, CEO of IPSOS Public Polling and author of *An Empty Planet*, reaffirms this notion: "I think in developed countries, it's young people comparing themselves to what their parents achieved, while in the developing ones, it's to what their parents simply didn't have."

DARRELL BRICKER

But that's not the whole story. Bricker's area of expertise is demographics – the study of populations. He's a firm believer in the idea that in order to gauge a people's values, you simply look at their collective shape. "I look at things like technology, culture, politics, and economics as being a manifestation of what's going to happen because of demographic change – it almost being the independent variable driving all these other dependent variables," says Bricker.

Viewing the initial 2018 study through the lens of demographic change, a narrative begins emerging. Youth pessimism in developed countries can ultimately be attributed to their aging populations, as young people feel that their voices are being squeezed out of politics. Bricker elaborates further, arguing that "Generational tensions will be driven by the fact that you've got this group of young people – which is not as big or young as a lot of people assume that it is – feeling that they've been left out. Even if they are innovative or expanding their skillset, opportunities are not going to come as easily as they did to their parents or grandparents." The relatively young populations in emerging economies, on the other hand, give youth a greater sense of political agency in a rapidly changing societal landscape – regardless of lower levels of democratic institutions.

However, if these apparent changes in youth optimism are driven merely by population pyramids and the march of economic development, aren't tomorrow's youth in developing countries headed for a similar fate? Bricker thinks so, arguing that such changes are already taking place in the developing world: "In these areas of the world, there's a lot of kids, mainly because infant mortality has collapsed, but the other thing we see is that they're following the same pattern as in developed countries in that fertility is rapidly declining."

Until then, the demographic tides will steadily wash up on the shores of the developed world, resulting in the inevitable consequence of gerontocracy – the rule of the elderly. These societies are due for a significant realignment of their status as global innovators and youthful, unbridled optimism, argues Bricker.

In the conclusion of *An Empty Planet*, Bricker predicts that "the really exciting theatre, the truly groundbreaking innovations, the revolutionary new thinking in the last decades of this century will more likely come from Lagos or Mumbai than from Paris or Tokyo." Perhaps it's this impending spur of innovative spirit

that is fuelling the optimism in the youth of the developing world today. “If innovation is a young person’s game, then these regions have got the edge,” Bricker re-affirms.

The process of ranking different countries along lines of wellbeing or happiness using measurable data first began with the establishment of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN. That is, wellbeing research boomed as populations did too – especially in the developed world. Given that fertility rates continue to plummet, can we say anything about how demographics might shape the future of wellbeing in these societies?

“I tend not to be a futurist in the sense of being able to project what I think is going to happen because of technological change or economic change; every time I start thinking that way, I think back to the movies of the 1930s about what the ‘great future’ would consist of. Demographics though, that's clockable. All the decisions have been made, and we’re just going to have to live through them. You can mark it on your calendar,” Bricker says. Some of the issues in store for future generations, both in the developed and developing world (albeit in different time frames), will consist of reassessing many of the values that currently bind their social fabric together.

Take growth, for example. Much of the developed world’s economic framework rests on the assumption of perpetual growth, aided by a steady level of consumption. The problem with an aging population, however, is that it tends to be the opposite of consumptive. “Now there’ll people who celebrate that,” Bricker tells me, “But the truth is without consumption, there is no economic growth. Who’s going to buy the cars? Old people don’t do that. Real estate? No, they tend to sell it. In terms of public services, they are in the hoarding stages of their life.” Add to that a soaring demand for those very public services, and there’s a great problem at hand. “Dealing with Alzheimer’s is another example. There’s going to be an explosion of Alzheimer’s unless we find some kind of a cure. And who is set up to do that? No country is,” says Bricker.

An objection often raised against the supposed ‘iron law’ of demographics is the role of culture. Several scholars argue that the collectivism underpinning much of the developing world can explain the high levels of optimism in their societies. The individualist cultures of the West, however, push societies towards being atomised. Mohsen Joshanloo, a cross-cultural psychologist and associate professor at Keimyung University in South Korea, agrees – but also thinks the picture is a bit more complex. “Cultural beliefs and values also play an important role [beyond demographics]. However, I don’t think that collectivism itself offers explanatory value in this context,” Joshanloo says. Instead, he believes that two other key values can explain why the youth of the developing world may tend towards optimism: religiosity and fatalism.

“In general, religions cultivate positive attitudes among adherents about what lies ahead. They often promote the belief that a higher power supports the believer and religious community. Fatalistic beliefs also often paint an upbeat picture of the future, foretelling good luck or positive turns of fate. These perspectives emphasise the possibility of changing negative outcomes through intentional action (such as praying to ask for divine intervention or making donations to improve one's destiny),” Joshanloo says. Combined, these values likely help contribute to increased optimism by providing a positive narrative and sense of control over the future.

While a cross-cultural analysis may point toward answers for the developing world’s relative optimism today, its argumentative strength is lacking when concerning the future. Joshanloo recognises that religiosity and fatalism were core components of the developed world until not long ago, expecting the emerging economies to eventually follow suit. “Modernisation, fuelled by technological advances, improved health care, ensured a robust legal framework, and improved public infrastructure, while reducing reliance on fatalistic attitudes or divine intervention to cope with life's uncertainties. Increased access to education and scientific knowledge may also challenge the relevance of supernatural beliefs,” he says.

I ask Joshanloo whether this might only be the case when thinking of ‘economic development’ under certain ideological conditions, such as liberal capitalism or socialism. He admits to slight doubt – perhaps it could swing the other way. “Predicting the trajectory of optimism amidst rising GDP is difficult. The persistent presence of religiosity in developing countries contradicts assumptions of its rapid decline and highlights the enduring role of faith in these societies. Despite economic progress, the consoling effects of fatalistic and religious beliefs may enable their persistence within the region’s cultural fabric.”

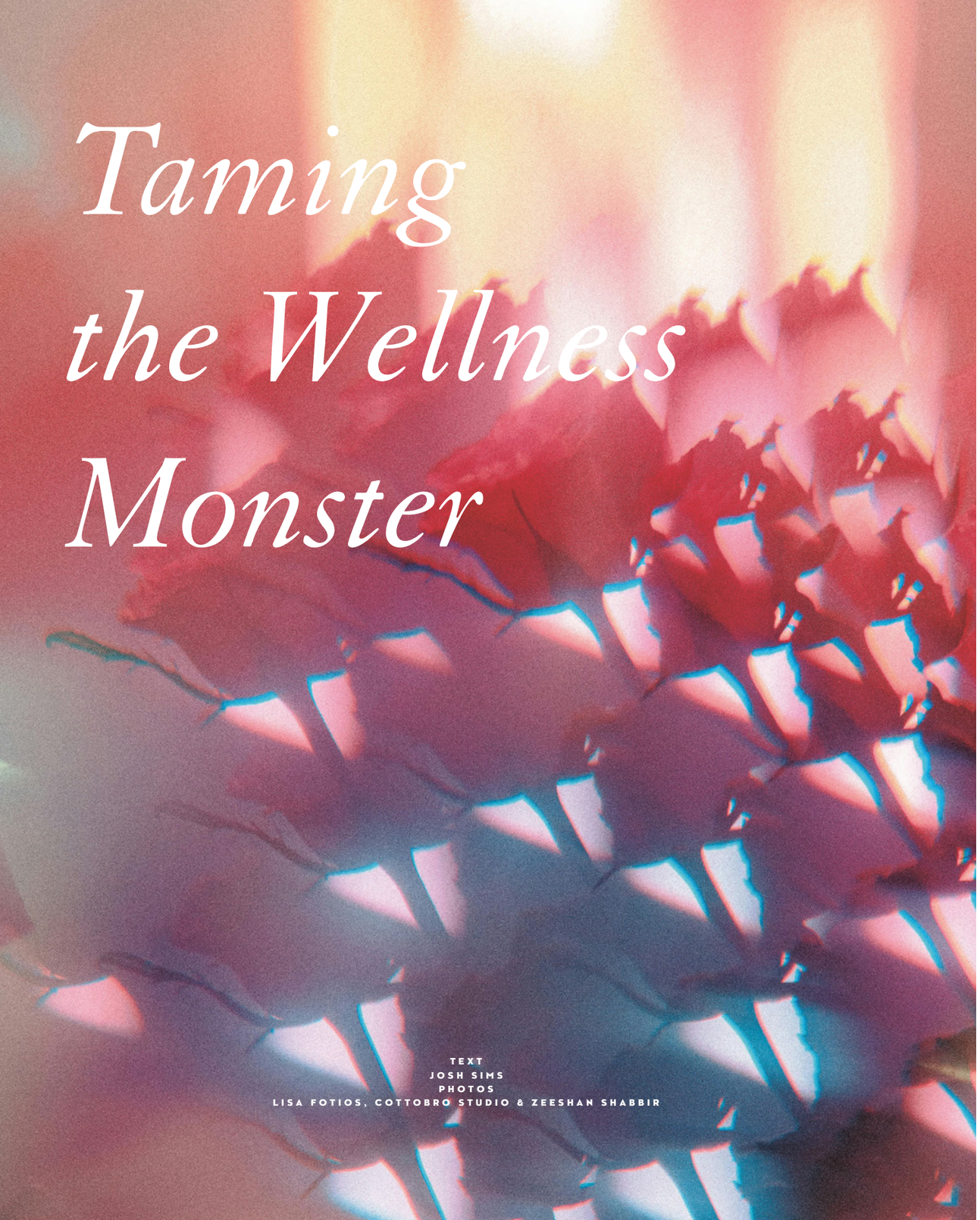
"Demographics though, that's clockable. All the decisions have been made, and we’re just going to have to live through them. You can mark it on your calendar"

This seems unlikely, given that the developed countries first on track towards demographic collapse are all, in fact, highly collectivist cultures where religiosity and fatalism ruled only half a century ago. As of 2022, South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world, with an average of 0.73 births per woman that is predicted to drop to 0.65 by 2025.

The country's speed-run through Western-led industrialisation and progress catapulted it into becoming an economic bastion of East Asia. Yet, it has also irreversibly transformed the fabric of its people. The country is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness, has the highest suicide rate in the OECD, and polarising political attitudes between young men and women are stark. In fact, a 2024 investigation by the Financial Times found that, in line with several other aging developed countries, Gen Z Korean men have become far more conservative, while women more progressive, compared to their equivalent age-groups since 2000. This, too, can be viewed through the lens of population shrinkage: as women become increasingly educated, economically self-sufficient, and socially progressive, many choose to not start a family – something a percentage of men seem to be deeply at odds with.

Countries like South Korea, Japan, and, to an extent, China, can be seen as canaries in a coal-mine of a global population bust. Taking a bit of metaphorical liberty, we can view rates of youth pessimism across the developed world as a salient warning against the impending consequences of population pyramids inverting worldwide. Gen Z being regionally 'doom-pilled', not only because of the existential crises threatening humanity, but the more immediate sense that a paradigm shift is occurring right under their feet. A sense that the world their ancestors set up – its institutions, social codes, and structures – will be insufficient or even counterproductive in addressing the problems of the future.

Bricker closes our interview by highlighting the shift in public interest he has experienced concerning the idea of population collapse over the past few years. "When John and I were working on *Empty Planet,* no one was asking these questions. Now the questions are less so 'How can you guys say this?', and more along the lines of, 'Okay, what are the consequences of this?' There's been this gradual acceptance of this idea that the global population inversion is what our future is. Now there are still some people who argue that it's not, or that it will be a lot smaller. But the population shrinkage we said that would happen in *An Empty Planet*, well, we're now saying that we were wrong – it's happening much faster than we suggested." ■



Taming the Wellness Monster

TEXT
JOSH SIMS
PHOTOS
LISA FOTIOS, COTTOBRO STUDIO & ZEESHAN SHABBIR

Is wellness, well, not very well? Is a culture that buys into Psychic Vampire Repellent – "spray around the aura to protect from psychic attack" – or the suggestion that one put jade eggs where the sun doesn't shine "to harness the power of energy work" in trouble?

These examples – just two recommendations from Gwyneth Paltrow's frequently criticised Goop brand – may be superficially harmless, but the influence of the wellness industry is, many now argue, increasingly problematic. That's not just a product of the wellness industry's awesome size: 2022 saw the personal care market valued at $1089bn, wellness tourism at $651bn, mental wellness at $181bn and workplace wellness – because wellness follows us everywhere now – at $51bn. It's also a product of its reach, and of its (often empty) promises. "Practitioners had good intentions but now we're seeing a misuse that departs from the original vision," says Dr. Stephanie Baker, sociologist at London's City University, UK, and author of *Wellness Culture: How the Wellness Movement Has Been Used to Empower, Profit and Misinform*. "The fact that the concept of wellness has been a very attractive way to sell products explains how it went from fringe counterculture to something mainstream and commodified," she says.

"The fundamental problem with wellness now is that it tells people indirectly that no matter what they do they can be better, which in turn tells them they're not good enough as they are," argues Svend Brinkmann, Professor of Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark, and author of *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze*. "The risks to mental health are obvious given the basic human need we all have to feel good enough as a person. And then there is its ethical risk: what happens to our commitments to others when we're constantly seeking to transform ourselves? Self-help and wellness are the two sides of the same coin. They both sell a fantasy of happiness, a happiness of a kind that isn't clear when you have it."

What some are now calling the 'Wellness Industrial Complex' has, of course, been boosted by social media, not least because the barrier for entry is so low and the means for amplification so cheap. Anyone, regardless of authority, can build a platform. And, since so many of us are impressed by the merest hint of celebrity, attain an air of credibility too. Indeed, tracing its lineage back to the first international self-help best-sellers of the 1930s, Brinkmann points out that wellness, in its broadest sense, is now almost a century old. The internet has merely, if radically, entrenched a mindset that has been decades in the making. Apps the likes of Happify, Headspace, or Calm make wellness accessible on the go and provide that lucrative service with low overheads and pay-as-you-go convenience. Tracking technology, furthermore, provides a barrage of metrics by which our self-improvement can supposedly be measured.

That's a concern, notes Stephen Palmer, Professor of Coaching Psychology at the

University of Wales. Particularly since many wellness influencers have poor credentials yet the reach to shape fads that are potentially harmful, both physically and mentally, if not just to our bank balance.

"Wellness really has gone wrong, especially in terms of anyone now being able to make a claim to expertise that they don't have, with no academic source or peer review at all," adds Palmer. "The industry is too often peddling a lack of truth, which is particularly harmful to younger people who have grown up with Google and can always find that the algorithms will reinforce a wrong wellness belief."

But while the pandemic increased the appeal of wellness influencers – in a sick world, who didn't think more about their health? – various governments' poor handling of the pandemic narrative, and science's natural leaning towards nuance rather than absolutes, only served to weaken trust in actual scientific authority. That in turn is driving wellness enthusiasts towards more 'alternative' narratives.

"The wellness industry makes the kind of straight claims that, it seems, the public wants now: 'Yes, it works!', not 'It might work!'," says Palmer. And yet research shows that people who purchase self-improvement books, have likely bought another during the previous 18 months. When one method doesn't deliver the promised results, we continue to search for one that will.

Indeed, according to a 2022 study by Baker, one way in which wellness online has further become corrupted is through its gradual slide into politics over the pandemic period. "There was a lot of collective discourse and a lot of it was conspiratorial in nature," she says. "I was struck by not just how individual wellness influencers promoted dubious and sometimes harmful procedures but how networks of influencers used [their micro-celebrity] not just for commercial gain but for political gain. In many instances over the pandemic, certain networks of influencers would raise legitimate concerns but brand themselves under the banner of wellness. They're strategically using whatever term is fashionable [like 'wellness'] to more nefarious ends, to galvanise the public."

Among these, she has found, are 'alt-right' and anti-vaccine discourses (in its widest sense, not just in relation to Covid), fears of curtailment of civil liberties, and Q-Anon-style conspiracy theories. Some wellness practitioners have felt compelled to make public statements rejecting what Baker has dubbed "alt-health influencers". Key is a distrust of government but also of mainstream medicine, and the alleged injustices it causes. Baker identifies these influencers as often proposing their followers set out on the path from mind-body purification techniques, through spiritual awakening to the founding of a conscious community and, finally, towards moral supremacy. They promote what she calls a "persecuted hero narrative".

"This same formula applies as much to wellness gurus exposing the corruption of the food and pharmaceutical industry as it does to conspiracy theorists exposing the 'deep state's' hidden agenda," Baker writes in her study. "It is one of the reasons why alternative health and wellness communities are susceptible to conspiracy theories and political extremism. Their subject matter may vary, but the underlying logic of constructing an evil enemy and heroically seeking to restore Truth, Freedom, and Justice is remarkably similar."

Given its overlap with New Age spirituality, wellness, she says, is particularly vulnerable to weaponisation. It promotes the ideas of individualised solutions, of finding a more profound purpose in life and unlocking one's potential, of thinking outside of the institutional framework, and an appealing emphasis on purity. Much as the joke goes that there's no such thing as alternative medicine – because, if it worked, it would just be called 'medicine' – debasing science as the thought police of the 'sheeple' works. This is done while, simultaneously making an appeal to scientific validity. This approach works just as well for an unusual skincare treatment or diet plan as it does for arguing that, for example, the world is run by a shadowy elite of billionaires.

As Palmer points out, wellness concerns move through cycles of fashion. Despite this, wellness has long been able to pivot to provide timely 'solutions' to whatever the latest cultural worry may be: maximising productivity, better parenting, screen time, nutrition in the face of 'ultra-processed foods', exercise and recovery from it, de-cluttering the home or the mind, assertiveness, efficient sleep (get 'sleep syncing' and mouth taping!), and so on… "The fact that there are so many wellness concepts now somewhat suggests none of them work," Brinkmann notes. "If any did there wouldn't be the need for what has become this huge industry."

But trust in wellness, however unfounded, is also increasingly underpinned by how it seems to fill what Palmer calls a "cognitive vacuum" in meeting a need for some kind of life management. Or perhaps it fills a spiritual hole in an increasingly secular culture. "People used to look to something beyond themselves, but secularisation has moved that absolute authority onto individuals," suggests Brinkmann. "We're told that if we believe in ourselves, we can achieve anything. Instead of the priesthood we have therapists and coaches. You could almost replace 'God' with 'self' now."

"Their subject matter may vary, but the underlying logic of constructing an evil enemy and heroically seeking to restore Truth, Freedom, and Justice is remarkably similar."

"Wellness offers that sense of deeper meaning," agrees Baker. "Most people following wellness trends and influencers have access to basic healthcare. With that covered the emphasis becomes less about survival and more about thriving."

Does wellness have a future in its current form? For some, perhaps. One 2021 study by Southwest University, Chongquin, confirmed what we might suspect: that the ability to self-manage health skews heavily away from lower classes. The tired and poor have neither the money, space, nor time to embrace the latest wellness trends. Meanwhile, the economic squeeze on the middle-class – which wellness may at first seek to address – may become so tight that any inclination to indulge wellness trends may be squeezed out altogether.
Might there be what, perversely, is a new wellness movement afoot, one telling us how to counter all the toxic wellness messaging with which we're bombarded? Brinkmann's future classic aside, there are best-sellers the likes of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* and *F*ck Feelings* – those expletives hinting at a very un-wellness, no-nonsense approach – while wellness-critical books published over the last 18 months have included the likes of *The Gospel of Wellness, The Wellness Trap* and *Who is Wellness For?*. Commentators the likes of Jordan Peterson have popularised 'old-fashioned' notions of self-reliance, rather than more self-love.

"There was a lot of criticism of the wellness industry before it, but I think the pandemic has accentuated those criticisms and highlighted the vulnerability of wellness," says Baker. "That said, I don't see it going away because I think there is a need for a broader conception of health than merely the absence of disease."

Some might suggest wellness is just too big, too commercially useful, and too psychologically potent to fail. After all, while fitness is challenging, much of wellness is more pleasurable and indulgent. Will Storr, author of *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us*, argues that wellness works precisely because it plays to our narcissism in especially narcissistic times. He argues that nature plays its part too, in that our brains give us an idea of ourselves through narrative; we're the headline acts in our own show. But we're also tribal, so we covet those things that make us stand out, that give us status, like showing we're making progress in ourselves and in the world. It's a matter of this performative 'conspicuous wellness'.

Maybe we need to be shaken out of this

navel-gazing. Brinkmann hopes that, to put it in quasi-religious terms, the end of wellness may be nigh. We're in the eye of the storm of so many crises – the cost of living, the pandemic's economic fallout, a European war, and the makings of a Middle Eastern one, political polarisation, an era of strongmen leaders, and climate change. These are events that people sense are very important, but which can't be solved by improving ourselves, Brinkmann says.

"I think there's maybe political potential in a kind of wellness that is much more about the collective," he suggests. "We have to focus on more edifying images of human life. That should involve wellness because, of course, people want to live good lives, but we need to break it away from the business model."

The trick will be not throwing the good in wellness out with the bad. "There is much that's positive about wellbeing, including the notion that we should look after ourselves, particularly our mental health," argues Jenni Cochrane, founder of the UK's Getahead wellness festival. "The problem is that aspects of wellness are putting enormous pressure on people. Wellness has also become a vanity project – especially in the workplace – and there is so much uncertainty around wellness now because there's so much bullshit. Working out what is real and for real people is an enormous challenge." ■

Ancient Wisdom for a Healthy Future

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What can the ancient Greeks teach us about wellbeing today?

From cutting-edge developments in pharmaceutical drugs and artificial intelligence trained for medical diagnosis, to more opaque practices of meditation gurus and self-proclaimed 'breathing specialists', the selection of health improvements offered to us seems to be constantly expanding. Amid this frenzied assault on our attention – both from dubious and credible sources of knowledge – it may appear that the trajectory of our health and wellbeing hinges on the innovative and groundbreaking.

But perhaps some of the truths around living a long, healthy life do not lie in technological progress or novel wellness techniques but rather in revisiting the ancient observations of the past. According to one practising physician, historian, and author, Katharine Van Schaik, exploring history as far back as antiquity provides new insight. The history of medicine not only helps us uncover how our understanding of health and wellbeing has evolved over time, but also the surprising degree to which the ancients understood many of the principles that form the bedrock of modern medical science.

In her book *How to Be Healthy: An Ancient Guide to Wellness*, Van Schaik, a faculty member at Department of Classical and Mediterranean Studies at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, explores some of the timeless wisdom, as well as flawed practices, of past attempts at optimising the health of body and mind. By studying the works of one of the greatest physicians of the ancient Greek world, Aelius Galenus (or simply Galen), and in presenting a collection of his texts, the author provides insights into how knowledge from the distant past can help us achieve wellbeing today.

"Galen's pillars of good health included the practices of exercise, maintaining a nutritious diet, and working on the mind-body connection, for mental health and what he called good character formation," says Van Schaik, when we meet over Zoom.

"Much of what we know today [. . .] has validated what Galen told us almost two millennia ago. We know now that much of what he proposed hit the nail on the head. I find that quite astonishing."

A philosopher, physician, scientist, and writer, Galen came to prominence during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, contributing to the foundation of Western medicine up to the 19th century. "Much of what we know today – via the application of modern scientific methods, like randomised, double blinded studies on groups – has validated what Galen told us almost two millennia ago," she says. "We know now that much of what he proposed hit the nail on the head. I find that quite astonishing."

"Sure, the way he puts it all together, in terms of describing the physiological mechanisms and pathways, is ultimately flawed when viewed through the lens of today's science. But the general instruction is sound."

Given what we know today about the benefits of lifestyles based around regular exercise and a nutritious diet – "eat food, mostly plants, and not too much" as author Michael Pollan puts it – Galen's emphasis on nutrition and exercise, "preferably in teams, possibly with a small ball", indicates a powerful perceptive ability for identifying physiological patterns, even if he didn't have access to today's intricate knowledgebase.

"He had this very sophisticated understanding of modifying activity based on one's goals and based on an individual patient's capabilities – pointing out that body movement is accessible to everyone and can work well with a busy schedule," says Van Schaik. "He also recommended that one adjusts their exercise routine to suit their age."

Galen's writings contain descriptions of movement routines, especially as group activities, which provide both mental and physical exercise, emphasising the mind-body connection, a topic very much in vogue this past decade. Moreover, Galen wrote insightfully about other aspects of mental wellbeing, including how to manage grief and emotional issues around what he termed 'lovesickness'. He also described the importance of maintaining and exercising the soul – in a similar way to the body – to develop one's character.

One of the remarkable aspects of Galen's system of thought and practice was his ability to integrate general human physiology, health, and disease, with specific aspects of an individual's constitution, which can be viewed today, some eighteen hundred years later, as being analogous to and a precursor of precision medicine.

"What Galen referred to as constitution we might describe today as a combination of genetic makeup, individual medical history, lifestyle, and behaviour," says Van Schaik. "He says that in an ideal scenario a physician would know literally everything there is to know about a patient, from what they eat on a daily basis, to what they've been exposed to in terms of disease and stress during their lifetime."

Such a scenario would allow a practitioner to make a diagnosis and then treat the patient accordingly, on an individual basis – although, as Galen notes, only God could know so much.

Modern data-driven medicine has achieved what only deities could in Galen's time. Using precision medicine techniques and evolving computer processing power, we are able to develop increasingly efficient individual therapies, Van Schaik explains. "By knowing more about individual make-up, we are already learning to administer therapeutic treatments in targeted ways that are specific to individual patients, thereby improving treatment efficacy. I think that AI will help with that, especially in the gathering and analysis of data."

But that doesn't mean technology in health and wellbeing is always necessarily moving in the right direction. Indeed, the past (and the present) offer up some red flags.

One influential idea of Galen's, now known to be dangerous, was bloodletting, the practice of solving medical issues by extracting certain so-called 'humours' (bodily fluids) including blood, bile, or phlegm from the body. This practice became extremely pervasive and was still commonplace until the Enlightenment, and in some cases even into the late 19th century. We know now that it caused much more harm than good.

Indeed, such an idea seems preposterous to our minds today, but Van Schaik points out the reasoning behind bloodletting and why it became commonplace. When she teaches Galen to medical students, she uses the case of a patient who has a fever. They feel hot and uncomfortable, tossing and turning, and their pulse is racing. But if you draw blood from the individual, their fever can subside, they can become less restless, and in many cases their pulse may feel fainter. "So, if the goal is to treat that perceived discomfort and restlessness, bleeding a patient is probably going to do that," she says, while noting that the side effects and consequences – including anaemia and hypertension reducing the flow of blood to organs – were extremely damaging for the countless individuals who experienced the practice over a period of 1500 years.

This is a key lesson from Galen's life and work, and his centuries long influence in medical practice. It highlights the idea of how we create the future ourselves; that is to say, it is not predetermined. One person, or group, can have an influence which can last hundreds of years, if not millennia.

"I use that as a thought piece with medical students when making the point that

"That's part of the reason why it's essential to study the past. I think it's very important for modern practitioners, technologists, and governments, to have that humility to know that in a hundred years, people will look back and recognise that we were so misguided."

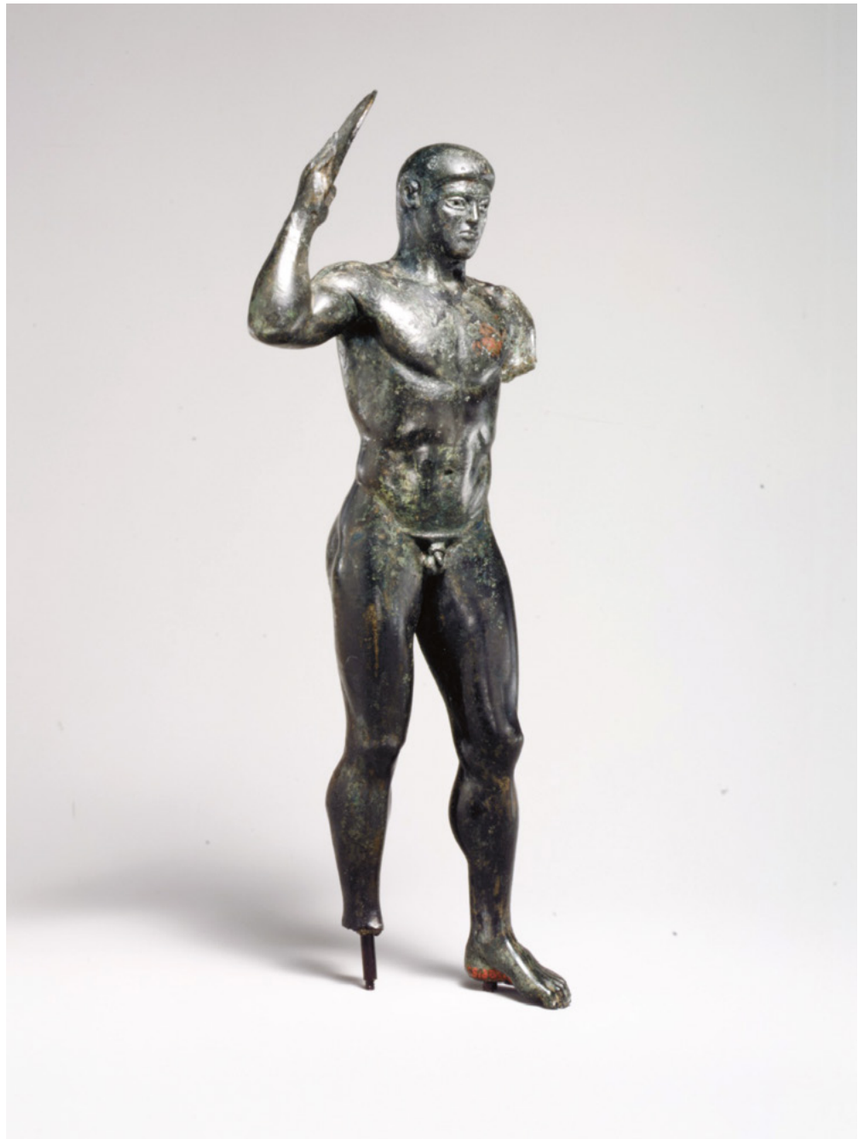
we may be making similar mistakes today in how we tackle and treat many aspects of health and wellbeing. In fact, in many cases our entire understanding of a particular mechanism might be flawed."

Van Schaik suspects there are aspects of medical systems today that are likely having a negative impact on the lives of millions and may do so for many years to come. "I think that's part of the reason why it's essential to study the past. I think it's very important for modern practitioners, technologists, and governments, to have that humility to know that in a hundred years, people will look back and recognise that we were so misguided."

A modern parallel to bloodletting, for example, may be the Theranos blood-testing disaster, where healthcare for public benefit and Silicon Valley profit-driven startup culture collided in a terrible way.

That humility, of course, is essential if we make the right changes, today, and the future of health and wellbeing is indeed better than the present. This is certainly a lesson for our world now as we build the future, or as certain groups are empowered to build it. Today, as many corporations roll out the next generation of pharmaceuticals and AI in the health and wellbeing space, we should remember that in many cases it is a walled garden of credentialled medical and business professionals who are making these decisions, which often help widen the inequality gap in our societies.

Galen himself was a man of leisure, who had the privilege of using his time, not in toil and labour, but to observe and to write. In his writings he talks about hunting as a form of exercise that is good but only available to "rich men of leisure". He was



a trusted elite in Greek society with influence and power, who was able to make an impact on his future lasting centuries, for better or for worse. Medical science was as entangled with questions of power, influence, and inequality in Galen's time as it is ours.

"I am a practising radiologist, and in my world, in the USA, I see inequality every day," says Van Schaik. "For example, I see an increased demand for whole body MRI as a screening tool to assess for malignancy. It is extraordinarily expensive and only available to individuals who can privately pay thousands of dollars. Without intervention there's no reason to presume this kind of inequality will improve, providing access for all."

Although we can expect inequality in health and wellbeing to persist into the future, if we learn anything from the past, it's that over time, and especially recently with the advent of advanced technologies, we should not depart from the universal, fundamental truths about our health known since ancient times. It is equally important to adopt an approach to medicine that means harmful notions like bloodletting don't accompany these universal truths into the future with us. ■

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