

meta crisis

Tasting the Pickle:
*Ten flavours of meta-crisis and
the appetite for a new civilisation*

Jonathan Rowson

Perspectiva is a registered charity operating as a collective of scholars, artists, activists, futurists and seekers who believe credible hope for humanity's future lies in forms of economic restraint and political cooperation that are beyond prevailing epistemic capacities and spiritual sensibilities. We work to develop an applied philosophy of education for individual and collective realisation in the service of averting societal collapse; and to cultivate the imaginative and emotional capacity required to usher in a world that is, at the very least, technologically wise and ecologically sound.

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*Jonathan Rowson*¹

I am not sure I am worthy of a spiritual name because for the last decade I have lived a bourgeoisie family life in London and enjoyed my share of boozy dinner parties. Yet there is a corner of the world where I am officially *Vivekananda*, a name conferred on me somewhat hastily in 2016 at a nondescript temple that doubled as a religious office in Kerala, South India. I came up with the name *Vivekananda* myself, which is not how it's supposed to happen. I liked that it means discriminating (*vivek*) bliss (*ananda*) because it chimed with my experience of getting high on conceptual distinctions; my wife Siva and my Indian in-laws agreed it was fitting and I was sent to photocopy my UK passport in a nearby booth on the dust roads. I returned with a piece of paper that detailed what I was ostensibly about to surrender, and it happened a few minutes later on a cement floor with chalk drawings, where I sat cross-legged under a ramshackle plastic sheet protecting us from the heat of the sun. I don't remember the priest's features and he didn't speak English, but I knew the fire he created would be our witness, and when he invoked me to chant, those ancient Sanskrit sounds would resonate beyond that day. I was undertaking apostasy. This act of spiritual sedition felt political because it so often goes the other way in India, and I still feel the solemnity of that moment in my body. I did not seek to flirt

with the sacrilegious and nor did I wish to renounce a faith I never really had, but I was sure that faith as such would always be my own, as would my Christian name.

I am still Jonathan, but technically renouncing my presumed Christianity to become Vivekananda was the only means by which I could be initiated into *Arya Samaj* (noble mission) which is a reformist branch of applied Vedantic philosophy within the religious orbit known as Hinduism. This conversion was neither doctrinal nor devotional, but it was undertaken quite literally to get closer to God, whom I hoped might exist, understand, and perhaps even laugh. After several years of sitting it out in a nearby air-conditioned hotel, the certificate I received after the ceremony was the only way I could, for the first time, join my family and enter the nearby pilgrimage site at Guruvayur, which is strictly for Hindus only, and purportedly Krishna's home on earth. Whatever the fate of my soul, family pragmatics meant that my upper body was needed to carry our second son, Vishnu, and his abundant baby paraphernalia. I was never asked for my certificate, and were my skin brown I would not have needed it. Yet it was only because Jonathan doubled as Vivekananda that the rest of his family could pay obeisance alongside thousands of other pilgrims. I watched them queue for hours to see idols bathed in milk, offer their weight in bananas to God, feed the temple elephants, and pray. At one moment, tired but grateful, I looked down at baby Vishnu in my sling, not yet a year old, and it felt like the temple's host was smiling back. I was there under false pretences, but those false pretences were true.

Swami Vivekananda was a celebrated spiritual figure and a disciple of the mystic Ramakrishna, which, curiously, is my father-in-law's name, which he also chose for himself. Vivekananda was known, among other things, for receiving rapturous applause for the acuity of his opening line at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893: 'Sisters and Brothers of America', he said. That line seems quaint now, but it was catalytic at the time for a Hindu to speak in such resolute solidarity with an international audience, an encapsulation of the emergence of a global consciousness that now reverberates everywhere, though not within everyone. To become worthy of the name Vivekananda would mean learning to speak with similar precision and to delight in the power of the intellect in service of

higher ends, a manifestation of *Jnana Yoga*. Spiritual names are often aspirational like that, reflecting latent qualities that might yet be realised. I am not worthy to use the name Vivekananda in that way, but I mention it here to atone for the pragmatism that acquired it, and to inform the spirit of what follows.

There is a process of *reckoning* going on around the world, heightened by the conditions of the pandemic and the palpability of our fragility, inequality and interdependence. There is a climate *emergency* that requires urgent action, but the precise nature, cost, location and responsibility of that action is moot. There is a broader *crisis* of civilisational purpose that appears to necessitate political and economic transformation, and there are deeper socio-emotional, educational, epistemic and spiritual features of our predicament that manifest as many flavours of *meta-crisis*: the lack of a meaningful global 'We', widespread learning needs, self-subverting political logics and disenchanting worldviews. These different features of our world are obscured by their entanglement with each other. It is difficult to orient ourselves towards meaningful action that is commensurate with our understanding because we are generally unclear about the relationship between different kinds of challenge and what they mean for us. That's what this essay is about. The world is in a pickle, and, daunting though it is, we need to learn how to taste it. Tasting the pickle relatively well requires, in the spirit of Vivekananda, finding joy and releasing energy through the right kinds of discrimination.

The English word 'pickle' comes from the Dutch word 'pekel' but there are related terms in most languages. For several centuries vegetables of various kinds have been preserved in a brine-like substance like vinegar or lemon. Depending on where you are on the planet, 'pickle' is likely to evoke images of stand-alone gherkins, jars of pickled vegetables, or perhaps composite substances with fermentation or spice. Due to the south Indian influence in my family, I know pickle mostly as lemon, garlic, mango or tomato pickle, condiments *reduced* to intensify flavour, usually in small amounts at the side of the plate that enhance the whole meal (not all reductionism is bad!).

Whichever image or feeling is evoked by the idea of 'the pickle', one major point of the metaphor, in a time of difficult decisions, is to help avoid various kinds of sweet-tasting spiritual bypassing, by re-

minding us of the importance of good and necessary but challenging tastes in a satisfying meal – salty, sour and spicy.² Pickles are also about the latter stages of a process that begins with ripening and it therefore highlights the will to preserve – to hold back entropy and decay. To buy time. The expression ‘in a pickle’ also alludes to difficulty in the sense of being as *trapped*, *mixed up* and *disoriented* as the pickled vegetables in a jar. The etymological fidelity of such claims matters less than whether the phrase helps us sense how we are all mixed up with myriad things, somehow stuck, entangled, and unable to change in ways we otherwise might. There are early uses of the term by Shakespeare that relate to being drunk, and sometimes being drunk *while not knowing we’re drunk*; and that’s also appropriate for our current predicament. Most people still appear to be running on autopilot with an outdated kind of fuel, drunk on ideas of progress, our own significance and the notion things will somehow be ok. As my colleague Ivo Mensch put it to me, we’re collectively living a life that no longer exists.

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For many years I took pleasure in the study of conceptual frameworks, diagrams and maps, and I was excited by developmental stage theories in particular.³ These days I sense that the wellspring of life is not cartographical in nature, but more like a quality of experience that we should not be too quick to define. I am still vulnerable to outbreaks of cartological hedonism, but I am now in remission, looking for new ways to think and write that allow me to apply my intellect in the service of qualities of life that are not merely intellectual. The idea of tasting the pickle flows from that incipient change of direction. Rather than produce a framework, the idea is to imbibe a distilled version of our historical moment, i.e. verbally warming up a set of situational ingredients to intensify their taste, and then, in ways that have to be unique to each of us, *taking it in*. The point of the practice is to make sufficient distinctions among the figuratively bitter, astringent, salty and sweet flavours of ‘the pickle’ we are all in to properly digest what is happening for us personally, and thereby improve our chances of living as if we know what we are doing, and why.

The pickle also alludes to unity in diversity – several tastes that are also one taste. A visual analogy to tasting the pickle is the song lyric from The Waterboys: ‘You saw the whole of the moon’, but the *tasting*

of the pickle is key. I believe we expect too much from ‘vision’, as if sight alone could ever save us. The tasting in question is about introjecting world system dynamics rather than spiritual realisation, but there are some parallels to the ‘one taste’ (which is every taste) developed in Ken Wilber’s basic map of evolution from matter to mind to soul to spirit, and involution from spirit to soul to mind to matter. Much of the theorising in the meta-community is tacitly about evolution in the former sense, about the purported need to become ‘more complex’ to deal with the complexity of the world. Tasting the pickle is mostly about the simultaneous necessity of countervailing movement, so that we can return home from our exalted abstractions, even if we may need to head out again. Wilber makes the point that the process of involution happens at The Big Bang, when we are born, and most profoundly at every waking moment if we know how to grasp it. But ‘one taste’ is not a specific state, more like wetness is to all forms of water. The pickle is more exoteric than esoteric, but it shares this fractal and permeating quality.⁴

I am thinking here as a chess grandmaster who knows that the quality of beauty in a single move typically arises from the cascade of ideas that can only arise from a particularly refined grasp of the truth of the position as a whole.

Finally, it matters that *taste* has an aesthetic orientation. At a time when most attempts to diagnose the world’s challenges appear to have an economic, epistemic or ethical emphasis, emphasising the need for qualities of taste that are not primarily cognitive seems worthwhile. The pickle is figurative, not mythical, but there is a useful parallel in James Hillman lamenting the loss of mythic understanding as a concomitant loss in the epistemic status of our capacity to relate to the world aesthetically, i.e. to be beguiled, horrified, delighted, enchanted.⁵ Learning to ‘taste the pickle’ is a training in the cultivation of *epistemic taste* that can be seen as an aesthetic and embodied sensibility in which ideas are tested not merely for analytical coherence or explanatory power but the beauty of their acuity and discernment in otherwise vexed problem spaces.

I am thinking here as a chess Grandmaster who knows that the quality of beauty in a *single move* typically arises from the cascade of ideas that can only arise from a particularly refined grasp of the truth of the position *as a whole*. In a different context, I remember being asked to read Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* as an undergraduate (in the late nineties) and I didn’t grasp it at all; the idea that cultivating the sentiments through aesthetic education might have tempered some of the fury of ‘The Reign of Terror’ that took hold

after the French Revolution seemed obtuse to me. Now I see that it is about the importance of individuals having sovereignty over their attention, emotion and experience so that they are less likely to be engulfed by ambient hysteria, but it's deeper than that too. Aesthetic education is also about acquiring a taste for beauty as a gateway to the fuller truths of life that temper the fervour of ideology because they seem more fundamental. In this sense the aesthetic dimension of tasting the pickle can be seen as a training in love in Iris Murdoch's celebrated definition: 'the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real'.

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The underlying contention is that it is when we come to know and feel things in their sameness *and* their particularity that they really come alive for us. Even with very complex and variegated issues like climate collapse, democratic deconsolidation, widespread economic precarity, intergenerational injustice, race relations, cultural polarisation, loneliness or depression, part of the metamodern sensibility is the inclination to feel incredulity towards seeing such problems as distinctive domains of inquiry, because they are always as polyform, co-arising and cross-pollinating. There is ultimately one predicament, but that predicament can and should be viewed in many ways from multiple perspectives. Tasting the pickle entails using *the right kinds of discrimination* with to clarify relationships and what they imply for our individual and collective agency.

To put it plainly in today's context:

The Covid-19 *reckoning* says: Reflect and contend with what really matters.

The climate *emergency* says: Do something! Act now!

The political and economic *crisis* says: Change the system! Transformation! Regenerate!

But our portfolio of *meta-crises* all ask: Who? How? With what sensibility and imagination?

One of the worst forms of pretence is the truism that everything is connected, because it frees us of the responsibility to disclose the provenance and meaning of those connections. Mythic soothsaying is rarely as helpful as compassionate discernment. Most of the things worth fighting for are grounded in the active ingredient of at least one good distinction. For instance, as Donna Haraway puts it, although everything is connected to something, nothing is connected to everything.⁶ To really taste the pickle then, you need to taste its ingredients, to distinguish between different features of the predicament as a guide to wise perception and constructive action, all the while knowing those features also exist *as one thing*. It is hard to overstate the importance of this point. In a noteworthy remark in *History, Guilt and Habit* Owen Barfield writes of the ‘obsessive confusion between distinguishing and dividing’. For instance, we can distinguish, he says, between thinking and perceiving, but that doesn’t mean we can divide them. The table below is, forgive me, ‘my last cigarette’ as a cartological hedonist – someone who takes pleasure in maps. I am aware that it looks somewhat ridiculous, but some people like to see the ingredients on the side of a jar before they open it and taste what’s inside.⁷

'The Pickle We're In' by Jonathan Rowson

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What's happening?	<i>Reckoning (Covid)</i>	<i>Emergency (Climate)</i>	<i>Crisis (Societal)</i>	<i>Meta/Crisis (Socio-emotional)</i>	<i>Metacrisis (Educational)</i>	<i>Meta-crisis (epistemic)</i>	<i>Meta crisis (spiritual)</i>	<i>Entelechy</i>
Description	Situation	Process	Predicament	Relationships	Confusion	Self-subversion	Meaninglessness	Diaphaneity
Experience	Dissonance	Urgency	Despair	Tribalism	Exhaustion	Frenetic inertia	Delusion	Post-tragic
Image	Portal	Fire	Fork	Battlefield	Tangle	Gas/brake	Hall of mirrors	Tesseract
Domain	Health	Climate	Political Economy	Culture	Education	Ideology	Arts and humanities	Pan-contextual
Injunction	Survive, reflect & contend	Act	Do almost everything differently	Love your neighbour as yourself	Transcend and include perspective	Awaken	Imagine	Taste
Pathway	Vision & Method	Socio-technical transition	New economic praxis/governance	Expanding circles of belonging	Global Paideia, Bildung	Reflexive Transcendental Design	Cultivate Spiritual Sensibility	Realisation
Obstacles	Fetishising Normality	Competing commitments	Vested interests & hidden assumptions	Culture-shaping technologies	Human capital theory of education	Allergies & infatuations; hegemonic co-option	Consumerism	Imaginary
Virtues	Painful truths	Courage & Speed	Resolve & Collaboration	Whole-heartedness & Friendship	Curiosity & teacherly authority	Discernment	Beauty	Wisdom
Illustrative issues	Can there be a new normal?	How can we live without relying on fossil fuels?	How to create a regenerative economy?	How to achieve polycentric governance and 'glocal' harmony?	How should we contend with smartphone addiction?	How can we create a healthy information ecology?	Could we create a spiritual commons?	Metanoia

This table can be seen as the map of the *pickle* but not the pickle itself. The value of *tasting* the pickle is that while it helps to recognise the plurality and vexation of our predicament as a whole as far as possible, it is important not to get lost in it, and important to keep it connected to the beating heart of the emergency, the realpolitik of the crisis and the circumstances of our own lives. The point of ‘tasting the pickle’ then, is to put everything together with wholehearted discernment and then ask:

Have you tasted it yet? Can you feel what it means for you?

1. The Pickle is Personal: metaphor, distinctions, sensibility

In what follows I seek to establish what makes the experience of tasting the pickle personal to each of us, and then I consider how I have come to see it politically, philosophically and professionally; this overview of the pickle is a key strategic premise for *Perspectiva’s* work, which is why I have highlighted some of our emerging responses.

It matters that the pickle is tasted personally, that each of us struggles and succeeds in fathoming how we are implicated in what is happening at scale, even if that struggle inevitably takes place with, through and for other people; indeed, to be perennially ‘alone with others’ is a major ingredient of the pickle and sometimes its main flavour.⁸ But what I have in mind is more profoundly personal. While many are familiar with the maxim that ‘the personal is political’, tasting the pickle is more about grasping the subtle contention of the psychotherapist Carl Rogers: ‘What is most personal is most universal’.⁹

When we are invited to see the world through a conceptual map, we might feel some intellectual orientation but we don’t always see ourselves on it. When we are invited into the uniqueness of another’s experience and vantage point, however, our own sense of personal possibility comes alive. The more deeply and uniquely a personal experience is conveyed, the more keenly the latent possibilities of our own uniqueness are felt. Why does that matter today? In the first two decades of the 21st century we typically spoke about global col-

lective action problems with words like ‘regeneration’, ‘transformation’ or ‘systems change’. While that kind of amorphously ambitious language does help to elevate discussions beyond narrow or naive concerns, the aspirational feels amoral, and it is *insufficiently personal* to have universal validity and resonance. As part of helping the reader taste the pickle, then, it feels incumbent on me to start with some personal disclosure, to help you find your own place in what follows.

The biggest intellectual influence on my life has been the experience of parenting.

I was born in 1977 and grew up in Aberdeen, Scotland in the context of the Cold War and Thatcherism. My main formative influences include becoming a type-one diabetic at the age of six and my father and brother developing schizophrenia while I was a boy; I know how it feels to be a visitor in a psychiatric hospital, certainly one of the outer circles of hell. I pretended not to notice or care too much about my parents divorcing and I sublimated all adolescent growing pains through an intense dedication to chess and later became a chess Grandmaster; that process entailed lots of travel, but much of the sightseeing was on chess boards and computer screens within hotel rooms. There were eight years in three parts of looking for an academic home in philosophy and social sciences but not really finding it, including a PhD on the concept of wisdom. There were seven years in public policy research, latterly in a polite renegade capacity where I was rethinking prevailing approaches to climate change and leading an exploration into the place of spirituality in public life. And I’ve spent the last five years as an ideas entrepreneur, building the organisation, *Perspectiva*, that is publishing this paper.¹⁰

There has been a lot to learn and unlearn along the way, but by far the biggest intellectual influence on my life has been the experience of parenting. Apart from a few short sanity breaks masquerading as work trips, I’ve been with one or both of my sons, Kailash and Vishnu, for about 4,000 days now. I say *intellectual* influence not to beguile the reader with the folksy half-truth that my children are my teachers, because they are also my tormentors. Their influence on me has been intellectual in a more grounding and exoteric sense, training me to attend to quotidian matters like finding missing socks or sought-after ingredients as if they matter – though I mostly fail – and helping me to contextualise the intellect in the kinds of daily life enjoyed and endured by millions. Marriage has been another major influence, not least because on those 4,000 days of parenting

I've coordinated activity with my wife Siva, who is a legal scholar and also has other things to think about. We both struggle to think and write while updating each other on whatever needs to be cleaned, bought, cooked, fixed, found or otherwise organised. Being busy is often lame excuse doubling as a status claim, but I am busy, so much so that I'm not always fully awake to myself as one week becomes another and I get steadily older. In his epic poem *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo speaks of 'a somnambulist whirl', and that's what I notice I am caught up in, especially when I have moments alone.

While waiting for the water to boil in my kitchen, I sometimes imagine myself as one of millions of passengers standing in line for coffee, travelling on a wet spaceship that twirls in a galactic trance to the tune of the sun. The cosmological setting for the plot of our lives is a geological niche too remote from human experience to be known like a particular tree or river can be known, but it is nonetheless very particular. Our planet is not merely a place that happens to be our home, but a process that gives, sustains and destroys abundant life, uncannily blessed by mathematical and mystical details that allow evolution towards language, consciousness, culture and the creation and perception of history. There may be kindred processes out there, but there is a distinct possibility we are alone; all eight billion of us. Our situation is laughable, and heartbreakingly beautiful.¹¹

God knows what we're doing here, but there's a real chance we might screw it all up. In fact it's looking quite likely. The agents of political hegemony that are invested in the reproduction of the patterns of activity that cause our destructive behaviour might just be conceited and blinkered enough to destroy our only viable habitat beyond repair (*The Bastards!*). Alas, those who see it coming and watch it unfold might be too irresolute, disorganised and wayward to stop them (*The Idiots!*). The regression to societal collapse within the first half of this century is not inevitable, but it's not an outlier either and may be the default scenario. Are we really condemned to be the idiots who blame the bastards for the world falling apart?

At times, it can feel like we really are that wayward and deluded, but there are many scholars, mystics and visionaries who see the chaos of our current world as an unfolding evolutionary process that has reached its limits of unfolding. What they see in the world today is

the necessary and perhaps even providential dissolution of our existing structures of consciousness and their manifestations, including our conceptual maps, so that another way of seeing, being and living can arise.

Something or perhaps *somehow* is emerging. It might be an impending disaster that looms. But our growing awareness that the first truly global civilisation is in peril is also an active ingredient in whatever is going on. Therefore, the most important *action* we can take – and it is a kind of action – is cultivating the requisite qualities of perception and awareness. In order for new ways of seeing ourselves and the world to arise, we need not so much to resist our current predicament, which often serves to reinforce it, but to reimagine it.

As developed further below, imagination is indispensable to help us to transgress our limitations, and while we like to think there are no limits to imagination, it is shaped and to a large extent constrained by the world as we find it. Our task, then, is to *allow* the intellectual premises of the process of destruction that is underway to be *dismantled*, which requires acute discernment about what exactly is going wrong and where precisely the scope lies for *renaissance*. When the intellect serves the imagination without seeking to fragment it, distinctions begin to feel like our friends.

To say societal collapse is inevitable is not shocking; it's a truism. Societies and civilisations are mortal, and we even have reason to believe that, regardless of human activity, our planet and solar system are time-limited. The issue at stake is a matter of timing and our relationship to time, and what follows for our responsibility to attend, feel and act with a discerning sense of priority. The American writer and leadership theorist Meg Wheatley is one of few with the resolve to contend that we simply cannot effect systems change at scale in the way we keep saying we have to; there is simply too much cultural inertia and economic and political interest inside our figurative ship to turn it around in time. In the context of that hysteresis (though she doesn't use that word), we should not expect too much from the elixir of emergence. Emergence is highly probabilistic in nature, and at present, in aggregate, most outcomes appear likely to be bad.¹²

Objectively, I see that, but I don't yet feel it. I am not sure if that's a kind of denial, or immaturity, but I feel the world is just so darn surprising that things will not unfold as we expect them to, and that there are latent immunities and antibodies that are treated like wildly optimistic unknown unknowns, but are in a sense more like viable known unknowns – nebulous intangibles that we nonetheless have sound reasons to believe in.

To make the most of whatever chance we have to protect what is most precious about life, we need to grow out of wishful thinking. We need, for instance, to get over the idea that widespread integral consciousness will forge within everyone's hearts and minds any time soon. And yet forms of sensibility *are* arising that are captivated by beauty, imagination and calling, and less bound to identity and materiality, though still dependent on them too. It seems wise not to attach to specific outcomes, but I am thinking, for instance, of abundant renewable energy, wise polycentric governance, universal basic income linked to land reform, a peaceful global paideia and just enough optimal conflict in the world to keep us keen. At a species level, there are still viable and desirable ways of living to fight for, but it is not clear how we might find the heart for the scope and scale of the renaissance required to get us there.

In a geological sense, planet earth is becoming less hospitable to human life, and in an historiographical sense something epochal seems to be ending. Our intellectual function cannot fully grok what is happening, and it is far from clear what, if anything, is beginning. We can't just make do and mend, we cannot redesign it all from scratch while we're still here, and I don't anticipate a mass 'shift in consciousness' any time soon. Still, it is clear that some beneficent forms of life are emerging, and whether they will scale in time to put out the fire or arise from the ashes is unclear. As poet W.H. Auden put it: 'We are lived by powers we pretend to understand'.

2. The Pickle as Political Economy: Reckoning, Emergency and Crisis

The Reckoning

Like a new child in the playground who has not yet found their place, the COVID-19 pandemic has been called by many names. In the *Financial Times*, Arundhati Roy called it a *portal* between one world and the next and ‘a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves’. Writing in *The Guardian*, Rebecca Solnit said that in times of immense change, ‘[w]e see what’s strong, what’s weak, what’s corrupt, what matters and what doesn’t’. Writing for *Emerge*, Bonnita Roy suggested we should see the pandemic as, in the terms of her title, ‘A Tale of Two Systems’: the relatively new system of global financial capitalism looking brittle, in the process of collapsing, while another system, ancient and resilient based on mutual aid and collective intelligence, was coming back into its own. Zak Stein captured this sense of burgeoning awareness evocatively in the title of another *Emerge* essay: ‘A War Broke out in Heaven’. There he writes: ‘Alone together, with imaginations tortured by uncertainty, we must remake ourselves as spiritual, scientific and ethical beings’.

With these influences in mind, contending with the disequilibrium caused by Covid-19 is fundamentally a *reckoning* to see more clearly all the entanglements we are caught up in. Poetry makes this point better than prose. Rilke said that to be free is nothing, but to *become* free is heavenly. That line makes sense of another by John Keats: ‘nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced’. Many events, processes and things in the world that *are* objectively real can only *become* real within us or between us when we are directly implicated in that process of becoming. On this reading, the Covid-19 pandemic means that the systemic fragility of a planetary civilisation that was already real just *became real* for millions of people. Our shared mortality, biological inheritance, and ecological interdependence became real. The vulnerability of our food, water and energy supplies became real. The deluded nature of plutocratic, extractive, surveillance capitalism became real. The value of care-based relationships and professions, and the solidarity of strangers became real. The need for good governance of scientific knowledge and technological innovation became real. The plausibility of a universal basic income became

real. And since much of the attempt to avoid the spread of the virus is about avoiding untimely deaths, it begs the question – why are we alive at all? – thus the purpose of life as such for all of us became real. These kinds of questions arise through any critical reflection on this legal basis for capitalism, and yet they are rarely articulated as such.

The protracted dissonance is tiring, but I think it is possible to see dissonance as a kind of collective growing pain too, and the longer it endures, the less the desire to go back to normal will feel normal.

The taste of the reckoning is mostly a kind of dissonance. For those whose health is not directly compromised, the pandemic is difficult precisely because day-to-day things are *not that bad*. It's not a time for heroism in war or resistance under occupation. Instead, there's a strange co-presence of normal and abnormal life. The protracted dissonance is tiring, but I think it is possible to see dissonance as a kind of collective growing pain too, and the longer it endures, the less the desire to go back to normal will feel normal. And rightly so, because if we were in our right minds, normal would be a state of emergency.

The Emergency

Prior to Covid-19, the declaration of climate *emergency* by Extinction Rebellion and many political leaders was (and is) legitimate because it is grounded in an objective characterisation of our timesensitive ecological plight.¹³ As David Wallace Wells said at the RSA in London, 'Everything we do in this century will be conducted in the theatre of climate change'. Urgent action *of some kind* is called for, but the declaration of emergency seems eerily obtuse, because it suggests we can disentangle climate collapse from the broader plight of a multifaceted and mortal civilisation, as if climate change were a deviant variable to be brought back into the fold with those purportedly benign constants called macroeconomics and politics. Alas, even during a pandemic, emissions are not falling even close to the extent that we need them to, and the idea of emergency is powerless to change that, because our problems are altogether deeper, broader and more entangled.

I like the fact that climate pronouncements have qualifications, texture and layers: the most authoritative consensus, on our best available evidence, indicates that humanity, *as a whole*, only has a small and diminishing amount of time, to have a fighting chance, of maintaining a viable habitat, in many places in the world, and eventually

all of the world. A recent paper in *Nature* is one of numerous respected sources to make that kind of case, particularly in relation to the probability of tipping points that could hasten cascading collapse of ecosystems that give us the kinds of temperature, air, food and water we need for a decent quality of life, if not merely survival.¹⁴

The statistical focal point that made the greatest emotional impact on me is the one that suggests our chances of even *failing well* are vanishingly small. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that for a two-thirds chance of limiting warming to the relatively modest constraint target of a two degrees Celsius rise in mean surface temperature since pre-industrial levels, emissions have to decline by 25 per cent by 2030 and reach net zero by 2070. But it is 2020 at the time of writing and emissions continue to rise, even in a pandemic, and show no sign of abating. Climate campaigners advise everyone to speak of the ambitious 1.5 degree target constraint, because several low-lying countries depend on that to remain above water, and it is good to establish a new norm, but it seems all but impossible given that this entails lowering our 2010 emissions levels by 45 per cent before 2030, to achieve net zero emissions around 2050.¹⁵

The idea of an emergency is useful as a call to action in the fierce urgency of NOW, because, as Rebecca Solnit notes in a *Guardian* essay, it signifies 'being ejected from the familiar and urgently needing to reorient'. However, the idea of emergency is conceptually mute on what discerning action would look like, and why it's not forthcoming. Ecologically we have knowledge, which we keep at bay through unconscious grief and terror, that we are inexorably destroying our only home. In its complexity, magnitude and consequences, climate change is an emergency unlike any we have confronted before, but it's a collective action problem that is also laced with dissonance. Calls for action feel hollow because nobody seems quite sure *how* to do what we *have* to do. The collective challenge is therefore to attend wholeheartedly to the deeper variables in which the climate issue is entangled, and unless we do that, we have little chance of even limiting temperature rises to 3 degrees Celsius or more.¹⁶

The Crisis

In almost every part of the world, our scope for action on the emergency is constrained not by the lack of calls for an emergency, but by a *crisis* – a very different phenomenon. Crisis is derived from the Greek *krisis* and is about the necessity for judgement in a state of suspension between worlds, characterised as a juncture or crossroads that may soon reach a turning point. To be in a *critical* condition, medically or otherwise, means that even if the dice might be loaded, things could yet go either way. Or more positively, as Will Davies puts it, ‘To experience a crisis is to inhabit a world that is temporarily up for grabs’.

The crisis is not that everything is going wrong but more like some things are going very well, some are going very badly, we cannot collectively decipher what this means, we need to change several things at the same time but cannot articulate the relationships to build a compelling political case to even try.

For several decades now, there have been reductions in absolute poverty, improvements in literacy and life expectancy, and significant technological and medical progress. And yet there is also cascading ecological collapse, socially corrosive inequality and widespread governance failures, many of which relate to apparent technological successes. The simultaneous presence of progress on some metrics and collapse on others is a feature of the crisis, not a bug, because it drives concurrent narratives that obscure our sense of what’s happening and confounds consensus on how radically we should seek to change our ways. The crisis is not that everything is going wrong but more like some things are going very well, some are going very badly, we cannot collectively decipher what this means, we need to change several things at the same time but cannot articulate the relationships to build a compelling political case to even try.¹⁷

Our evaluative metrics work on a piecemeal basis, saying X is doing well but Y is doing badly, but they struggle to evaluate the whole. While our intuition may be that this co-arising of positive and negative features of our planetary civilisation suggests the truth lies somewhere in between, complex systems dynamics means it is more likely that because everything is inextricably linked, that we live at a particularly unstable moment. As we look to the future, the chance of dynamic equilibrium in perpetuity is very small indeed. Civilisations are mortal, the end sometimes comes quickly, and this one may well be near the end. Even for those with an instinctive both/and mentality, it looks a lot like the world system will either evolve to a higher state of resilience, complexity and elegance, or collapse under the strain of its own contradictions.

Daniel Schmachtenberger is one of many to call this predicament ‘the hard fork hypothesis’ – the contention is that we may have to go one way or the other. I agree with the underlying sentiment about instability, but there are other possibilities, including a system that becomes more resilient and less complex, and I am not sure whether to consider the hard fork hypothesis idea axiomatic, a plausible and useful heuristic, or an article of faith. The theoretical basis for these ideas arise beyond my own competence, from bifurcation theory in mathematical modelling, Priogene’s theory of transitions in complexity in chemistry and Walerstein’s work on World System Dynamics. What I can surmise, I think, is that in the context of socio-economic systems, we do not have the kind of data that would indicate whether we are approaching a bifurcation event (as they are known) but it’s important to understand that we *could* be.¹⁸

The design process for the kind of thinking that is discerning enough to offer an alternative to collapse is what Forrest Landry calls Transcendental Design, and that has to be a design process that is inherently reflexive because the humans undertaking it are simultaneously affected by it, because they are both constants and variables. Nobody yet knows what a viable destination will look like institutionally, nor how it will vary across the world. Some speak of this kind of approach as ‘Game B’ in which a world of non-rivalrous games is built from within ‘Game A’ – the world as we find it. Others, including Vinay Gupta, point to basic ecological and ethical constraints relating to stringent reductions in the per capita use of carbon and the ending of de facto slavery. Whatever the precise model or terminology, it seems clear that the desirable destination is less like a new place and more like a renewing and regenerative process that will include several features:

- A relatively balanced picture of self in society, free from the alienation of excessive individualism and the coercion of collectivism, with autonomy grounded in commons resources and ecological interdependence.
- A more refined perception of the nature of the world, in which discrete things are seen for what they have always been – evolving processes.
- A dynamic appreciation of our minds, which are not blank slates that magically become ‘rational’ but constantly evolving living systems that are embodied, encultured, extended and deep.
- An experience of ‘society’ that is not merely given, but willingly received or co-constructed through the interplay of evolving imaginative capacity.
- A perspective on the purpose of life that is less about status through material success and more about the intrinsic rewards of learning, beauty and meaning.
- An understanding of our relationship with nature that is less about extraction of resources for short-term profit and more about wise ecological stewardship (some would add, for the benefit of all beings).
- Patterns of governance that are less about power being centralised, corrupt and unaccountable and more ‘glocal’, polycentric, transparent and responsive.
- A relationship to technology in which we are not beholden to addictive gadgets and platforms but truly sovereign over our behaviour, and properly compensated for the use of our data. (And where, in Frankfurt’s terms, we ‘want what we want to want’).
- An economy designed not to create aggregate profit for the richest, but the requisite health and education required for everyone to live meaningful lives free of coercion on an ecologically sound planet.
- A world with a rebalancing of power and resources from developed to developing worlds, and men to women, and present to future generations.

Whatever the precise model or terminology, it seems clear that the desirable destination is less like a new place and more like a renewing and regenerative process that will include several features.

These are not necessarily the transitions that will work best, nor the only transitions that could help, but they describe the *pattern of transitions* we need based on our current historical sensibilities, transitions that are of sufficient scope and concern for the interconnected nature of our predicament. Many questions remain, for instance for the technological nature of the money supply or the provision, storage and transportation of energy; it is likely to mean a very different kind of world, and getting there is unlikely to be costless for everyone. Even if we seek an ‘omniconsiderate’ world of win-win scenarios and believe such a place is possible, there will certainly be winners and losers on the way there. And because there are winners and losers in parts of the necessary process of transition, and not all them can be expected to defer to the presumed wisdom of the improvement for the whole, there will be conflict, and possibly war. The world as a whole is not loyal to game theoretic assumptions about Pareto optimal outcomes, and we should not expect it to be, nor imagine that we can ever bend it with our wills to be so.

In the context of crisis and the hard fork hypothesis, political hope no longer seems to be about electing the right political parties and campaigning for a policy tweak here and there. Our ecological situation is so dire and our prospective technological changes so profound that it seems implausible that we will somehow ‘muddle through’. The critical idea to grasp this point is *hysteresis* – the dependence of the state of any system on its history. We are already underway, and we have been since the Industrial Revolution if not before. Things already in motion cannot be easily changed, but they *can* be better understood, and that understanding influences their direction. The notion that we are responding to a crisis is not therefore about a litany of problems or a general call to arms but the recognition of the need for intentional action in the context of seismic changes that will either happen to us unwittingly and unwillingly, or through us, creatively and imaginatively.

The crisis, then, is about misaligned interests, confusion over the co-arising of success and failure and the path-dependent nature of entropy and hysteresis that oblige us to change course. The emergency is the crisis in this sense: it’s not just that we have to *act* fast, but that we have to *get it right* fast, where ‘it’ is something like the underlying logic, the source code or the generator function for civilisation

as a whole. That source code is not just in the world outside, but within us, between us and beyond us too. How we understand and react to our crisis is an *endogenous* part of our crisis and our emergency, and at a species-as-a-whole level, at a political level, at a business level, we don't understand it very well at all.

I have three main things to say about the wisdom of going meta. First, there are several meanings of meta. Second, there is epistemic skill involved in knowing when and how to go meta, and when not to. Third, we are already meta.

All of our rallying cries for action and for transformation arise in cultures and psyches riddled with confusion and immunities to change. We have to better understand *who* and *what* we are, individually and collectively, in order to be able to fundamentally change *how* we act. *That* conundrum is what is now widely called the meta-crisis lying within, between and beyond the emergency and the crisis. That aspect of our predicament is socio-emotional, educational, epistemic and spiritual in nature; it is the most subtle in its effects but the roots of our problems, and the place we are most likely to find enduring political hope.

Pausing the pickle: We need to 'go meta' while realising we are already there

I have three main things to say about the wisdom of going meta. First, there are several meanings of meta. Second, there is epistemic skill involved in knowing when and how to go meta, and when not to. Third, we are already meta.

At its simplest, meta means *after*, which is why Aristotle got to metaphysics after writing about physics. It can also mean 'with' or 'beyond' but these terms can mean many things. *With* can mean alongside, concomitant or within. *Beyond* can mean transcending and including, superseding or some point in the distance. In most cases 'meta' serves to make some kind of implicit relationship more explicit. The 'meta' in 'metamodernism' can simply mean 'after modernism', but a more precise way to capture what that means is with another kind of 'meta': *metaxy*. *Metaxy* is about between-ness in general, and the oscillation between poles of experience in particular. Being and becoming is a metaxy, night and day is a metaxy, and modernism and postmodernism is *the* metaxy that characterises metamodernism; Jeremy Johnson put the point about metaxy particularly well in his feedback on this paper:

This is why I think it's helpful to keep returning to the etymological roots, re: metaxy. Charging the word with its quicksilver, liminal nature, it approximates both the magical structure of consciousness (one point is all points), it provides a mythical image (Hermes, anyone?), it elucidates a healthy mental concept (oscillation, dialectics, paradoxical thinking), and in a back-forward archaic-integral leap, it challenges us with the processual and transparent systasis ('from all sides'). Tasting the pickle.

One additional point on the meaning of meta is that it is invariably used as a prefix and it appears to have a chameleon nature depending on what it forms part of. The meta in metanoia is mostly *beyond*, as in the spiritual transformation of going beyond the current structure of the mind (nous). The meta in metamorphosis and metabolism is a kind of 'change', and the meta in metaphor has the composite meaning of the term because metaphor literally means 'the bearer of meta'. The point of showing the multiple meanings of meta is not to get high on abstraction – though there is that - but to illustrate that meta need not be, and perhaps should not be, thought of principally in semantic terms as a word with its own meaning. Adding the prefix 'meta' introduces a shift in gear or register that can take us to several different kinds of place. It's a manoeuvre in our language games that changes the mood and tenor of a discussion or inquiry.

As Zak Stein argues, however, there are also limits to the wisdom of going meta, which can easily become a pseudo-intelligent love of infinite regress disconnected from the pragmatic purposes of thought. Worse still, the constant availability of the meta-move creates the kind of 'whataboutery' that makes it difficult to create a shared world. For instance, when someone says: 'this conversation is going nowhere', they are going meta in a way that unilaterally ends whatever collaborative spirit of inquiry may have characterised it up to that point. To paraphrase Aristotle on anger, anyone can go meta – that is easy; what is difficult is to go meta in the right way, at the right time for the right reasons. Going meta in the wrong way can feel strenuously abstract or even absurd, but when done well, going meta should feel more like a return to sanity or a step towards freedom.

The good news is that it should not be particularly difficult to go meta in the right way because we do it all the time. Meta phenomena

are more diverse and pervasive than we typically imagine – the meta world arises from our relationship with the world as sense-making and meaning-making creatures. Meta is *already here* with us, within us, between us, beyond us, waiting to be disclosed and appreciated. We are already meta. Learning how to learn is meta – and schools increasingly recognise the need for that. A speech about how to give a speech is meta – and people pay to hear them. Parents of young children experience meta whenever they feel tired of being tired. For a different take, if you ‘go meta’ on oranges and apples you get fruit (or seeds, or trees). If you go meta on fruit you may get to food, and if you go meta on food you may get to agriculture, and then perhaps land and climate, and then either soil and mean surface temperature, or perhaps planet and cosmos. Meta is also what happens in meditation (meta-tation!) when the mind observes itself in some way: there I go again, we think, without pausing to feel astonishment at being both observer and observed. Meta themes abound in popular culture, for instance in *Seinfeld*, where comedians successfully pitch for a television show in which nothing of significance ever really happened; that idea was the explicit expression of the implicit idea that made the whole series funny.¹⁹

The meta-move is often noteworthy because it tends to happen when normal moves exhaust themselves. For this reason, ‘going meta’ is a key feature of metamodernity, characterised by our encounter with the material and spiritual exhaustion of modernity and the limitations of postmodernity. Going meta is therefore important and necessary, and it’s already a part of popular culture, so we should not fear talking about it as if it was unacceptable jargon. But we do need to be a bit clearer about why and when we use it, not least when acting in response to ‘the meta crisis’. Since I have argued that crisis has a particular meaning relating to bifurcation and time sensitivity, and we often use the terms meta and crisis to describe our predicament as a whole, the relationship between meta and crisis deserves closer attention.

Here is how I see it. The idea of the meta-crisis is pertinent and essential, and the term offers the kind of creative tension and epistemic stretch that we are called upon to experience. However, in our social change efforts we need to remember that language is psychoactive, and it matters which terms we use to attract, persuade and galvanise

people. I don't think the aim should be to stop talking about meta as if it was a secret code we had to translate to make it more palatable. Instead, I think the aim should be to disclose that what is meta is so normal and even mundane that we don't need to draw special attention to it.

While most developmental progress is about the subject-object move, in the case of meta-phenomena, I wonder if this is an exception that proves the rule. What we appear to need is for whatever is meta in our experience and discourse to become subject again, such that it becomes a kind of second nature that we simply 'do' rather than reflect on or talk about. The aim is to close the observational gap by integrating what you previously exorcised by making it object, moving from unconscious, to conscious and then not back to unconscious as such, but to dispositional and tacit. In this sense, the aim is to know the meta-crisis well enough that it ceases to be 'meta', and ceases to be a 'crisis', and frees us of the need to speak in those terms. The aim is to get back to living meaningfully and purposively with reality as we find it.

Some of the most profound and promising theorising in this space comes from those who suggest we might precipitate the new forms of perception we need by understanding the provenance of our current sense of limitation more acutely. Jeremy Johnson puts it like this:

If we wish to render transparent the true extent of the meta-crisis, to get a clear sense of how to navigate through it, then we need to thoroughly identify the foundations of the world coming undone. In order to navigate this space 'between worlds', we need a phenomenology of consciousness that can help us to trace, as it were, the underlying ontological 'structures' of the old world, the constellations of sensemaking we have relied on up until now. We should do this so that we can better recognise what the new world might be like – to re-constellate ourselves around that emergent foundation.²⁰

I have endeavoured to try to do that in what follows. Once you take the idea of meta-crises seriously and start looking at them closely, it seems we are caught up in something oceanic in its depth and range, and *plural*. The idea of trying to define *the* meta-crisis as if it could be encapsulated as a single notion and conceptually conquered is a kind

of trap. I have come to think it helps to *distinguish* between different features of an experience that ultimately amount to the same underlying process. In fact, that's how I see the meta-crises writ large: they are the underlying processes causing us to gradually lose our bearings in the world.

There are many ways to parse the different qualities of meta-crisis, which are of course interrelated, but I have alighted on four main patterns, unpacked as ten illustrations.

The socio-emotional *meta/crisis* (meta as with/within; the crisis of 'we') concerns the subjective and intersubjective features of collective action problems relating to management of various kinds of commons, not least digital and ecological. In essence it's the problem relating to the limits of compassion and projective identification, and of the world not having a discerning sense of what 'we' means in practical, problem-solving or world-creating terms.

The epistemic *meta-crisis* (meta as with/self-reference; the crisis of understanding) concerns ways of knowing that are ultimately self-defeating, underlying mechanisms that subvert their own logics. In essence it's the problem of ideological and epistemic blind spots.

The educational *metacrisis* (meta as after/within and between; the crisis of education) concerns the emergent properties arising from all our major crises taken together, which entail learning needs at scale, particularly how to make sense of the first planetary civilisation; how to confer legitimacy transnationally; how to do what needs to be done ecologically; and how to clarify collectively what we're living for without coercion.

The spiritual *meta crisis* (meta as beyond; the crisis of imagination) concerns the cultural inability or unwillingness to 'go meta' in the right way, for instance to think about the political spectrum rather than merely thinking with it, or for economic commentators to question the very idea of the economy or the nature of money. More profoundly, it is about being cut off from questions about the nature, meaning and purpose of life as a whole as legitimate terrain in our attempts to imagine a new kind of world.

3. The Philosophical Pickle: tasting ten flavours of the meta-crisis²¹

*Whatever its woes,
and there are many,
the world we are
called upon to love
is always the one we
are already living in.*

Do we even know what we want? If pushed for an answer I would say I seek a world of ecological sanity that delights in its own abundance, societies with dynamic equilibriums where everyone can develop skill and taste and relationships, and forge meaningful purpose, and education that leads us to seek truth, feel moved by beauty and experience joy, but these intimations and sketches I am never quite sure what to hope for. I also feel that that desirable world is already with us to a large extent, and it would be foolish to wish it all away. There are certainly socio-economic and ecological problems to be solved, but I don't have a working vision of Utopia as a lodestar, and doubt those who do. I notice that life is defined by processes of change that feel endemic and pervasive, that struggle is part of that process, but often a friend in disguise, and although I have no direct experience of war, widespread calls for peace on earth don't ring altogether true; I wonder if our darkness is a feature rather than a bug, and perhaps we can only ever repress the patterns of ambitious coercion that are baked into human desire. Whatever its woes, and there are many, the world we are called upon to love is always the one we are already living in.

What should we work towards, then, and how? It is precisely when we take this question seriously – the question of what to do about the emergency and the crisis – that the full range of meta-crises reveal themselves. What follows, then, is a performance of my own tasting of the pickle, of what it feels like to dive into the jar as it were, and play with all the elements that seem to be swirling around in the meta-crisis discourse. It is hoped that by conveying my experience of the pickle, others may think and act with an enriched set of reference points.

1. The Meta/Crisis of Cosmopolitics: We don't have a viable We

The slash in meta/crisis signifies that the meta/crisis is *almost* indistinguishable from the crisis as such. The term also helps sharpen the distinction between emergency and crisis by highlighting perhaps the most fundamental feature lying *within* our crisis. The main limitation with the idea that we face an emergency is that there is no 'we'

as such to address it. The We that wants to say there is an emergency is not the same We as the We that needs to hear it, and the We that needs to hear it has several different ideas about the nature of the We that should do something about it. As I argued in the second edition of *Spiritualise*, ‘we’ is usually an injunction in disguise.²²

Perhaps spiritually we are One, or could be, but politically we are many, indeed for many how we decide to demarcate our ‘we’ is the fault line of politics.

Perhaps spiritually we are One, or could be, but politically we are many, indeed for many how we decide to demarcate our ‘we’ is the fault line of politics.²³ Many believe political polarisation is the defining challenge of our time; it is certainly one of them. Fascism has been described as ‘the politics of them and us’, and while it is not a term to be used lightly, many countries are at least somewhat closer to the spirit of fascism than they have been for years. One way of looking at The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act in India for instance is that it effectively makes Hindus ‘more Indian’ than Muslims. The Indian ‘We’ may still be secular and legally plural, but politically that ideal is increasingly contested under the ethno-nationalist claims from incumbent powers that proclaim India to be a Hindu nation.

More generally, there are competing tribes, perspectives, interests and factions in the world, and perhaps there always will be. You don’t need to travel far to realise that, but I found it helps to do so. For me, spending some time in Sarajevo as part of my Open Society Fellowship was particularly useful, because it revealed how easily and tragically war can arise when a collective sense of We-ness shatters into lethal shards of them and us. At almost every level of analysis, from sclerotic global governance to quarrelling spouses, we appear to lack sanctified mechanisms to resolve what kind of We we want ourselves to be. Ecological sanity depends upon the recognition of some kind of unity in diversity, and that should not be impossible to obtain. For instance, Elinor Ostrom’s work reveals that collective action solutions are every bit as real as collective action problems.²⁴

However, in the absence of a wholehearted commitment to something like the human rights framework or the sustainable development goals at an international macro level, or the rapid deployment of polycentric governance to coordinate meso levels, or the spread of methodologies of interpersonal micro-solidarity (e.g. micro finance) at a micro level, or a combination of all of the above, the widespread misalignment of our identities and priorities will remain problem-

atic. Competing and incommensurate political aims undermine the *stability* of the kinds of cooperation and sacrifice that may be necessary for the greater good at a planetary scale in a time of emergency. That *realpolitik* is part of the crisis.

As Bonnitta Roy reminded me in a personal communication, while people make a lot of conceptual statements around ‘us’ as unity, the problem is that it doesn’t turn into units of action – the appropriate scale for ‘we’ as a unit of action is the critical question, and an urgent one at a time of global collective action problems where the presumptive global we is *not* a unit of action. I felt the acuity of this point even more profoundly in a personal exchange with Dougald Hine who noted that whenever people travel and converge for conferences of various kinds, the question invariably arises: ‘What should we do?’ And yet there is usually no ‘we’ in the room that is capable of coordinated action because they are all away from their contexts and networks where each of them may more readily establish units of action, and that recurring confusion wastes precious time.

To take an example at a larger scale, we need to keep most oil and gas reserves in the ground and virtually all coal in the ground to give us a fighting chance of staying within the relatively ambitious 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures. There’s a compelling case for pursuing that global objective if you are one of the thousands of inhabitants of Tuvalu or any other low-lying small island state with non-amphibious humans who simply wish to live above water. However, if your political remit is to do something about energy poverty affecting millions of families in a coal-rich part of rural India or China, you may see things differently. Likewise if you are one of many rapidly developing African countries seeking to catch up with Western living standards and you notice that a lack of an international airport places you an economic disadvantage, it won’t look obvious that ‘we’ shouldn’t build any more airports.

The identity crisis about our ‘we’ is compounded by the confusion about our *success as a we* – a species. Many people feel an understandable desire to continue being ‘successful’ without really knowing what that means. One recent expression of this aspect of meta/crisis is an impressively reasoned paper in the journal *Science* about the lack of acuity and coherence in the idea that Green Growth or The

Green New Deal, which is the policy that advocates ‘winning’ on all fronts – economically and ecologically – as the preeminent response to our plight. It would make sense if it worked, and it might even be a necessary step forward, but after reading the meticulous take-down of the assumptions behind the idea, it is hard to see how it could ever be credible as a global strategy. Let’s imagine then that a significant majority of powerful people read that paper, agreed with all of it, and decided resolutely that growth in developed countries is the wrong goal, and then acted on that post-growth understanding in a fundamental shift in policy goals and political messaging. How likely is that? Not at all likely, and that’s the crisis too – some apparent truths are deeply unacceptable politically, in the literal sense that we, writ large, are not *able* to accept them and sometimes also not *willing* to accept them, in the sense of not knowing *how* to do it.²⁵

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And climate activists
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No wonder people will continue to ask: What should I do? What *can* I do? If we don’t really know who they are (and often they don’t really know either) all we can offer are lowest-common-denominator things we don’t wholeheartedly believe in anymore. Recycling is good, but feels lame when your country is on fire, and writing to your elected representative feels quaint when *their* leaders brazenly lie. And climate activists rightly remind us that we are running out of time, so there is no time to waste.

Perhaps we save time by reminding ourselves that the question, what should I do, is always asked by particular, knowable, historic, geographic, embodied, learning individuals. The answer can and should therefore be unique to their pattern of character formation, their professional skill, social influence and growth potential; and it usually comes down to this: do what you are best at to address whatever is most generatively helpful, and collaborate with other individuating people. A deeper exploration of individuation as a mostly Jungian concept traversing psyche and character and journey is beyond our scope, but in terms of its implication for *action* it is closely related to the achievement of autonomy, and the best short definition of autonomy is an open system that is capable of closing itself. That, in essence, may be what we need at scale – open systems capable of closing themselves. The ‘We’ required to collaborate for the greater global good depends on individual capacities and sensibilities that are not just insufficiently abundant, but insufficiently autonomous

because they are also, as Carl Rogers mentioned earlier, insufficiently personal. So when one of the eight billion asks us then: What should I do? At least part of the answer has to be: You tell me.

One of the reasons the collective action problems of our time seem overwhelming is that we sense that they are actually problems of collective individuation in disguise.

At a time when requisite action – on consumerism, on smartphone addiction, on political polarisation – is often a kind of restraint, one of the psychological variables we need to understand is the *provenance of agency*, because that determines the extent to which an action is volitional or habitual, chosen or coerced. One of the reasons the collective action problems of our time seem overwhelming therefore is that we sense that they are actually problems of *collective individuation* in disguise. There is a necessary realisation waiting for all of us that yes, we are utterly contingent and interdependent, but we are also uniquely relevant and ethically singular. While the kind of We that might actually be fit for purpose cannot be wished into existence then, it can perhaps be forged. That forging process, an educational process, is a collective effort to allow all the *Is* that we are to begin to know, find and create themselves through a collaborative institutional and cultural effort that speaks to that endeavour. Technology alone will not save us from the sensibilities that lead to the misuse of technology. What we need to mitigate ecological collapse, cultural fragmentation and political and economic breakdown is the widespread internalisation of a global commons, such that people *feel* their individual actions are a palpable part of a global web of life. Getting to that kind of collective sensibility will not happen if your raw ingredients are eight billion or so pieces of generic collaborative fodder. There is no such ‘We’ to be mobilised, and we know it. Cooperation at scale may nonetheless be possible but we should consider what follows if it depends on the resolute, discerning and skilled collaboration of *individuals* worthy of the name

This challenge of collective individuation applies across contexts, and in the context of his relationship to Buddhism, Stephen Batchelor puts the underlying aim as follows:

The Dharma needs to be individuated in the Jungian sense, meaning differentiating yourself from the collective, from archetypes, from the norms or traditions, and so forth, in such a way that you become increasingly your own person. That doesn't mean you become an egoist, but it means that you've teased out your potential in such a way that

you can optimally flourish to be the person that you aspire to be, that may have elements of Buddhism or Christianity or socialism or whatever fed into it. The mix is uniquely your own. It's your own voice that you find. That, to me, would be a vision of where we're going.²⁶

Our predicament calls for a planetary-scale response that is both profoundly collective and deeply personal.

The majority of the world's population may remain highly suggestible, and susceptible to manipulation by plutocratic alchemists who stoke base impulses and appetites and turn them into figurative gold for private gain. A critical mass, however, can become relatively discerning and act according to their own judgement, ideally with some care for the greater good and capacity to help others find their own unique contribution. I reflect further on the idea of collective individuation in forthcoming publications. For now, it is sufficient to understand that the individual and the collective are profoundly co-constituted, and our predicament calls for a planetary-scale response that is both profoundly collective and deeply personal. This 'We' challenge of collective individuation is at the heart of the new strategy for Perspectiva's Emerge project.

2. Metacrisis in World System Dynamics: we're not good at joining the dots

The composite word '*metacrisis*' is inspired by our German friends, and is useful for resolving to speak to the cross-pollinating crises of our time as one whole thing. Here the aim is to better 'join the dots' between apparently disparate phenomena while recognising, as Gödel helped us discern, that no single grand vision or narrative, however textured and inclusive, can fully make sense of itself. The simplest view of the metacrisis then, is that it's about whatever underlying crisis is driving a multitude of crises, not just ecological collapse (which is certainly bad enough) but also a range of governance and security issues, alongside global economic instability and inequality within countries, a steep rise in mental health problems and a decline in social trust. It's as if we have a civilisation-level wicked problem.

This idea of an underlying problem behind, within and between all problems goes back at least to the 1970 Club of Rome report that describes 'continuous critical problems' which they also call 'meta-problems'.²⁷ More recently, in a talk at Google, the philosopher and entrepreneur Terry Patten reflected on the need to speak to meta-crisis

as ‘the sum of our ecological, economic, social, cultural, and political emergencies’.²⁸ More recently, when the first Covid-19 lockdown began, Elizabeth Debold argued in our first Emerge online gathering that one collateral benefit of *the reckoning* was that many thousands of those who were just beginning to think systemically (a non-trivial cognitive achievement) would have accelerated their development. As the nature of the world’s interdependence and the reality of the relationship between apparently different ‘things’ became palpable, so did a growing awareness of the metacrisis. This way of seeing the metacrisis – as a descriptor for the pattern that connects various crises – is perhaps the most conventional use of the term, and it is the premise for *Perspectiva*’s encapsulation of the scope of our inquiry as ‘systems, souls and society’.

The composite metacrisis can also be seen as the failure of culture to evolve quickly enough to save itself from itself.

3. Metacrisis in Historiography: Modernity and postmodernity struggle to procreate

The composite metacrisis can also be seen as the failure of culture to evolve quickly enough to save itself from itself. Cultures vary enormously of course, and different kinds of changes are called for in different parts of the world, but the active ingredient in question here is shared across cultures, and called by various names: cultural code, hidden curriculum, consensus reality, paradigm, collective imaginary, value memes, shared story, sacred canopy, social surround. All of these terms mean something a little different, and sometimes they apply to particular places and at other times to the world as a whole, but they all refer to the prevailing pattern of norms and forms of life and the assumptions they entail; at its most abstract and generic we can think of it as a semiotic fabric that acts as an ideational ozone layer for humanity. When the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz said that we are creatures suspended in webs of meaning that we ourselves have spun, he was referring to something like this.

This metacrisis is mostly a metacrisis of modernism – the world of the presumed universality and beneficence of science and reason and progress – and the battle that we have not yet fought and won to transcend and include that presumption. Many, including Jürgen Habermas, appear to view postmodernity as a phase within the modern historiographical epoch in which the critical tools of modernity were turned back on itself. While the postmodern critical inflexion

has value and is necessary, in terms of cultural renewal and adaptation, it also appears to be a kind of dead end.

The primary function of metamodernism may be to safeguard interiority.

Post and meta can both mean ‘after’, but while the after in postmodernism is more like modernity’s after party – a continuation of the same party, or ‘afternoon’ – a later stage of the same day, ‘meta’ has a notion of after that is more than mere temporal extension. Meta here signals that a qualitatively different kind of relationship has arisen. When meta is placed in this context, and understood in this way, the cultural meta-crisis is about our apparent failure to cultivate metamodern sensibilities with sufficient permeation at scale to adapt to our historiographical epoch of metamodernity. This qualitatively new epoch has been with us to some extent since the birth of digitisation, and its impact on the lifeworld has arisen alongside the apparent spiritual and material exhaustion of modernity. We all know from abundant misquotations of Einstein that cultural and moral progress needs to keep pace with technological and economic developments, but that’s not happening.

Viewing the metacrisis in this way helps illuminate why metamodernism as a normative endeavour matters, as I feel Greg Dember puts mostly acutely in his essay for *The Side View* (spring 2020: ‘What is Metamodernism and Why Does it Matter?’) when he argues that we need it to protect our interiority from capture on either side of the oscillation of the dominant cultural codes. Each of us risks losing the meaning of our lives to either the scientific reductionism and instrumentality of modernism or the identity politics and irony of postmodernism. The primary function of metamodernism may therefore be to safeguard interiority. Curiously, and perhaps excitingly, the resources for that task are as likely to be found in indigenous and pre-modern cultures as in untethered futurism, and that may simply be because we need to rediscover our place in nature, and patterns of activity and meaning that fall out of that.²⁹

The metamodern sensibility is described in the works of cultural studies scholar Timotheus Vermeulen, professor of philosophy Robin van den Akker and literary theorist and political activist Seth Abramson, and more recently there have been strains of political metamodernism in the work of Hanzi Freinacht, Brent Cooper, Tomas Björkman and Lene Rachel Andersen. The modernist in me

senses the progress in the exposition of the idea, while the post-modernist notes the apparent predominance of Anglo-Saxon white males. For metamodernism to flourish it will have to deepen and widen its sense of itself, which is one of the underlying purposes of the forthcoming compilation by Perspectiva Press.

4. Metacrisis in Philosophy of Education: We are failing to learn how to learn

In his 2014 essay, *Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty*, German philosopher Thomas Metzinger offers the following dark prognosis:

Conceived of as an intellectual challenge for humankind, the increasing threat arising from self-induced global warming clearly seems to exceed the present cognitive and emotional abilities of our species. This is the first truly global crisis, experienced by all human beings at the same time and in a single media space, and as we watch it unfold, it will also gradually change our image of ourselves, the conception humankind has of itself as a whole. I predict that during the next decades, we will increasingly experience ourselves as failing beings.

The educational question hidden within this statement is: what are our present cognitive and emotional abilities, and how much capacity do we have to improve them at sufficient scale and speed?

This feature of the metacrisis arises in a time when the distinction between technology, culture and schooling is barely perceptible but ecological collapse is cascading, children's mental health is deteriorating, and governance failures abound. When learning is as much tacit and informal as formal and the gap between digital and analogue sensibilities widens, the proper place of intergenerational transmission is difficult to discern. We appear to be unable to adapt to the challenges of our time because our goals (e.g. getting a job; increasing national GDP), our methods (e.g. teaching to test) and our metrics (e.g. school admission results) are perpetuating ways of being and living that are destructive in aggregate. In response, Perspectiva plans to develop a Transformative Educational Alliance (TEA) based on five questions for the future which are educational in the sense that they beg the question of what and how we need to learn to address them, and what that means for designing institutional forms

and cultural practices that may take us beyond conventional schooling and assessment.³⁰

Intelligibility – what’s going on, and how do we know?

Capability – do we have what it takes to do what we need to do?

Legitimacy – who gets to say what we should be doing and why?

Meaning – what ultimately matters and how do we live accordingly?

Imagination – what does a viable future look and feel like?

These questions permeate Perspectiva’s *Realisation* strand of work, which includes an annual festival and the building of our own transformative education curriculum within an already established growing network around the idea of *Bildung*, which may be loosely translated as transformative civic education.³¹

5. Meta-crisis in Ideology: Our underlying mechanisms subvert their own logics

The hyphen in ‘*meta-crisis*’ speaks of a crisis of self-reference and sometimes a paradoxical failure of achievement; too much liberty may kill liberalism, too much democracy can weaken democracies, and we don’t always understand how we understand, we tend to deny our denial, and we are struggling to imagine a new imaginary.

In *The Politics of Virtue*, Milbank and Pabst describe a wide range of meta-crises, mostly characterised by a kind of self-referential excess. So the meta-crisis of democracy is about *too much* democracy leading to the weakening of non-democratic elements that keep democratic systems stable; and the meta-crisis of capitalism arises from capital being too free, leading to its abstraction and reification, as money becomes increasingly untethered to the actual material world. In his review of their book, Rowan Williams frames this view of the metacrisis as follows:

There are crises and there are meta-crises: a system may stagger from one crisis to another but never recognise the underlying mechanisms that subvert its own logic ... If we are now panicking about the triumph of a politics of resentment, fear and unchallengeable untruthfulness, we had better investigate what models of human identity we have been working with. Our prevailing notions of what counts as

*knowledge, our glib reduction of democracy to market terms, our inability to tackle the question of the limits of growth – all these and more have brought us to the polarised, tribal politics of today and the thinning out of skill, tradition and the sense of rootedness. Treating these issues with intellectual honesty is not a sign of political regression but the exact opposite.*³²

On this logic, the meta-crisis of liberalism is that it is too liberal, encapsulated in Patrick Deneen's saying that liberalism has failed because it has succeeded. For instance, through its emphasis on the protection of the individual by the state, liberalism weakened the power of intermediate institutions and became simultaneously more individualist and statist; and by supporting the apparently free market, it has facilitated the coercive power of commerce in ways that make us less free: 'Liberalism created the conditions, and the tools for the ascent of its own worst nightmare, yet it lacks the self-knowledge to understand its own culpability'.³³

Backing up, the meta-crisis refers to our inability to see how we see, our apparent incapacity to understand how we understand; our failure to perceive how we perceive or to know how we know. In this sense, the hyphenated term meta-crisis is valuable because that conjunction of words encapsulates our problem: we are struggling to understand our predicament well enough to conceive of intentional action that appears to be meaningful in the context of the challenges we face, and mostly we amble on towards probable catastrophe.

This feature of the meta-crisis might even have something resembling a neurophysiological basis, although it certainly cannot be reduced to the brain. The psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist speaks of our current problems in terms of our need to escape 'a hall of mirrors', patterns of attention arising from conceptual constructs of our own making and their institutional expressions, that arise from an overly dominant left hemisphere. In so far as that is correct, and I worked with Iain to clarify the nature of the claim in our 2013 publication 'Divided Brain, Divided World' (RSA), the way out of such self-reference lies in reclaiming sovereignty over our attention, feeling into details, retaining embodied presence, appreciating context and enjoying nuance; there are also contemplative practices that allow us to develop these capacities.³⁴

Perspectiva's *Praxis* strand of work seeks to address these kinds of self-referential challenges, including our work on metaphor design, constellations inquiry and improvisation. In each case there is an embodied and relational attempt to see ideological and conceptual confinement more clearly, and move beyond it where possible.

6. Meta-crisis in Epistemology: The territory is full of maps

The *Vox* journalist David Roberts has written influentially about epistemic bubbles, reality tunnels, and the need to grasp that different tribes increasingly live in different kinds of epistemic reality, where there appears to be no neutral terrain to decide what is true. In his most recent memoir, US President Barack Obama has brought 'epistemological crisis' into mainstream language. These are important developments, because the increasingly public language of 'the epistemic' is a healthy form of cultural incorporation of the meta, because when we are arguing about what is understood, and known and true, it helps a lot to have a broader holding pattern to make better sense of understanding, knowing and partial and whole truths.

This development appears to arise from an even deeper issue. As my friend David Rook puts it, in the context of failing to feel that the world is intelligible through conceptual maps, there is a curiously recursive problem: 'The reason 'the map is not the territory' is because the territory is full of maps'. It is not as though there is a shared world and competing sensemaking perspectives to make sense of it. It's more like the shared world is defined by that competition, and the challenge is to make sense of *that world*. This idea is actually one of the premises of what makes a wicked problem wicked, namely that there is disagreement about the nature of any given problem at hand, and those disagreements are an enduring feature of the problem, not something to be resolved and eclipsed. Climate change is a good case in point – there is genuine disagreement on the maps of the territory, such that nobody seems sure if the situation is challenging, grim or apocalyptic – and the point is that the range of maps that make the cases for those claims are part of the reality that confounds our capacity to address it.

The way out of this feature of the meta-crisis will probably not be a map or even a map of maps, but it will come down to a collaboration

of organisms who cannot help but be constituted by their own mapping processes. This is the terrain of neo-Piagetian developmental theory but also literary exploration of Jorge Luis Borges and others. I see this idea as an important part of the meta-crisis because we are mapmakers who struggle to experience and gain perspective on the reality of our own mapping process.

As David Rook puts it: "The reason 'the map is not the territory' is because the territory is full of maps".

Grasping this complex map-territory relationship is an important aspect of what is sometimes called the sensemaking or intelligibility crisis. Perspectiva's main approach to this problem is the development of the antidebate praxis, which is about combining methods of debate and dialogue to enhance and promote epistemic literacy and the intellectual humility that goes with it.

7. Meta-crisis in Design: We have a suicidal generator function

In the language of meta-design used by gamers (principles that influence coding decisions), the meta-crisis is about a code reaching its own computational limits, like cultural software running out of ecological hardware. The problem lies in our 'underlying generator function' (Daniel Schmachtenberger) or 'source code' (Jordan Hall) being 'self-terminating'.

The most straightforward expression of this idea is that in a world of 'rivalrous dynamics' (win-lose zero sum games) that characterise our capitalist world system, where there are strong incentives to damage shared long-term (commons) resources for short-term gain, combined with the multiplying force of 'exponential tech' (forms of technology that lead to further technology and further incentivise or at least make possible this kind of behaviour), civilisation 'self-terminates'. This formulation can be seen as a more abstract and analytically precise formulation of the limits to the growth theory of the seventies, but with a technological emphasis.³⁵

This way of viewing the meta-crisis is palpable in that it points to our apparent inability to prevent our own suicide. Perhaps the most evocative expression of this idea is Schmachtenberger's idea that in a world where technology gives us the destructive power of Gods, we need to develop the wisdom of Bodhisattvas. In his interview with Eric Weinstein, Schmachtenberger even spoke of 'Bodhisattva engi-

neering'. This amusing term is on the oxymoronic side of paradoxical, but it is a powerful way to distill the overall purpose of the new 'global Paideia' outlined in Zak Stein's advocacy, and the language may even be evocative enough to attract the investment such a bold vision requires.^{36 37}

Perspectiva does not currently work at the level of transcendental or ontological design but our work on praxis is distantly inspired by the idea of 'Boddhisattva engineering'. We observe the community loosely defined as 'Game B' with interest in a collaborative spirit, but we are more inclined to cultivate receptivity to forms of life and ways of living that are also emergent but perhaps more open to transrational phenomena. A commitment to praxis is a necessary part of creating this receptivity. In an essay in *Aeon* magazine by Perspectiva's Senior Associate Mark Vernon, on Blake's imagination, he puts the point somewhat more strongly than I would, but the underlying emphasis is shared:

*'[Blake's] vision for ecology is, therefore, not one of managed exploitation (Ulro), managed consumption (Generation), or even managed cooperation (Beulah), but instead one aimed at radically extending awareness of the ecologies of which we're a part'. It means embracing not just the environments and organisms studied by the natural sciences but the divine intelligences appreciated by the visionaries, plus a panoply of gods, spirits and daemons that our ancestors took as read.'*³⁸

8. Meta Crisis in Consciousness: we are increasingly disabled by dissonance

The adjectival form of 'meta crisis' says that's the kind of crisis it is – a crisis defined by a debilitating lack of perspective and abstraction – if an economic crisis is a crisis in the economy, the meta crisis is a crisis in the meta. To clarify, with reference to the discussion on meta above, our widespread inability or wilful refusal to a 'go meta' in the right ways is giving rise to a pervasive sense of dissonance. The experience of dissonance arises when we try to align our thoughts, values and actions, but fail, and notice we have failed, but don't quite understand why.

We live in an age of dissonance. The complexity and pace of events has long since eclipsed the complexity of human consciousness, yet social, political and professional conventions oblige us to talk and act as if we know what we are doing.³⁹ What dissonance highlights that concepts like alienation, false consciousness and dislocation do not is the idea that our experience is defined by a lack or loss of *agreement*, the sense that things that should fit together do not. Opposites of dissonance include agreeable and harmonious. Dissonance is a relational idea at its heart, but the relationship in question is the most fundamental relationships of all, between the subject of experience and the object of inquiry, between an organism and its environment, between ourselves and the world.

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The experience of dissonance is prismatic of that relationship between subject and object being in a state of disequilibrium. This relationship can be seen as ‘the form’ that shapes our perception and understanding, and for millions around the world this form is in the more or less slow process of ‘trans-forming’. Such development involves creating an observational gap between subject and object, such that we can observe and relate to whatever we were previously embedded in and defined by. That happened when we first saw Earth from space. That happens when we stop saying ‘left wing’ and ‘right wing’ and start asking: is this political spectrum really helping us and should we perhaps create a new one? That happens when we move from commenting on the economy to questioning the very idea(s) of the economy and, for instance, the idea of ‘money’ within it. That happens when we suggest, as Joe Brewer does, that the default unit of coordinated action may not be city or the state, but something more like a bioregion. But this *kind* of ‘healthy meta’ thinking remains painfully niche.

On this framing, the meta crisis arises from large swathes of the population being unable or unwilling to make such meta moves or consider them worthwhile. A recent example would be the debate over Brexit in the UK when, at various stages of the process, numerous ideas or proposals were described as being democratic or anti-democratic, but almost never did the broader question of what democracy might mean seem like a permissible inquiry – it was right at the heart of the public argument for months and yet still apparently too abstract to consider as a question of shared public interest. A similar

point applies to the apparent inability of the media to view climate collapse through anything other than an environmental frame.

Dissonance may now be a feature of life, and we need to learn to dance with it.

Dissonance may now be a feature of life, and we need to learn to dance with it; through cognitive development and emotional maturity dissonance can perhaps become less painful and more playful and paradoxical. One of the most hopeful developments in this space is a new institutional form – the Epistemic NGO – called The Consilience Project founded by Daniel Schmachtenberger and developed by Zak Stein and others, which Perspectiva hopes to learn from and contribute towards in due course. The aim is to show that news (what's happening), meta news (*why* some sites/ people are presenting the case in particular ways and others seeing it differently) and education (what the underlying issues/backstories are that are needed to understand what's going on in the news and meta news) belong on the same platform. By making the information ecology more transparent to itself, we may all be better placed to see the *basis* of the disagreement between ourselves and others, and any disagreements within ourselves, and perhaps also learn and grow through the epistemic fuel of any dissonance that remains.

9. Meta Crisis in Arts and Humanities: the imagination is limited by the imaginary

Where are the prophets and the rishis? Does anyone have a notion of what a viable world could look and feel like in the 21st century, one that is not naive, or coercive, but which might actually arise from the world as we find it, and the people that shape it? The meta crisis in imagination may be the most important ingredient in the pickle, and again it's a crisis of what is in some sense meta, in this case an inability to adequately relate to what we are constructed by in a way that would allow us to conceive or create something new.

To come back to where we started this reflection, in the spirit of *Vivekananda*, one way to grasp the relative difficulty of imagining the end of capitalism is by distinguishing between the imagination, the imaginary and the imaginal, but the distinctions that follow seek to be heuristic rather than canonical. It helps to think of the imagination as a distinctly human *capacity* that is *in some sense real*, cultivated most directly in the domain of the arts and humanities, as detailed

for instance in Northrop Frye's classic CBC lecture series in the sixties: *The Education of the Imagination*. The imaginary is more helpfully thought of as a minimally malleable *constraint*. This concept from social and cultural theory is about the limits of what we can imagine and the idea is developed explicitly by, for instance, Cornelius Castoriadis, Charles Taylor and former *Perspectiva* researcher Sam Earle; it is also tacit in the idea of *The Sociological Imagination*, which is also the title of Wright C. Mill's 1959 classic text. And the *imaginal* is neither a capacity nor a constraint, but more like a *cornucopia* to be discovered in the terrain of depth psychology, mythology and comparative religion. Almost anything by James Hillman is of value here, but the classic text might be Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*.

With these distinctions in mind, while the end of the world is a mere act of *imagination* – an event characterised by stock imagery and widely portrayed in cinema, capitalism has become a defining feature of our collective *imaginary* – a shared social construction that circumscribes our relationship to imagery and our imagination. Moreover, the impact of social media (there are approximately two billion Facebook users and 1.5 million regularly using YouTube) might be that because we pass each other so much of the same imagery, our imaginations are becoming less individuated and more collectivised, such that the renewing power of the individual imagination is at ever greater risk of being subsumed by the collective imaginary. And perhaps the reason we appear to be struggling to see and think beyond our imaginary is partly because we don't take the *imaginal* realm – our psychic, mythic and archetypal resources – seriously. Indeed we may need our theories of change to be premised on something like what Cynthia Bourgeault calls 'imaginal causality', which taps into a source that is deeper than ideas and values and habits, and powerful enough to change them fundamentally.⁴⁰

I am out of my depth here, and I say that because my experience of dreams and therapy and synchronicities lead me to feel that the imaginal realm is in some meaningful and non-reductive sense real; and yet it is still mostly terra incognita, for me at least. I don't know what follows, but I see the imagination as a frontier and our last best hope to loosen the grip of the collective imaginary may well be forms of praxis that explore the imaginal. Those forms of praxis may arise

from socially acceptable forms of artistic endeavour. However, they may also be relatively transgressive forms of shamanic inquiry, psychedelics and everything between and beyond. We will need courage and discernment as we go.

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10. Meta Crisis in Cosmovision: A weakness for one of two kinds of spiritual bypassing

Following the sequence of the pickle tasting from the Covid reckoning, to the climate *emergency*, to the political and economic crisis, to the mostly social and emotional *meta/crisis*, the mostly educational *metacrisis*, the mostly epistemic *meta-crisis* and the mostly spiritual meta crisis, it is time to take stock of the most fundamental holding pattern for those underlying features of our predicament, namely our cosmological framework, religious outlook or worldview.

At the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico city I learned a great term to meet our conceptual needs here: 'cosmovision'. This charming Mesoamerican word is indigenous and centred around pre-modern practices of world-making, world-centring and worldrenewing, but morphologically those same practices are needed today, and cosmovision deserves a modern reappraisal as a way to describe our perception of our place in the universe as it informs our everyday lives. The meta crisis here, which the term 'cosmovision' perhaps helps us see, is that many people currently fall into one of two main forms of spiritual bypassing that undermine generative forms of spiritual life.

In my 2017 book *Spiritualise*, I query the value of definitions, but go on to define spiritual sensibility as a disposition characterised by concern for the fullness of life and experienced through simultaneous intimations of aliveness, goodness, understanding and meaning. Those glimpses of wholeness and integration have a texture that is at once emotional, ethical, epistemic and existential – the feeling of being alive, the conviction that something matters, the intuition that the world makes sense, and the experience that life is meaningful respectively.

Spiritual bypassing is classically conceived of as the tendency to look for spiritual answers to psychological problems at a personal level and, less often perhaps, political problems at a societal level. Many

of those who sense the need to bring 'the inner world' to bear on the crisis and emergency fail to connect the case for spiritual sensibility to inner life as a whole, including its darker emotional and psychological aspects and, further, to its historically situated nature in all our systemic and structural complexity. I think this kind of spiritual bypassing is a neglected part of the meta crisis precisely because it's often pseudo-meta in nature; it does not entail a cosmovision at all but more like an adherence to consensus reality with some aspirational identity markers. As Robert Augustus Masters puts it in his classic text on *Spiritual Bypassing*:

*Authentic spirituality is not some little flicker or buzz of knowingness, not a psychedelic blast-through or a mellow hanging-out on some exalted plane of consciousness, not a bubble of immunity, but a vast fibre of liberation, an exquisitely fitting crucible and sanctuary, providing both heat and light for the healing and awakening we need.*⁴¹

Many of those who sense the need to bring 'the inner world' to bear on the crisis and emergency fail to connect the case for spiritual sensibility to inner life as a whole, including its darker emotional and psychological aspects and, further, to its historically situated nature in all our systemic and structural complexity.

That resolute statement helps to disclose another way to think of spiritual bypassing, not as a misapplication of the spiritual, but the complete ambivalence towards or disregard for it. This kind of spiritual bypassing is about more than an intellectual wariness towards the ambiguous term 'spiritual', as I learned from the project I led at the RSA in London, which was more or less premised on the question: 'Why don't we speak more of spiritual matters in the public domain?'. In this context, however, I am concerned mostly with metaphysical openness, whereby mind is not assumed to be merely irreducible to matter but also potentially in relationship with transpersonal forms of life that are simply not perceptible in a materialist ontology or naturalist epistemology. And for the avoidance of doubt, yes that means I am just not sure about, inter-alia, the existence of ghosts, life after death, telepathy, divination, the reality of God and so forth. While it is important to retain one's critical faculties, and social and academic conventions make many of these subjects taboo, when we don't really understand time, consciousness or life as such, I think we need to remain curious about our metaphysical assumptions.⁴²

The book that made the biggest impression on me over the last few months was Jeffrey Kripal's *The Flip*. The most notable claim is that an acceptance of consciousness as an irreducible feature of reality,

and a concomitant acceptance of a range of apparently ‘paranormal’ phenomena, is not primarily a spiritual achievement, but more like a cultural correction at the level of intellectual leadership; that it is something I feel can happen in a number of years rather than decades or centuries. This point matters profoundly because many discussions of our planetary predicament are characterised by a misplaced presumption of secular liberal atheistic materialism, despite the fact that over 80 per cent of the world’s population identify as being in some sense religious.⁴³ There is a kind of cosmovision among our ruling elites, but it’s mostly a limited one, and it precludes the kinds of vision, sentiment and realisation that are in some fundamental sense spiritual. It does not follow that we invite in old time religion by the back door. As Kripal makes clear, the case for the irreducibility and/or primacy of mind often points towards an uncanny and even disturbing view of reality that is at odds with much of religion. He also argues that we need ‘a new metaphysical imagination that does not confuse what we can observe in the third person with all there is’.⁴⁴

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I feel a certain hopefulness towards the flip, related to the limitations of what Jean Gebser calls the mental mode of consciousness; we flip partly because it’s a source of epistemic and spiritual renewal; otherwise, things make less and less sense and we grow increasingly exhausted. The flip is not a transformation of consciousness as such, but perhaps a precursor to it. From a more spiritually ambitious integral and evolutionary perspective, this new metaphysical imagination may give rise to a growing awareness of *Spirit* as such. In *Ever Present Origin*, Jean Gebser describes what is needed as follows:

*A mere interpretation of our times is inadequate ... This new spiritual reality is without question our only security that the threat of material destruction can be averted. Its realization alone seems able to guarantee man’s continuing existence in the face of the powers of technology, rationality, and chaotic emotion. If our consciousness ... cannot master the new reality and make possible its realization, then the prophets of doom will have been correct. Other alternatives are an illusion; consequently, great demands are placed on us, and each one of us has been given a grave responsibility, not merely to survey but to actually traverse the path opening before us.*⁴⁵

It is far from clear what follows, but the point is that we just don't know what is really going on. In *Perspectiva's Insight* work, including our essays, books and podcast, we are therefore keen to apply our powers of reason and discernment to metaphysical and cosmological perspectives that may help to make better sense of how we should recalibrate or reimagine life for the greater good in this time between worlds. To put it in secular business terms, when we are tasting the pickle, we may have pragmatic reasons to focus on the emergency and the crisis, but cosmovision has to be 'on the table'.

To put it in secular business terms, when we are tasting the pickle, we may have pragmatic reasons to focus on the emergency and the crisis, but cosmovision has to be 'on the table'.

Tasting the Pickle in Practice: Perspectiva's purpose

Many of the thoughts above were gleaned but not fully articulated when I collaborated with Tomas Björkman to found Perspectiva as a charity in 2016. We are now on a secure financial and operational footing, and describe ourselves as a community of expert generalists working on an urgent one-hundred-year project to improve the relationships between systems, souls and society in theory and practice.

We have evolved into a community of scholars, artists, activists, futurists and seekers who believe credible hope for the first truly planetary civilisation lies in forms of economic restraint and political cooperation that are beyond prevailing epistemic capacities and spiritual sensibilities. Our charitable purpose is therefore to develop an applied philosophy of education for individual and collective realisation in the service of averting societal collapse; and in the spirit of serious play and ambitious humility to cultivate the imaginative and emotional capacity required to usher in a world that is, at the very least, technologically wise and ecologically sound.

Over the next few years we will be pursuing four main thematic strands of work that help others to taste the pickle with us, to help us all work better on the crisis and the emergency.

- *Realisation* is our response to the educational metacrisis. It's about building an alliance of transformative educators, and features an annual festival 'for the soul' in collaboration with St Giles House in Dorset, and intellectual inquiry on the frontlines of activism and 'the digital ego'.

- *Insight* is our response to our epistemic meta-crisis, our intellectual vision work in our essay series, journal, podcast and book publishing arm, Perspectiva Press, which offers 'soul food for expert generalists'.

- *Praxis* is our response to the spiritual meta crisis in which we attempt to turn theory into practice, currently through improvisation, metaphor design and the antidebate methodology, but potentially through innovative approaches to the imaginal, temporics and Logos.

- *Emergence* is our response to the 'we' problematic of the meta/ crisis, and is about building a pre-figurative social movement through whatisemerging.com for wise global transitions.

There is a long road ahead, so if you have reached this far, thank you for tasting the pickle, and good luck!

Endnotes

1 With thanks to Bonnitta Roy, Mark Vernon, Layman Pascal, Ivo Mensch, Hannah Close, Ian Christie, Minna Salami, Jeremy Johnson and Zachary Stein for their feedback on various drafts of this essay.

2 Masters, Robert A., *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*, North Atlantic Books (2010)

3 Rowson, Jonathan, '[The Unrecognised Genius of Jean Piaget](#)', *Medium* (2016)

4 Wilber, Ken, *One Taste*, Shambhala Press (2000), p. 315.

5 Intellectual Deep Web, '[James Hillman - Why Study Greek Mythology](#)', *YouTube* (2017)

6 Haraway, Donna, *Staying with the Trouble*, Duke University Press (2016)

7 The table, especially the last row, includes several terms that are not introduced in the text, but act as placeholders for related terms and issues that are. Diaphaneity, for instance, is a Gebserian term that refers to 'seeing through the world'. A tesseract is a shape thought to best illustrate Robert Kegan's fifth-order of consciousness. Pancontextual just means across all contexts, a variant of Nora Bateson's terms 'transcontextual'.

8 Batchelor, Stephen, *Alone with Others*, Grove Press (1983)

9 Rogers, Carl, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, Mariner Books (1995), p. 83.

10 I write about all these details in considerably more depth in my book, *The Moves that Matter: A Chess Grandmaster on the Game of Life*, Bloomsbury (2019)

11 I enjoyed the discussion between Forrest Landry and Jim Rutt on the possibility that earth might be unique in producing life like ours: The Jim Rutt Show, '[EP31 Forrest Landry on Building our Future](#)' (2019)

12 State of Emergence, '[EP028 Meg Wheatley - Warriors Wanted: It's Time to Defend the Human Spirit](#)' (2020)

13 Gautier, Chappelle, Rodary, Daniel, Servigne, Pablo, & Stevens, Raphael, '[Deep Adaptation opens up a necessary conversation about the breakdown of civilisation](#)', *Open Democracy* (2020)

14 Lenton, Timothy M., '[Climate tipping points - too risky to bet against](#)', *Nature* (November 2019), Vol 575, p. 592-595.

15 McIntosh, Alastair, *Riders on the Storm: The Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being*, Birlinn Ltd (2020)

16 Less public, but uncannily similar to the climate emergency in its prospective tipping point when you begin to grasp it, is an emergency in the world of machine learning. We are in the process of creating theory-less knowledge and accruing 'intellectual debt' – namely the number of systems functioning in our lives that appear 'to work', but often in ways even the AI designers/engineers don't understand, gradually moving into a world where decisions will be taken on an algorithmic basis that is opaque to everyone. This time-sensitive lock-in risk is a quieter and less palpable emergency than climate change, but may be 'an emergency' nonetheless.

17 For further details and sources see: Rowson, Jonathan, '[We've Never Had it so Good, but Everything has to Change](#)', *The Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity* (2017)

18 Related issues are discussed at length in an excellent interview between Daniel Schmachtenberger and Jim Rutt: *The Jim Rutt Show*, '[Transcript of Episode 7 - Daniel Schmachtenberger](#)' (December 2019)

19 Liideoz, 'Seinfeld - The Nothing Pitch', *YouTube* (2010)

20 Johnson, Jeremy, '[Meta, Modern](#)', *The Side View* (2020)

21 Meta-crisis has a particular meaning below, but I also use it here, and above, as the default way of writing the term that captures all the different kinds of meta/crisis, metacrisis, meta-crisis, and meta crisis.

22 Rowson, Jonathan, *Spiritualise: Cultivating spirituality sensibility to address 21st century challenges* (2nd edition), *Perspectiva/The Royal Society of Arts* (2017)

23 Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political*, Rutgers University Press (1932)

24 Ostrom, Elinor, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press (1991)

25 Jackson, Tim, & Victor, Peter A., 'Unraveling the claims for (and against) green growth', *Science* (November 2019), Vol. 366, Issue 6468, p. 950-951.

26 Stephen Batchelor on the ageless practice of self-reflection: Bachelor, Stephen, 'Solitude Will Change Your Life: How to Be Alone With Others', *Psychology Today* (September 2020)

27 The Club of Rome, 'The Predicament of Mankind: Quest for Structured Responses to Growing World-wide Complexities and Uncertainties - A Proposal', Accessed via Demosophia.com (originally published 1970)

28 Talks at Google, 'Confronting The Meta-Crisis: Criteria for Turning The Titanic - Terry Patten', *YouTube* (2019)

29 Perspectiva, 'What is Metamodernism?', *YouTube* (2020)

30 These five questions arose collaboratively at Perspectiva. I am grateful to Zak Stein for his earlier version of four questions and latterly to Mark Vernon for suggesting imagination should be added. For an exposition of their importance and relationship, see my talk at the Das Progressive Zentrum conference on bringing the future back to Democracy in October 2020: Das Progressive Zentrum, 'Bringing the future back to democracy with Helena Marschall, Jonathan Rowson & Jens Südekum', *YouTube* (October 2020)

31 Rowson, Jonathan, 'Bildung in the 21st Century - Why sustainable prosperity depends upon reimagining education', CUSP essay series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity, No9, *CUSP* (June 2019)

32 Williams, Rowan, 'Liberalism and capitalism have hollowed out society – so where do we turn now?', *New Statesman* (October 2016)

33 Deneen, Patrick, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale University Press (2018)

34 McGilchrist, Iain, & Rowson, Jonathan, 'Divided Brain, Divided World: Why The Best Part Of Us Struggles To Be Heard', *The Royal Society of Arts* (2013)

35 The Jim Rutt Show, '[Transcript of Episode 7 - Daniel Schmachtenberger](#)' (December 2019)

36 Stein, Zak, *Education in a Time Between Worlds*, Bright Alliance (2019)

37 Eric Weinstein, '[Daniel Schmachtenberger on The Portal \(with host Eric Weinstein\)](#), Ep. #27 - On Avoiding Apocalypses', *YouTube* (April 2020)

38 Vernon, Mark, '[The Fourfold Imagination](#)', *Aeon* (2020)

39 As Jeremy Johnson puts it in his essay 'Meta, Modern': 'This uncay world of hyperobjects we have entered defies categorical and compulsory mapping. There really are 'No Maps for these Territories' & Johnson, Jeremy, '[Meta, Modern](#)', *The Side View* (2020) & Gibson, William, *No Maps for These Territories* (2000)

40 Bourgeault, Cynthia, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey Into the Imaginal Realm*, Shambhala (2020)

41 Masters, Robert A., *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Really Matters*, North Atlantic Books (2010), p. 3.

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43 Rowson, Jonathan, '[Spiritualise: Cultivating spirituality sensibility to address 21st century challenges](#), *RSA/Perspectiva* (2017)

44 Kripal, Jeffrey, *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*, Bellevue Literary Press (2019), p. 107.

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