

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Greetings, this may be a doozy of a Frankly. it is that time of year again, Earth Day and Earth Week. Let me start with a story, a real story that's happened in the last week. A friend of mine, or a new acquaintance of mine who follows the podcast. and I met, at an event a few months ago. Is an investor in things technologically, AI and such, and she.

[00:00:34] Called me last week and said she's interested in investing in a really cutting edge project in artificial intelligence. But in order to do so, she wants to make sure that the project is in service of life. And would I help her ascertain if this AI project, could be in service of life? so I'm gonna unpack that, in today's, frankly.

[00:01:03] by the way, the, term in service of life I've been using, rather liberally, lately. one of my, frankly, as I mentioned, that my work is b plus in service of life as opposed to a plus because I'm just trying, I'm, directionally thumbing a direction, in, I'm hitchhiking in the direction of.

[00:01:23] Making things better than the default, the term in service of life. I got from Nora Bateson who told me a story of her, father, Gregory Bateson, I think Rex Weiler was there like 50 years ago. when young students had gathered around and said, well, what do we do with our lives? And Gregory Bateson said, and I'm paraphrasing, I forget the exact story, make sure that it's in service of life and, Those words meant something to me and I've, included them in my vernacular. But later on I'm gonna try to define, what those things are. so first of all, let's get to the AI portion of the story.

[00:02:16] As followers here know, we are in this complex predicament. the biophysical macro economy is that humans are using energy and minerals and materials that were stored for millions of years, and we're treating them as if they were interest, but their principle and we're drawing down this bank account.

[00:02:35] And effectively technology and new growth and innovation function as a straw that is not only drawing down this ancient bank account, but also appropriating 40% of the net primary productivity on the planet and directing it to

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the human endeavor. And we are creating monetary representations of this real reality that have to be paid back with energy and materials.

[00:03:04] and the whole thing, screams of ecological and financial overshoot. Yet we're scurrying around, looking at pieces of the story and complaining and blaming, without looking at the bird's eye view, which is what we've attempted, on our podcast. So artificial intelligence is the new kit on the block, the new tool in the homo sapiens, toolkit.

[00:03:28] And could it, potentially be in service of life? And I've thought about this the last few days. I think if it were, it would have to be in one of four categories, and the first category would be above the level of technology to the level of. Governance, aspirations, structures, incentives, prices, the whole nuts and bolts, and beating heart of the economic super organism, which is our cultural goal is to grow every quarter, every year.

[00:04:06] And we denominate that by monetary profits, tethered to energy, tethered to ecological impact. So ai, Could potentially, if it were in service of life, change that governance structure and dynamic. The second category, would be to invent some new technologies, new ways of doing things, new ways of combining artificial intelligence with knowledge of our ecosystems and regenerative agriculture and such to reduce the amount of extraction.

[00:04:44] And increase the amount of regeneration. I find this unlikely, even if there were an AI that were to optimize on something more than just dollars and optimize, for instance, on the wellbeing of people or healed ecosystems or regenerative landscapes. That AI model would be outcompeted by the singular reductionist profit max maximizing models that exist.

[00:05:15] so with the rebound effect, the backfire effect, the fact that any new technology, from AI that makes us better at more efficient at extracting or using less energy will act. As a larger straw because it will feed back more productivity into the system and that productivity, as long as our cultural goals aren't changed, will result in more energy and material use and ecosystem impact.

[00:05:43] So the second category is technology, that will probably result in a larger, ecological energetic straw, even if it's better than the current technology we

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have today. The third category isn't biophysical macro. It would be biophysical micro, which is how we relate to each other, how we relate to the world, to other species.

[00:06:12] We do not have in the year 2025, a information problem. We have a relational problem. One of my friends who, Since I didn't ask her if I could, say this will remain anonymous. Calls ai, the child of, western white parents, that could be a prodigal son, but needs to be raised by indigenous elders.

[00:06:40] we, need to relate. To the natural world and everything again, and have the neurobiological recall of our pre fossils fuel, ancient ancestors who lived in different ways. And if 1% of humanity could via AI, chatbots or whatever, attain some knowledge change in consciousness, metaawareness, that leads to a meta stability.

[00:07:10] That might be something. now granted there's going to be thousands and millions of chatbots that are gonna be trained up and optimized for fascism or colonizing Mars or Buddhism or whatever. But we could, in theory, use AI to improve our relational wisdom and intelligence, towards cultural shifts.

[00:07:36] The fourth category is unknown because AI itself is emergent. The things that are happening were not predicted and are emergent. So there may be some way of changing the system in service of life that I haven't thought of. I'm just a newbie on ai. I just see it, as having a seat at the table. So I want to include it in these things.

[00:07:58] so by the way, before I go further. I will say that if AI is successful in service of life in any of these four categories, we will still have to navigate. I. What I refer to as the five horsemen of the 2020s, which is debt, overshoot, geopolitics, and the zero sum game, that results once the rising tide of global economic growth stops the reduction of complexity.

[00:08:29] Which I also call a simplification, based on the just in time delivery of cheap goods and international credit lines and trip, shipping, transport lines on a six continent supply chain and polarization. The social contract, the civil civic discourse that we have, and increasingly the ecological breakdown due to, higher wet bulb temperatures and droughts and floods and heat and fires and such.

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[00:08:57] Even if AI were to solve some of these things, we would still have to navigate the great simplification, which is my work. the work of this podcast and platform isn't going to change, because the answers are still the same. Even if AI, is able to do things in service of life, I think we still have to navigate the great simplification.

[00:09:22] But then my friend asked me. But Nate, what does that really mean in service of life? it sounds good, but what does it really mean? And I'd like to move, to that question. but before, we address being in service of life, let's just briefly catalog life, because I've, I looked into this morning and, we'll update you on what I learned.

[00:09:51] there are billions of species of bacteria on earth. super, simple life. But if we look at the biomass, on earth, there are. 3 trillion trees on Earth. And two weeks from now, three weeks from now, Tom Crower is coming on the show. He's a expert in Biocomplexity and we're gonna talk about trees and biocomplexity.

[00:10:15] There are 73,000 tree species. There are 1 million known insect species, and we've probably only identified 10 or 20% of the species. There are orders of insects. For instance, there are 400,000 discovered species of beetles, 180,000 discovered species of butterflies and moss, et cetera. moving on. There are 33,000 species of fish on this planet, 11,000 species of birds, and about 1800 of those are in Ecuador, where I, was fortunate to go on a bird, study exhibit for a month under earth wash.

[00:10:56] And we trapped these, birds in, in mist nets and banded them, and they have up 250 species of hummingbirds in Ecuador alone. There are 11,000 species of reptiles. there are 8,000 species of amphibians like frogs and toads and salamanders and such. There are 6,400 species of mammals, of which around 40 or 50 of those are domesticated.

[00:11:21] The rest are wild. Of those mammals, 500 species are primates, and of those primates, 25 species are apes, and there are eight species of great apes of which. We are one. We are the last remaining of nine hominid species. All of this life has exploded the last 50 million years after the last mass extinction, and we are, with the exception of the last 10,000 years, sitting at the all time high.

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[00:11:58] Of, biodiversity complexity, of life on the planet Earth. And as followers of this podcast are aware, it has been taking a beating the last 10,000 years, especially the last 200 years, especially the last 50 years, especially the last 10 years. Life is freaking amazing. In the universe. This is the only place we know that it exists.

[00:12:25] So what does it mean to be in service of life? I've talked to a bunch of people about this in the last few days, and it turns out that it's not the easiest question to answer. I think what's perhaps an easier question to answer and one I'll start with is what is not in service of life? and this is from the perspective of all the things that we've learned on the 200 podcasts we've done, and, Frank's and, earth Day talks of which I will be giving one in Madison, Wisconsin, this Thursday and Friday.

[00:13:03] and this episode will come out Friday. So happy Earth Week to everyone. Happy in quotes. I've come up with 10 criteria of what is not in service of life. Anything that is in anthropocentric, meaning that it only cares about humans, not including elephants and orangutans and citations and hummingbirds.

[00:13:27] much of our discussion about life just cares about human life. that's not in service of life, at least with a capital L. Anything that is reductionist or just counts like I just did earlier, the number of species versus incorporating the symbiosis, the biocomplexity, the biodiversity in Tom Crow, there's, upcoming episode.

[00:13:53] He talks about the fact that if there are 10 species in an ecosystem, the 11th doesn't add 10%. It adds something enormously more. Because of the interactions between species and the stability and the stable state that they create. anything that favors simple life over complex life is not in service of life, or at least, implying that there's equivalence between the two all life together.

[00:14:25] In symbiosis, the animals, the trees, the fungi, the evolved ecosystems. And most of all, to me and, my colleague who I wrote three college textbooks with, DJ White is consciousness and self-awareness because it is the most fragile and also qualitatively, a very. Different, additional thing because complex life allows for the creation of subjective virtual worlds in our minds.

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[00:14:58] I just got back from a Maha mudra, meditation, in tutorial a few days ago, and all of the awareness and consciousness and colors and things in our mind is just. Mind boggling to think about it. but this could not exist. These virtual worlds in our minds could not exist without the complexity, stability, contingent past and all the things.

[00:15:25] And if we manage to save self-aware consciousness. We've saved it all because that's the most difficult thing. Mines like ours, but also like whales and, elephants are the most fragile and complex things in the universe. Probably based on the most fragile and complex biophysical substrate, which has had billions of years to evolve here.

[00:15:50] If these minds go away, what's left and does what's left not lose its substance in a deep way. next, what is not in service of life? Well, anything that is current or only looks at the 21st century alone, which is by the way, when most climate models stop at the year 2099, as if the climate and ecosystem impacts will stop.

[00:16:19] at that time, the only scale relevant for life with a capital L. Is deep time over time. The PETM, the paleo scene, Eocene thermal maximum of 55 million years ago, did not kill. All life, but it sure as hell filtered it a lot. And its onset, of how it came about was thousands of times slower than what we're doing now.

[00:16:47] What we're doing now, in contrast, could be known as the HATM, the Holocene and th Anthropocene Thermal maximum. Which is coming on our current trajectory in the next 500 to thousand years, and there is no reason to expect self-aware consciousness to evolve again if it's killed off. It's not impossible, but it's fairly far into, in last week's, frankly, I, called the won't happen category.

[00:17:15] We don't know what this HATM is going to, eventually, max out at, James Hansen's recent paper suggested eight to 10 degrees Celsius. I've had several guests on the show that said at three degrees Celsius, we will lose half of the species on earth. two degrees looks to be completely baked in the cake.

[00:17:41] We don't think about this. We don't talk about this. It is not a conspiracy theory. It is in the distant future, which to us doesn't feel real, but to the denizens

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of Earth in deep time, the future is just as real as you watching this video. What else is not in service of life? Well, anything is based on the land.

[00:18:06] Only oceans comprise 70% of the living habitat on earth. Most self-aware, conscious species. All the whales, all the dolphins aren't human. and they live in the seas. So merely prioritizing human minds, could be seen as a type of eugenics philosophy, which evokes the worst. Of fascist and similar ideologies.

[00:18:33] we live on a blue planet. It's called the blue Planet for a reason. The oceans have to be considered if we are in service of life. Anything with an EXOPLANETARY focus. In other words, imagining life or populating humans on other planets while ignoring or writing off the life extent on earth. Certainly immortal robot bodies are ecologically evil because they represent the height of an anti-life singularity philosophy.

[00:19:07] Mars will not be terraformed. The energy and complexity are not there to do it. That is a reductionist fallacy that doesn't see the lens from which all that we're currently doing is on the backs of fossils, combined with an oxygen commons that was produced by life. What else, is not in service of life.

[00:19:28] Anything that leads to a species extinction, species cannot be brought back. Dire wolves weren't brought back. That is a dog wolf hybrid with a PR machine behind it. Real dire wolves weren't even wolves. So with respect to species, which we are losing at. 10 to 100 times the background extinction rate.

[00:19:53] Once you're gone. And one day I think you'll be missed. This obviously means also preserving species habitat, is a thing that would be in service of life. Resuscitating, extinct creatures allow. Jurassic Park is part of a techno future unlimited energy fantasy along with robot bodies and uploadable brains.

[00:20:19] that is not tethered to reality. What else is not in service of life? Allowing existential global threats to continue banning all nuclear weapons does make the cut as an intermediate or full scale nuclear war would probably end all complex life on earth and other similar risks. Curing humans of malaria in the absence of instituting some other way of protecting the rainforest, in contrast, would not be in service of life and is as it arguably facilitates killing the rainforest faster.

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[00:21:00] I. Bringing this up because this is a common, in service of life thing. But ecologically, as opposed to anthropocentric, ecologically malaria happened to constitute an ecological defense for areas humans shouldn't be in, or at least shouldn't be slashing and burning. I got some pushback with this on, From some of my friends who argued that we are life and anything that we do, and we grow and we try to expand is part of life and therefore we are part of life and anything we do is in service of life. I think that is a rationalization, and saying life will survive in the future is actually useless and meaningless.

[00:21:48] this is a story. this is an epic species level, rite of passage about minds, about sapiens and making the glorious complexity of earth's ecosystems and long story, something other than a self distinguishing growth culture in a Petri dish. Last, but not least, what is not in service of life? Slowing the superorganisms metabolism is in the service of life.

[00:22:20] Shrinking the superorganism from its tumor state is in service of life. Growing. The superorganism under this framing is not in service of life. So saying these things out loud, I have, a dual reaction. One is, a bit of a relief that I stated these things, which I think, are my beliefs, but I think they're ecological truisms as well.

[00:22:52] Also with trepidation, because these things are threatening to many well-intended people who are not doing these things. Let's delineate this in service of life with a small I. Versus in service of life with a capital L, which is the 10 categories that I just read. Wind farms, installing solar energy and tree planting, and building eco homes, and recycling and educating people about sustainability or larger initiatives like ESG or the UN Sustainable Development Goals, or Greenpeace, or the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy.

[00:23:28] All of these things are. Helping the future be better than the default. And we need that, we need in service of life, lowercase, but that is a different class of, threshold than in service of life. Capital L and all those initiatives are failing, with respect to the capital L in service of life. maybe we should talk about this more.

[00:23:57] The difference between little L and Big L is socially, politically, economically, podcasty difficult, to outline. so, we are at the early stages of what I

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call a great simplification, and it's my opinion if we can't expand our moral circle. To include concepts like the Trillionth human child to be born, we've lost.

[00:24:29] The plot of our era, and it's not just about humans. the complex symphonies of citations, the metabolic wisdom of ancient rainforest elephants, hearing their individual names called and responding. These are not luxury items on some planetary balance sheet. They're the fundamental wealth that our culture is liquidating for temporary convenience and status and comfort.

[00:24:59] The standard for life with a capital L is not GDP or utility maximization. The standard is deep time, the continuation of life with a capital L, 4 billion years of evolutionary intelligence, now capable with or without AI of contemplating itself under such a framing. If you think the elephants, the orangutans, or the whales are expendable to progress under this framing.

[00:25:35] This is evil and your works are evil. It is a high threshold, a high bar, but hard to deny that we, those of you watching this. Are now the universe becoming aware of itself, as hubristic as that sounds, which creates both possibility and responsibility. Earth systems can remain viable for hundreds of millions more years, but only if we recognize that we are temporary stewards, not permanent owners.

[00:26:12] And that is the big picture reality, that we're embedded in. In 2025. So with respect to ai, can it be in service of life, either small L or big L? I believe that AI is likely to act as a larger straw, which will accelerate, resource impact and, ecological overshoot. And there's many more ways for it to go wrong than it to go right, but.

[00:26:47] But what if it helps us understand and grow up as a species? AI has access to all the ancient texts and all the knowledge from centuries before written in books that are uploaded. it doesn't focus on that because it's usually asked, how do I make, a million dollars? Or how do I start a new, legal entity for this shopping center?

[00:27:10] But it could. There are emergent properties in AI that could regain some, awareness of deep down who we are as a species. What are your thoughts about all this? Can AI be in service of life? Can humans be, I. In service of life, back to our reg, regularly scheduled non Earth Day schedule next week.