Time and the Anthropocentrism Trap

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Give me chastity and continency, only not yet.

(Confessions of St Augustine of Hippo)

Give us carbon neutral, but not yet. Fundamentally, this is an essay about time. It was in his introductory speech to the COP27 summit in November 2022 that UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres expressed the view that we are "on the highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator". Reflecting on the diversions caused by events such as the military operation in Ukraine he continued rather more presciently to observe that "Climate change is on a different timeline and a different scale". It is indeed, and that is largely the problem. It is proving harder than imagined in 1996 to develop the kind of foresight that will shift political priorities.

Ukraine is a problem for the present, as are similar conflicts around the world from the moment they break out. The same can be said of an epidemic such as Covid from the moment it breaks out, although until 2020 the possibility of a global pandemic was a problem for "the future". A climate that has warmed enough to pose a threat of sufficient urgency to compete for resources with a war, pandemic or just simply falling living standards continues to be perceived as a problem for the future for precisely the reason Guterres identifies. Perhaps unseen by the foresight advocacy of the 1990s[1] it is on a different timeline, a timeline where it is difficult if not a simply incoherent aspiration to identify when the future has arrived.

Thirty-five years ago, I devised a series of courses for children aged between eleven and fourteen identified by their schools as "talented and gifted". The courses were called *Futureworld* and focussed mainly on the consequences of what was then presented as profligate consumption of fossil fuels.[2] *Futureworld* was science and technology based with a liberal dosage of philosophy. It presented the young students with alternative futures, an idea I had at the time from David Hicks who (had I but known it) was to be an external examiner of my PhD. Hicks was another advocate of student empowerment based upon envisioning the future.[3] Taking my cue from Hicks I presented the pupils with four messages from the future, the alternatives of a probable future and a preferable future, and four courses of possible action that might in varying degrees result in one or the other.

At the time, nuclear power was a hot topic in environmentalism whilst wind energy was regarded, even by advocates of carbon reduction, as somewhere between peripheral and eccentric. The course included a tour of Hinkley Point nuclear power station. It is perhaps worth quoting in full the action set B that was presented:

> Invest a lot of money in energy conservation, nature conservation and the development of renewable energy sources such as wind, water and solar power. People must be made to make their houses better insulated. We need to conserve the world's supplies of coal, oil and gas and make them last very much longer and we certainly need to make our atmosphere and oceans healthier again.

The critical point is that the date on the messages from the future was 2030. *Futureworld* was an offshoot of an award-winning project I had begun at my school in 1992 called the *Sustainable Millennium Project.*[4] Conceived to run in parallel with my doctoral research, the *Sustainable Millennium Project* identified the "millennium children", the youngest pupils in the school in 1992 who would reach the age of eighteen in the year 2000. One reason for choosing the year 2030 as "the future" was that the BBC had produced in 1992 a fictionalised weather forecast for the year 2030 which was shown to the pupils attending *Futureworld* courses. It is a shame that I no longer have the tape but if my memory serves me correctly, the fictitious forecast was very similar to the real ones that were commonplace during 2025. One could say that "the future" has arrived five years early. Alternatively, one could say that "the future" never comes because it retreats ad infinitum. The *Futureworld* course could run again tomorrow with the dates changed from 2030 to 2060 and little other editing.

I quote in full message from the future number two:

> I like looking in the history books. I cannot believe that there were once wild animals and that trees and forests grew in the open. It must have been good to have lived then. Nowadays the only time we can visit woodlands and breathe really fresh air is when we go to one of the ecodomes[a] for a holiday. The trouble is they're really expensive and only the rich can go to them. **My message to 1996 is that I wish you hadn't been so selfish burning all that coal so quickly just to get cheap energy. You should have listened to the warnings. Still, I suppose nobody could have seen how quickly it would happen.**

The four messages were on a graded scale from the most dystopian to the most cornucopian[b]. This was the lesser of the two dystopian messages. Sadly, I have no record of how many pupils allocated it to a preferable and how many to a probable future.

Does the future recede infinitely, or is it more the case that there are as Guterres suggests, two different timelines? Might there be a multiplicity of timelines? Does the future even exist at all? The question of temporal ontology remains an open and unresolved field.[5] Presentism, the belief that both past and future are theoretical constructs requiring us to live for the present,[6] is common in religious writing and seems to stand in direct contrast to futurism in all its various forms.

Whatever the answer to these questions might be, we can certainly say that an extreme level, there exist the two different scales of historical and geological time. The geological timescale is greater in length than the historical by orders of magnitude that exceed the capacity of human imagination. Climate warming and cooling significantly greater than the worst-case scenarios of IPCC has occurred over geological time but might be ignored on the grounds that the earliest evolution and ultimate extinction of humans will likely occupy but a very brief period within geological time. By this criterion, almost everything that is written about climate change is strongly anthropocentric. The entire Pleistocene epoch spanned something like two and a half million years, which is an historical scale period, albeit a long one. That epoch saw ice ages come and go, the most recent ending approximately

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[a] At the time, the Eden Project in Cornwall was under construction and generating much excitement. Plans had been announced in 1996, and the domes were finally completed in 2000. The Eden Project

[b] the idea that continued supply of the material needs of humankind can be achieved through continued advances in technology. It contends that there is enough matter and energy available for practically unlimited growth.

11000 years ago. For those inclined toward presentism, either as religious comfort[7] or as a scientifically plausible account of temporal ontology, this fact can justify the "business as usual" approach.

Evidence has been emerging for some time now that "business as usual" must include reckoning for increased costs, the insurance industry being at the vanguard. Costs such as repairing storm and wildfire damage, compensating for decreased agricultural yields, rehousing displaced communities, or replacing infrastructure built by the Victorians are almost certainly going to increase. It will likely be the rate at which they increase that begins to define the timescale of the journey to climate hell. On this matter we seem ill-prepared. Whatever the ultimate objective truth might be in a theoretical utopia where inequality did not exist, the lived experience of all but a few has always been that of limited access to resources. These resources must be rationed against a scarcity whether this be real or merely politically expedient.

This requires a relatively crude ordering on an ordinal scale or the making of "this is better than that" judgements. During 1993 and 1994, one such scale was constructed for the millennium children who underwent a variety of tests to elicit and clarify the values they held. In one of these, two hundred and eighty-eight individuals in Y6 (age 11) and Y9 (age 14) were given a list of "goods" which were normally free to them but which they would not have if they were not willing to pay for them (WtP). Here is the result of this WtP test.

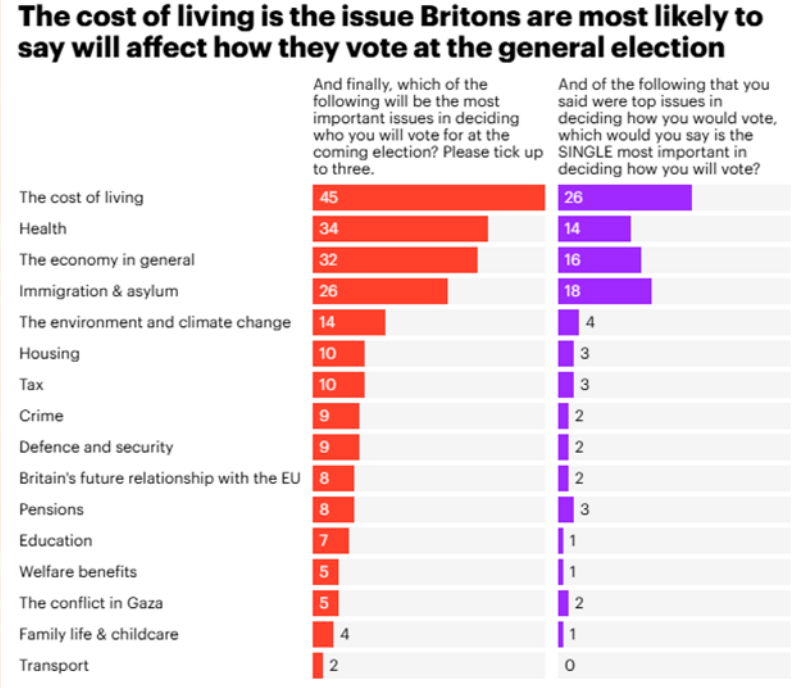
	Rural Y6	Rural Y9	Urban Y6	Urban Y9	All %
An ambulance if you have an accident	86.2	86.5	76.1	92.3	85.3
Water to flush your toilet	73.1	76.9	61.6	100.0	77.9
Seeing the doctor	69.6	69.2	56.6	96.0	72.8
Control of smoke from a factory	57.2	57.6	53.3	84.6	63.2
Lessons at School	67.6	53.8	31.6	76.9	57.2
Borrowing books from a library	35.8	53.8	21.6	76.9	47.0
Using a field to play sport	31.0	25.0	40.0	69.2	41.3
Using Public Toilets	37.2	53.8	30.0	23.0	36.0
Using a local river for fishing or playing in	38.6	40.3	51.6	0.0	32.7
A walk in the country	22.0	38.4	21.6	23.0	26.3
Going into the woods to play	30.3	23.0	5.0	0.0	14.6
Swings and Slides in a park	6.6	19.2	20.0	7.6	13.4
Going into a church	17.2	9.6	8.3	11.5	11.7

There is a clear order of priority here. Health first, education second and potential contact with the natural world third. Translated into political priorities, health will receive the highest level of funding, and we might presume that if expectations of the ambulance service or access to the GP surgery are not met, there will be complaints and demands for more funding. Funding or action to keep the environment free of the kind of pollution that might harm health is also expected and has the potential to harm a government's reputation if not managed[c], but only around 25% of the sample would like to see the natural world funded. Education will also be funded, but if the overall budget is squeezed, certain elements, perhaps the arts or outdoor education are going to be cut.

This order of priorities may seem familiar. The figure below shows a YouGov poll of the priorities of the UK electorate in 2024, a constituency which of course includes the millennium children, now in their

[c] At the time of writing, the privatised English water industry has for some time faced a barrage of complaints about its poor performance whilst at the same time announcing the need to raise the costs born by consumers to put right the things they complain about.

forties. We can see that scarcity is felt to be real because there is anxiety about the economy. "Cost of living" is the highest priority and indicative of the fact that despite the cornucopian promises of technology people are feeling the impact of their government's ongoing inability adequately to fund all their desires. Second only to this is health at 34% whilst environment and climate change, though acknowledged as important by 14% come a long way behind the perennial priority of health. When asked for a single priority, 18% cited immigration and only 4% environment and climate change. This would seem to suggest that partisan political rhetoric is currently more impactful than actual experience of being flooded or losing a home to a wildfire, even though there is much discontent at the time of writing with the performance of private water companies.



This of course raises another question about "the future" and its timing. How many losses due to floods, storms or wildfires need to be borne by what percentage of which populations to raise "climate change and environment" to a higher priority than immigration? Despite the extravagant promises now being made for AI, the future of cornucopianism may be less certain than previously promoted. The spread of collective experience of environmental emergency, new kinds of illness, the stubborn persistence of social inequality and recurrent economic crises have led Davide Morselli to suggested that the future has shifted from promise to uncertainty and threat.[8] The unfortunate and unseen (by the present author at least) consequence may be increased focus on the present. If the future is no longer something to take care of, to feel responsible for, then the present becomes the only 'playground' that matters.[9]

Studies of community responses to floods, storms and wildfires show a strong focus on recovery, resilience and reconstruction, and thus an increased focus on the present or immediate future.[10] Moreover, "the future" as defined in 1992 has become the present for significant numbers and it might be said that we live in a present where the need to develop resilience and recovery strategies whilst funding reconstruction is becoming normalised. No more so is this the case than with present day children who are the equivalents of the millennium children, i.e. those born since 2015 who will be in their forties around 2060. The climate has not changed for these children since 1992 for the obvious reason that they did not then exist. For these children the need for resilience and recovery strategies and the experience of reconstruction is beginning to define the present and does not therefore present

as an issue for "the future". This is not to say that the impact on these children is not great. Studies of wildfire and flood events have shown persistent flashbacks, feelings of alarm, numbed to feelings, mood disorders, estrangement, withdrawal from activities, nervousness, anxiety, irritability, anger, and difficulty sleeping or concentrating.[11] In persistent cases such symptoms have developed into depression and PTSD. Also found have been similarities with the Covid pandemic such as prolonged school closures and social isolation, the effects of which are still felt and debated.[12] What is remarkable is that this new normal is seemingly accepted as inevitable whilst mitigation of its probable worsening trend receives relatively little attention.

The current unknown is how much of a drain on governments these requirements for resilience, recovery and reconstruction will have come to be by 2060 and whether the ability to fund existing priorities such as health care will be overwhelmed by them. Indeed, conditions such as depression or PTSD are likely to come under health spending anyway, thus potentially forcing new and difficult choices about how the health budget is to be managed. This possibility has hitherto attracted surprisingly little attention. An exception is the study by Everuss et al (2017)[13] which is of interest because the same WtP method that I used in my own study (shown in the table above) was employed. Citing the argument that "expensive climate change mitigation should be postponed until there is greater certainty, has lost credibility"[14] Everuss and colleagues made use of a chance meeting at a conference to construct a study in which residents of Adelaide in Australia and Lisbon in Portugal were asked whether they personally would be prepared to contribute to the costs of mitigating future climate change. The precise wording of the question was carefully formulated:

> Would you be willing to contribute regularly, a significant, but affordable part of your income, if you were sure this would be used effectively, accountably and fairly, to prevent or reduce any negative impact of climate change that will occur within your lifetime?[15]

A second similarly worded question extended the timescale to the lifetimes of descendants. The results of this second question were significant regarding "the future". There was little or no difference in WtP in either location between 'events within your lifetime' and 'events affecting descendants in centuries to come'. This perhaps surprising result challenges much that has been written about the impact of time and intergenerational equity. Probably the more significant result however was the difference between Portugal and Australia. 54% of the citizens of Lisbon were WtP, a result that would translate into political action. However, only 30% of those in Adelaide were similarly WtP, a result that would probably not translate into political action or raise climate change mitigation to a priority status of an order approaching that of health.

The authors considered various explanations for this difference before concluding that political leadership was the strongest explanatory factor. Leadership in Australia had been weak and dismissive, particularly under the climate change sceptic Tony Abbott. Leadership in Portugal had been consistently strong, including of course in António Guterres himself[d]. Experience of disaster emerged as a secondary factor. The figure of 27% of Australians WtP who had not experienced disaster rose to 42% for those who had. On the question of leadership, the fact that climate change is a global problem that renders national boundaries irrelevant is frequently used by weak and sceptical leaders as a reason for putting national interests first, no more so, of course than in the case of the world's longstanding greatest contributor to climate change, the United States of America.

In 1998, I accepted the proposition that nature has intrinsic value, the luxury of an indeterminate timescale for "the future" keeping alive the hope that wider acknowledgement of this principle would

[d] Gutteres served two terms in office, from 1995-1999 and 1999 -2002.

impact on the ordering of WtP. I no longer do.[e] The instrumental value of the natural world and its life-sustaining ecosystems is all that we have. I concluded on page 208 of my 1998 thesis that:

- *Children are socialised into an anthropocentric culture in which resources are committed to to environmental protection or sustainability only when demands for high levels of service in areas such as health and education have first been satisfied.*

Does this statement need modification twenty-eight years later? I might question my use of the term "socialised". Is it not the instinct of any sentient species of any age to prioritise its own immediate survival and welfare? The fallacy of the tabula rasa! It is difficult to envisage mitigation of climate change ever approaching the level of health care as a priority and I wonder if I ever imagined it might. This one, simple fact of human nature probably more than anything else results in the anthropocentric trap that keeps us speeding down the highway to hell past all the possible exits. Cornucopians have long promised that technology will fix this problem, but cornucopians also promise that technology will cure cancer and similar conditions, ushering in an age of universal health and long if not everlasting life. For the entire population of the world?

Where does this leave "the future" and the various initiatives that have been devised to empower groups and individuals through the imagination of possible, probable and preferable futures? The "Futures Clinique" of 2013 attempted to adapt the traditional futures workshop concept to "suit the world of constant flux and bottom-up initiatives" and promoted possible, preferable, surprising and alternative futures instead of probable ones.[16] Like other such initiatives, it stressed a "bottom up" initiative. If, though, there are two time- scales operating as Guterres suggests, to which should such initiatives attend? If anything has been learned through 2026 being "the future" of 1996, it is that the time-scale of "bottom-up" initiatives is not going to result in the strong, informed lead people, and especially adolescents need to make climate change and its mitigation a high priority personal or political issue.[17] This essay has considered how within our familiar historical timescale the present is evolving into one in which recovery, resilience and reconstruction are the new norms that begin to displace "luxuries" such as funding of the arts in national budgeting. The timescale over which predicted climate tipping points may result in the struggle to recover and rebuild overwhelming all other spending priorities is uncertain but if and when it is clearer will we then have arrived at the destination of the highway to hell? Will we recognise that we have got there? It seems to me that the necessary frame of reference will not be an imagined future but the recorded past.

> I like looking in the history books. I cannot believe that there were once wild animals and that trees and forests grew in the open. It must have been good to have lived then.

Perhaps we should consider that only a few hundred years ago, the existence of wild animals was considered a bad thing?

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[4] The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Curriculum Management Award.
[5] Tan, K-H (2026) Temporal Ontology: Does the Future Exist Yet? A Novel Framework for Understanding Graduated Temporal Existence. Postgraduate dissertation, Singapore University of Social Sciences.

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[e] See the essay *Are Intrinsic Values Real*?

[6] McLauglin, S. (2024) The Future Does Not Exist: it's literally now or never. *Medium*.
[7] "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." **– Matthew 6:34**
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