

FOUR HARD QUESTIONS: SIZE, SCALE, SCOPE, SPEED

To address ecological crises, it's time to leave behind those who are holding us back.

People are sometimes reluctant to ask questions when they suspect that they will not like the answers.

How many churchgoers who have doubts about their congregation's doctrine decide to squelch their questions out of fear of losing friends and community? How often do people in intimate relationships avoid confronting tension because they know a problem cannot be resolved? How many people have delayed a trip to the doctor because they know that an examination may lead to a diagnosis they do not want to deal with?

Here is an exercise for all of us: For one day, pay attention to all the forms of denial you practice and that you see others practicing. How many times do we turn away from reality because it is too hard at that moment to face? Dare we list the things that scare us into silence?

We all have personal experience with this hesitancy to face reality. At some point in our lives, we all have avoided hard questions, precisely because they are hard.

What we experience individually is also true of society. There are hard questions that, collectively, we have so far turned away from, either because we have no answers or because we will not like the answers that are waiting for us. Contemporary societies face problems for which there likely are no solutions if we are willing to consider only solutions that promise no dramatic disruption in our lives. Hard questions often demand that we acknowledge the need for dramatic change.

Our ecological crises cannot be waved away with the cliché that necessity is the mother of invention, implying that human intelligence, perhaps in combination with market incentives, will produce magical solutions. We believe that the most productive way to face today's hardest questions is to focus not only on human creativity but also on human limitations. The techno-optimists emphasize the former, betting that we can do anything we set our minds to. Those who lean toward nihilism focus on the latter, suggesting that there is no way off the path to ruin. We believe that responsible planning requires careful



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consideration of both humanity's potential and its propensities—not only what can get us out of trouble but also what got us into trouble in the first place.

Four hard questions that are essential to confront now are: What is the sustainable **size** of the human population? What is the appropriate **scale** of a human community? What is the **scope** of human competence to manage our interventions into the larger living world? At what **speed** must we move toward different living arrangements if we are to avoid catastrophic consequences?

When we have raised these issues in conversation, the most common response is that while these hard questions may be interesting, they have no bearing on what is possible today in real-world struggles for justice and sustainability. The implication is that such questions either somehow do not really matter or are too dangerous to ask.

We have heard this not only from people within the conventional political arena but also from environmentalists and activists on the left. Their argument generally goes something like this: The questions raise issues that most people simply will not engage with and suggest a need for changes that most people simply will not make. Sensible environmentalists and activists know that you cannot expect people to think about such huge questions when they face the everyday problems of living, and making a living, which take up most of their time and energy. And what is the point of thinking about these things

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anyway, when we all know that politicians can only move so far and so fast in our political system? Why ask questions and offer policies that are certain to be ignored?

Sensible people, we have been told, are those who accept the Overton Window. Named after the late Joseph P. Overton from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the idea is that politicians “generally only pursue policies that are widely accepted throughout society as legitimate policy options. These policies lie inside the Overton Window. Other policy ideas exist, but politicians risk losing popular support if they champion these ideas. These policies lie outside the Overton Window.”

That can be a useful concept for thinking about what laws might be passed today, but it becomes an impediment to critical thinking when people use it to avoid hard, but necessary, questions that cannot be put off forever. When confronting questions of size, scale, scope, and speed, we encourage people to climb out of the Overton Window to get a wider view of the world, to think not about how human political processes limit what actions are possible today (which they do) but about what the larger living world’s forces demand of us (which dictate the material conditions in which we live our lives).

When attempting to come to terms with biophysical realities, refusing to look beyond the Overton Window guarantees collective failure. That window certainly exists in the realm of environmental policy—politicians fear the loss of support if they move too far, too fast. But that does not exempt anyone from asking the hard questions. The environmental policies that are possible today are important, but we also must recognize that we likely face a dramatically different set of choices in a far more challenging tomorrow. And that tomorrow is not as far away as we might want to believe.

We realize that asking these four hard questions in the mainstream political arena today is nearly impossible, and that the key actors in our current political system will not engage them

anytime soon. But to cite these impediments as a reason not to ever grapple with these questions in *any* context is not sensible. It’s an indication of moral and intellectual weakness. The nineteenth-century Austrian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach put it succinctly: “There are instances in which to be reasonable is to be cowardly.”

The four questions are so complex that detailed answers are beyond our capacities, but that does not render them irrelevant. With these caveats, we assert the following rough conclusions as a place to start the necessary conversations.

In terms of size, the Earth’s ecosystems can sustainably support far fewer than eight billion people, even if everyone were consuming far less energy and material than they do today. For scale, we will have to learn to live in smaller and more flexible political and social units than today’s nation-states and cities. On scope, we are far less capable of controlling modern technology than we think, and we cannot manage the current high-energy/high-technology infrastructure we have created for much longer. Regarding speed, we must move faster than we have been, and faster than it appears we may be capable of.

We believe that more and more people are willing to climb out of the Overton Window. We constantly meet people who are tired of being told they must be “sensible.” If we can refuse to be limited by other people’s fears—if we can see beyond both a naive techno-optimism and a corrosive nihilism—we create space for a conversation about these questions without having to pretend that we have all the answers. We can make realistic assessments, drawing on science and human history. But we have to be willing to drop sunny-side-of-the-street fantasies captured in phrases such as “the impossible will take a little while” and “necessity is the mother of invention,” while at the same time refusing to slip into a paralyzing despair. ♦

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