Chapter 8 Philosophy tackles Climate Change: introducing the '*Hyperobject*' Narrative

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Abstract: There is a steady drum-beat calling for a new narrative to support the scientific story about climate change. Cognitive and decision-science has proven that the delivery of facts-based information has a very limited influence upon people. Rather, mostly people think and act in accordance with their underlying beliefs, values and worldviews, even if they are presented evidence to do otherwise. This principle holds true even when people's levels of IQ are taken into account. It is also now understood that how an issue is framed, greatly affects how people respond to it. Hence there is now increased attention on how to frame and describe climate change in such a way that it truly resonates with people.
Ironically, a fresh approach has emerged from one of the oldest fields of human scholarship – philosophy. Timothy Morton describes global warming using creative language and reframes it as a 'hyperobject'. He also presents an argument for the expertise of the humanities to be more effectively utilised in the climate communication challenge.
This presentation will provide an overview of key cognitive science insights about 'deep framing'. It will then describe the Hyperobject narrative, reflecting upon its utility as a new frame.

The full paper will be available after publication.

Synopsis and Commentary – Peter Tait

Opening with a demonstration that scare tactics haven't been working, and giving people the facts isn't working took us into a journey through philosophy and cognitive science to look for an idea of what might work to help people change, and hence transform culture.

The importance of narratives, the stories we tell about our world and ourselves, emerged as a critical element. Our stories give us meaning, understanding of the world and most importantly they provide us with our identity. The only way to supplant a narrative is to create a stronger one.

Creation of a stronger narrative is difficult and can be done badly resulting in unintended consequences. The clumsy handling of fear, raising suspicions and resistance is one example. A good narrative needs to speak to the identity of the person (their values and beliefs), be in a context of the already known and understood, allow a difference to be imagined, and engage the emotions.

Lakoff: "*Real reason is: mostly unconscious (98%); requires emotion; uses the 'logic' of frames, metaphors, and narratives; is physical (in brain circuitry); and varies considerably, as frames vary.*"

A deep frame is a worldview. It is a system of metaphors and frames. Values are grounded in this deep frame. It is change resistant. To change a deep frame – well it can't be, so change requires creating a new frame, that is a new system of metaphors.

A new frame requires new words, it needs to resonate emotionally (feel 'right'), be values based, have a coherent narrative or storyline. Repetition of images and metaphors is needed to 'learn' and to reinforce it.

Timothy Morton brings the idea of a hyperobject into the discussion. The hyperobject is a method for introducing new frames about humanity, and our place in nature. A hyperobject is a 'thing massively distributed in time and space, relative to humans'. Examples would be anthropogenic global warming, the capitalist economy, human culture – all of which are creating wicked problems for humanity. In essence a hyperobject is characterised by people being embedded in it, it is global and long term, it is outside usual human capacity to comprehend, we can only observe aspects of it and we can only know it through its traces or signs. [Morton introduces the term 'hyperobject' to define "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 2013 p.1). Morton, T. (2013). Hyperobjects Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.]

So the recognition of something as a hyperobject changes human perception of it and our response to it. We are forced (however unwillingly) to acknowledge that we have no control over a hyperobject. This leads to a new narrative of human existence by altering our identity of ourselves (as in what it means to be human); the frame of how humans view the world and the issues that are hyperobjects; it changes how we create narratives about what is happening and what can be done; and it speaks to the emotional content of the situation.

This new frame is both terrifying and liberating. Terror from the shift in identity and the humility in acknowledgement that humans are not in control. Liberation from the realisation that we can forge our own narrative and that the emotions are a normal part of our response, and in accepting them we can move into action. Just because we are not in control doesn't mean we cannot respond and influence the situation.

Thus from this we gain a new sense of identity – yet to be completely resolved, a new set of tools for viewing, approaching and responding to wicked problems, and a more 'accurate' sense of what it is to be human. The 'Arts' provide the vehicle for creating the new narratives, metaphors and frames needed for change.

Summary

Our stories give us meaning, understanding of the world and our identity. Introducing hyperobjects introduces change to our identities – who we are; and the stories and narratives we tell about who we are and why we are here. It changes the ideas around human agency – we have influence but no control. It changes the meaning of the place of humans in the universe. It permits however ability to craft new narratives about our identity and our role. It makes the emotional responses overt and so manageable, and this opens opportunity to use the arts to tell these new stories.

Changing the frames of our existence by altering the narratives and metaphors we use, allows humanity to create a new future.