

Book review

The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World

Roman Krznaric
WH Allen
London, UK
2020
324 p.
ISBN 9780753554517
Review DOI
10.1108/JTF-03-2022-245

The Good Ancestor is a book that asks a big philosophical question. The question comes from Jonas Salk (the developer of the first safe polio vaccine in 1955), who believed the most important question we must ask ourselves is, "Are we being good ancestors". Put into a more active form, this becomes, "how can we be good ancestors?" Krznaric regards this as the most important philosophical question of our time and one that offers hope for the evolution of human civilisation. Just as we have inherited so many riches from the past (e.g. physical, religious, cultural and scientific), we must also pass them on to our descendants. The book is a call for action to intentionally chose the long term in a short-term world.

Part one deals with the tug of war for time, because our brains are wired for both short- and long-term thinking. Krznaric challenges the dominant mindset of short-term thinking based on a belief in the primacy of now. He uses the metaphor of the marshmallow (short-term rewards) and the acorn (long-term-goals) to symbolise the tension and the constant tug of war that exists within the time horizon of the human mind. Fortunately, long-term thinking may be one of the greatest unsung talents of our species.

Krznaric believes the future is treated as an uninhabited territory. The unborn generations of tomorrow can do nothing about this colonialist pillaging of their futures, they are granted no political rights or representation and

they have no influence at the ballot box or in the market. The great silent majority of future generations are rendered powerless and airbrushed out of our minds.

Becoming a good ancestor is a formidable task. It is determined by the outcome of a struggle for the human mind currently taking place on a global scale between the opposing forces of short- and long-term thinking. The world systematically ignores the long view. For example, economic discounting should be considered as a weapon of intergenerational oppression disguised as a rational economic methodology because it gives smaller and smaller weights to future citizens.

Part two deals with the need to change the dominant short-term mindset. The national liberation struggles of the 20th century were fought with guns. But Krznaric believes the intergenerational liberation struggle of the 21st century is a battle of ideas, taking the form of a titanic tug of war for time. On one side, six drivers of short-termism threaten to drag us over the edge of civilisational breakdown. On the other, six ways to think long are drawing us towards a culture of long-time horizons and responsibility for the future of humankind. The six ways to think long are the core cognitive skills for being a good ancestor. All six ways of long-term thinking are needed to create a long-term revolution of the human mind and it needs critical mass of people and organisations. The six pairs of short-/long-term thinking are:

1. *tyranny of the clock* (i.e. the acceleration of time since the Middle Ages) versus *deep-time humility* (i.e. grasp we are an eyeblink in cosmic time);

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2. *perpetual progress* (i.e. the pursuit of endless economic growth) versus *developing a transcendent goal* (i.e. strive for one-planet thriving);
3. *digital distraction* (i.e. the hijacking of attention by technology) versus *legacy mindset* (i.e. be remembered well by posterity);
4. *political presentism* (i.e. myopic focus on the next election) versus *intergenerational justice* (i.e. consider the seventh generation ahead);
5. *speculative capitalism* (i.e. volatile boom-bust financial markets) versus *cathedral thinking* (i.e. plan projects beyond a human lifetime); and
6. *networked uncertainty* (i.e. the risk of global risk and contagion) versus *holistic forecasting* (i.e. envision multiple pathways for civilisation).

Part three considers how the imaginative leap to long-term thinking would be transformed into actions that reshape the world. This section tells the stories of “time rebels” who are struggling against the rampant short-termism of the modern world and attempt to put the six long view ways into practice. They battle the short-termism of entrenched corporate behaviour, intransigent government and a throwaway

consumer culture. Examples include the global climate strike movement, Extinction Rebellion, regenerative economics and citizen’s assemblies.

In summary, we need to switch off our marshmallow brain. This is a thought-provoking book written for the general reader, which will also have relevance for tourism futures practitioners, educators, researchers and students. It asks a deep philosophical question about what type of civilisation we want to pass on to our descendants. Whilst the book has an inherent focus on futures thinking, the six ways to think long, especially the transcendental goals, legacy mindset and cathedral thinking, would seem to be preconditions for sustainable tourism, both now and in the future.

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