

We need change. That is the primary premise of this series of articles. I will be examining change: what is the nature of change, how does change manifest in nature, how can we influence the direction of change. But before I begin in earnest, I want to pause and think about the terms “we” and “need”.

We know that we need to change the world. That this has become a matter of survival. But the world - what we see - is dependent on the position from which we see it.

This is a concept of dialectics I will discuss later in the series. But for now it is important that I state clearly what my perspective is, the angle from which I am coming from.

Compounded complexity

These articles will discuss complex theories about how we understand - and change - the incredibly complex world we inhabit: our social world, our natural world.

This compounded complexity could result in a series of arguments that would be impossibly long, and almost impossible to understand. Therefore some kind of filter is also very necessary.

The perspective and the filter I will use is human need. I have over the years discovered a theory of change which I feel we need to use in order to change the course of history, to move towards a sustainable world rather than a broken, inhabitable one. I will try and reduce this theory of change down to the fewest conceptual tools necessary, the ones we really need.

So now I want to explain my choice of human need as the starting point for this exploration of change.

The primary philosophical claim I want to make is that human need is in fact the centre of the ‘universe’. In this respect, I want to fully embrace anthropocentrism. It is the very nature of our human needs that has created the universe, as we as humans can understand it and can discuss it together.

Biological nature

Human needs are derived from our biological nature, and much of both our physical and psychological existence and experience exists so that we can meet our own needs. This is true of the evolution of the hand, of the brain, and also of the evolution of the human being as an intensely social being, working in groups.

Humans are not the only beings with needs, however. None of our individual needs are entirely unique, and no one of our attributes are without comparison to those of other animals and living things. In this sense, I totally reject anthropomorphism.

Indeed, I believe that need in its most general form explains how our universe, how life in general, came to be - and why it came to be in the form that it has. Just as the philosopher

Hegel wanted to begin with Being, I want to begin from the concept of need. And this is why.

The second law of thermodynamics - entropy - recognises that our universe is expanding, cooling, and becoming less complex. Things fall apart.

If this was the only law of nature, then nothing could exist. Indeed, we don't really understand how things can exist. If everything started at the same point, and expanded in a straight line, then all matter would be evenly distributed. We do know that this is not the case.

Countering entropy

This means that for any one thing to exist, it must be acting against this primary tendency of the universe. For any structure, any pattern, any phenomenon to exist long enough for us to witness it, for it to have any being, it must have a mechanism or process that can counter entropy.

Everything has a need, which is the need to resist entropy. All things that cannot meet this need already no longer exist.

The mechanisms or processes that exist to act against entropy can be understood as systems. A system is defined simply as a whole which is a collection of parts that act together to perform a process, or to make change.

By this definition, almost everything that exists is itself a system or a part, or product, of a wider system. Life, in its most general form, is a system. This explanation is the core to the theory of change set out in this series.

The systems that successfully counter entropy therefore always have a need, and are capable of meeting this need in their context or environment. They have a purpose, or an aim, which is to counter entropy.

Living systems

This is not something the system itself needs to be conscious of, it has not chosen its purpose. However, those things - or systems - that do not act against entropy are selected out of existence, they do not exist for very long.

Therefore, human need is a form of need which is shared by all of nature, all of life, and even non-living systems.

The reason I have chosen to focus on human needs is I am a human and you are too. We human beings are systems that can be conscious of our needs, who have a conscious understanding of our own agency and the fact we can make decisions that mean we meet - or fail to meet - our needs.

We have complex languages and can articulate those needs to each other. Some animals

also do this, but not in a way that is easily understood by us. I don't know how to successfully describe my needs to a cat, for example, or a star.

I believe that we as human beings do not have a clear understanding of our needs. Our essential needs are not being met. We live in a society driven by an economy that prioritises its needs over the needs of the human individuals that inhabit it. We live in a world of unmet needs.

Green bubble

This causes anxiety and stress, resulting in behaviours that can be destructive to others, to our communities, and to nature. This is true of all of us individually, and collectively.

Advertising, a trillion dollar industry, creates false needs.

My own view is that we cannot solve the major ecological problems that confront us, we cannot avert catastrophic climate breakdown, the crisis of extinctions, or the devastation of natural environments, until we learn to meet our human needs.

This is the philosophical reason I want to begin with human need. But there is also a very practical one. This is more than simply the fact that we need to change the world, so that it continues to meet our needs. It is more personal than that.

I have learned from my years as an activist that the best approach to convincing and mobilising others is to first listen to their needs. Listening involves developing a true sense of the needs of others. This understanding needs to happen at three levels: the personal, the interpersonal and the social.

There was a moment in my life when my environmental activism hit a wall, I felt I could go no further. However urgent, however scary, however strategic the message I crafted, it would not carry and it fell on deaf ears. There was a green bubble, and I was trapped inside.

Giving and taking

The 'information deficit model' where I just go around telling people that the environment is in crisis, and that we urgently need change to prevent collapse, has not worked. I learned this when trying to understand why anyone would continue to deny climate change - anyone other than an oil company.

Around the same time, I watched a Ted Talk about the fact some people are givers and some takers. Naturally, I assumed I was through my activism giving everything to the cause. But someone very close to me said, simply, 'maybe people do not see what you are doing as giving, maybe to them you are taking'.

As an activist, you give your time, your thought, your activity. But she was right. At every turn I was asking others to change their views, to change their behaviours, to challenge power, to take enormous risks and sacrifices. I am asking others to meet my need for social

change.

It was then I began to ask, what do people need - what do they really need from me? If I can meet an every day need for them, can I gain an audience for my needs. People's needs are really not that different from each other. And when I began to learn about others' needs I began for the first time to understand my own.

I had previously believed that I had put my own needs aside and dedicated my life to meeting the needs of those less fortunate than me - including animals and nature more generally. I didn't then work for a charity, but I joined campaign after campaign focussed on the important environmental and social issues of our time.

Managing needs

But I was in fact ignoring my own immediate, ordinary human needs by worrying about big, global social needs. It took quite a lot of work to admit to myself that in failing to manage and meet my own needs I was in fact relying too heavily on others.

I came to understand that my desire to change the world was a product of my own personal needs, and often led me to impose my needs on other people. I need other people to become political activists, because I am anxious about the state of the world today.

This does not really present as a problem if I only come in to contact with people who have essentially the same needs as me - and better still if they are also members of an even smaller subset of people who are trying to meet them in the same way as I am. I need them to do a better job, I need them to adopt more effective ways of working. But they get that. But all this does become serious a problem when you want to engage people in environmental activism who are already overwhelmed by trying to meet very real and immediate needs. This is even more true in a society where need has been distorted into "effective demand" by corporations, economists and politicians alike. If you can't pay, your needs are irrelevant.

I am now much better at meeting my own needs. And my desire to change the world, to see that the needs of humans and the myriad living creatures we share the planet with, are met, is still as real and as vivid as they have ever been. But they are no longer an escape from my own unmet need.

Advocating for change

This means I am in a much better position to hear other people when they express their needs. I need to listen to, I need to hear, I need to understand the needs of people whose lives are very different from my own.

I need to understand that for so many people even meeting the most basic needs involves all of their time and all of their attention. It is hard in that place to consider what the world will

be like in 2100.

Only after I have heard people express their needs do I hope for a fair hearing when I express my own needs - needs that can only be met through a whole world of change. Now I understand that I have to begin any act of activism by first understanding the needs of others (although I am not responsible for meeting those needs). It is an understanding that I want to put into practice.

This involves changes in the way I am in the world. It also means trying to advocate a change in the methods and behaviours of those who campaign alongside me.

Theory of change

And it involves a radical change in the approach of the environment movement in general - away from saying climate change trumps all other concerns, and towards campaigns that both meet the everyday needs and concerns of as many people as possible while at the same time expanding their needs - and what they are willing to fight for - to the need for a sustainable and enriching natural environment.

In this article I have tried to explain why human need is central to my theory of change. I have argued that from my perspective 'need' explains the existence of life, the universe and everything. This is a theme I will come back to again and again.

I have also shared some ideas that were important in my own 'discovery' that meeting needs is the fundamental of activism, in working with others.

Need is the founding concept of this theory of change. We need change, we need to change to a society that meets human needs, directly. We need a living, thriving, natural environment. But human need is not simple to discern.

The theory of change that has grabbed my attention - dialectics and systems thinking - also provides a profound insight into human needs.

Further Reading

Three popular books have enhanced my understanding of our human needs at the personal, the interpersonal and the social level.

The personal: one book that has influenced my view that human needs must form the primary standpoint of our understanding of change is Dr Nathaniel Braden's Six Pillars of Self Esteem. Braden, a psychologist, is credited with introducing the term 'self esteem' and his book argues that each person's sense of self worth is very much predicated on their ability to identify and their trust that they can meet their own needs.

The interpersonal: I have been very influenced by Marshall B Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life. The primary lesson he provides is that in order to be heard, we must learn first to listen. It is in meeting the needs of others that we can begin to

discuss how others may want to help us meet our needs.

The social: I have also taken an interest in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This has been put to good use by Chris Rose who sees perceived unmet needs as a driver for social attitudes. Rose's claims in *What Makes People Tick* that people's attitudes to key social issues - from migration to abortion - tend to cluster and this can be explained around whether - essentially - people feel secure.

Braden, Rosenberg and Rose have each written extremely useful books. They claim that their advice can move the reader towards a more contented, a more effective life. This is achieved by examining needs. But I want to go even further, developing a thorough understanding of the system of human needs.

Source: theecologist