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Interaction with The Good Ancestor

The *Good Ancestor* is a call to arms for an overthrow of an outmoded system and the rise of a radical new order. Drawing at times on metaphors of the liberation of oppressed colonised people, it draws our attention to the latent oppression of the people of the future. These, our descendants, must bear the brunt of the current culture of consumerism – that happily squanders the resources and health of the future, in pursuit of short-term profits and single-use pleasures. Like *No One is Too Small to make a Difference* by Greta Thunberg it is an unapologetic wake-up call. The brief chapters (reproducing Thunberg’s speeches) in *No One is Too Small* are guttural cries for help from the vanguard of the future, briefly highlighting critical facts and key discussion points. By contrast *The Good Ancestor* provides a thorough, deliberated, discussion of these and other facts and perspectives. As the author himself disclaims early in the book, its greatest limitation is that it is intimately a product of the intellectual class of a wealthy first world society. Although it aspires to be the book that makes the pivotal change so greatly needed in the world, it is unlikely to be avidly read by paraffin lamplight across the poorer parts of the global south. But perhaps that is not its purpose. The educated classes of Europe and America have undoubtedly incubated the growing disaster of consumer capitalism and are in many ways in control of the media and other enablers that drive the mainstream western narrative. As such, if this book speaks most clearly to them, the knock-on effects could be global. Hopefully, its insights will also feed into a pool of ideas that will birth a diversely narrated dissemination of crucial information and aspirations.

Indeed, the central thesis of the book speaks to a very real crisis in our midst. If we don't change the way we are doing things we will, by the end of this century, have facilitated a runaway collapse of the biosphere and climatic systems as we know them. Our descendants will live (if at all) in a devastated, uncomfortable, unpredictable, shadow of the world into which we were born. And this is no longer a dystopian fringe imagining, it is the most likely scientific probability. As an evolutionary biologist I am well aware of how the biosphere and global climate have developed in a close relationship over hundreds of millions of years, and how any extreme perturbations of the climate, or atmospheric composition, have precipitated huge biotic die-offs and collapses of global ecosystems. Certainly, some life survives, and seeds a whole new (different) biotic world, but that generally takes millions, sometimes tens of millions, of years. By contrast our entire evolutionary history, from where our and chimps' ancestors last fed from the same mother, has taken place within the last 7.5 million years. Our first shapely stone tool, the hand axe, was invented less than two million years ago. We, like all life during the earth's varied history, have evolved within a very narrow set of physical parameters, including temperature, humidity, atmospheric and water composition, and selected filtration of solar radiation by the sky. As a result, us, and most of our current co-inhabitants of the earth, would struggle to survive if these parameters were to significantly shift. It seems a concept perhaps too large for many of the world's politicians that biosphere conditions can shift, are shifting and will continue to shift. How severely depends on what we do right now.

Yet, we seem paralysed with complacency. Post-enlightenment materialism has, for many, robbed the world of its wondrous nature and a sense of responsibility to be good stewards of the forests and animals which evolved alongside us. Briefly, towards the end of the book, Krznaric tangentially engages with this paradox and, as one of the 16% of the world's population who identifies as an atheist, toys with the benefits of venerating an Earth Mother. There is an impression that our loss of a sense of sacredness has left us with little feeling of responsibility for our fellow creatures and fellow man. Krznaric's central thesis, however, steers well clear of such musings. His appeal to the reader is more humanistic, more direct and personal. Imagine your descendants gathering to remember you in a century's time. Try to picture them as people looking back on you, as we recall our own ancestors. How will they remember you? You were of the generation that found themselves in a world on the brink. Perhaps the last generation who could avert total disaster for them. What did you do? Did you heroically fight for them? Were you part of a tide of change to which they look back with gratitude for their wellbeing? Or did you complacently fritter away your time with the endless distractions of consumer capitalism, whilst passively condemning them to a life of hardship and suffering? Frighteningly, the choice is ours.

Krznaric calls for nothing short of a social revolution on behalf of the people of the future, waged by us. Unlike many of the social upheavals of the past, against colonialism, sexism, racism and classism, the most disadvantaged are not here to demonstrate, picket or man the barricades. They are the vast majority of humanity: those who have not yet been born. But just as many people believe that others whom they have never met, and live in foreign lands, have fundamental human rights, so too do those who we have not met who inhabit the future. Caring about them is not something new. Not caring for them is. Krznaric draws our attention to the long-term planning of our ancestors. Taking an example from Europe he points to the great medieval cathedrals, many of which took centuries to build, sometimes funded by public subscription. The people who planned and began the cathedral knew that they would never see more than the outline of the envisioned edifice. But they started it for the future members of their community, often including their own descendants. For generations people worked on something for the appreciation of the distant unborn, in the hope of making the lives of future dwellers better than their own.

Throughout the world we can encounter demonstrations of forward thinking. One may observe small scale farmers planting fruit trees whose harvest they won't enjoy; and pastoralists caring for a patch of old growth forest that doubles as a sustainable pharmacopoeia and a timeless place to encounter their ancestors. Planning long term, even longer term than our own lifetime, is what Krznaric refers to as using our Acorn Brain – recalling the Swiss shepherd who, planting a few acorns each day while herding his sheep, seeded a huge forest over decades. Krznaric contrasts this with the Marshmallow Brain, named for the famous experiment – failed by many – wherein children were left with a marshmallow, and promised a second one if they didn't eat it while the researcher was out of the room. Krznaric hones in on the 'Buy Now' button on internet sales sites as the icon of current consumer capitalism. Capitalism has rapidly progressed over the last century from profiting from the manufacture and sale of what people needed for their lives, to manufacturing desire for goods that people don't need. Unsustainable economic growth derives from continually stimulating the pleasure centre of our Marshmallow Brains. Krznaric, like Thunberg, points to the impossibility of the current economic paradigm pursued by many governments, which views endless economic growth as a panacea for staying afloat. Endless, linear, economic growth is simply not possible in a world with limited resources and a limited capacity to absorb human emissions. The illusion of credibility, that keeps governments winning elections at the end of four year cycles, relies heavily on pillaging the resources of the future. Krznaric argues that this is no less a crime against humanity than pillaging the resources of another nation.

The problem is that the consumerist world has captured us, even here in South Africa's rural Eastern Cape. Trees in the sacred forests die from being unsustainably stripped of bark for sale for charms on the pavements of the city. Half the population is in the city looking for a bite of the apple, looking for well paid jobs, scrolling through feeds on their smartphones, posing for selfies, looking good for an instant post. We're neither looking nostalgically back or strategically forward. We're captured by consumerism and narcissism.

Krznaric says that the only hope for the well-being of the future dwellers that we are passively exploiting is to snap out of the dream and to tackle the real big issue. Now. Uniting to save humanity is the most important thing we can possibly do. We all need to take this seriously. Small tweaking of the status quo will not suffice, our global society needs a complete overhaul. The way things are done needs to change. Krznaric gives a lengthy discussion of the political and economic dimensions of the problem, as well as encouraging green shoots appearing from Canada, Sweden and New Zealand to Bangladesh. Ideally the book should be read by open minded politicians willing to step out of line and make truly big, truly statesman-like decisions. This is not impossible, but would certainly take me by surprise. In many ways the fossil fuel industry is the backbone of the global economy and a large funder of political parties. Yet one of the greatest priorities in serving the future inheritors of the world is to radically reduce carbon emissions, and the greatest human contribution to carbon emissions is burning fossil fuels. We all do so, indirectly by buying manufactured goods and directly every time we turn the key in a car or board public transport. We can't help ourselves because we are embedded in a fuel-guzzling world. But it doesn't have to be. Sustainable sources of energy from wind, tide, sunlight and even geothermal energy could replace fossil fuels, if there was a strong will. Krznarac discusses the problems of political short termism that currently directs policy making, whereby benefits to the future are discounted (or considered significantly less valuable) the further into the future that they stretch. According to this model, a tidal electricity generation system (that would have provided a substantial proportion of Britain's electrical needs) was considered too costly by the government because the offset of benefits stretched too far into the future compared to, say, a nuclear build. Conversely the long-term danger of carbon emissions or nuclear waste is considered less important than their short-term contribution to growing the industrial economy.

As Krznarac points out, this myopic thinking needs to end in order for us to leave a sustainable future for generations to come. Ultimately, as he intimates, we need to create a carbon neutral circular economy. That is an economy that doesn't just extract resources, use them briefly and then dump them as (often

toxic) waste, but that uses resources in ways that permit their reuse and circulation. This is essentially the pattern of process in natural ecosystems and would put us on a sustainable trajectory into the distant future.

But practically now, how is all this to be achieved? *The Good Ancestor* does not present a detailed revolutionary manifesto. The nitty gritty of design and execution are left open. Ultimately though, we need to remember, as South Africans demonstrated in the 1990s, that governments only rule by the consent of the citizens. It is time for us to all rise up and pressurise our governments to do the right thing, to put our collective number one priority at the top of their concerns. To make that priority count at the ballot boxes. It's time to put all other causes in second place. As Thunberg said, "Our house is on fire." Its time for us to all step up in any way possible.