

# Rowson Podcast Episode

Thu, 6/3 2:49PM • 1:00:22

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

question, people, human rights, problem, essay, world, called, jonathan, crisis, emergency, capitalism, change, letter, thinking, capability, building, human rights movement, life, point, human

## SPEAKERS

Sarah, Imogen, Damien, James, Flo, Jonathan Rowson, Caroline, Tom Pegram

### Tom Pegram 00:00

Welcome to 'Global Governance Futures', based out of the UCL Global Governance Institute. This is a podcast about the challenges facing humanity, and possible global responses. If you're new to the show, and you want to get a list of our favourite books, or the resources, listen to past shows, and to join our community, go to [ucl.ac.uk/global-governance](https://ucl.ac.uk/global-governance). Hello, This episode is our first podclass. What you're about to hear is the live conversation between Jonathan Rowson, co-founder and director of the research institute Perspectiva, philosopher, and former chess grandmaster, and students on our MA in Human Rights programme at the Department of Political Science, University College London, Jonathan was kind enough to drop by to discuss his recent essay on reimagining Human Hights for the 21st century, which is composed in the form of a letter entitled, 'Dear Human Rights Movement'. It's available in the show notes, I was really struck by the essay and keen to share it with my students in the module: Human Rights, Politics and Practice, which I co convene, and it did not disappoint. The essay opened up many portals of reflection, and I think left a deep impression on the students. It was also a very lively discussion with agreement and dissent on Jonathan's core argument, that a shift from rights to duties is now required if we are to confront the crises of our times. So it was a real pleasure to have Jonathan join us, we hope that you'll also enjoy the conversation. So without further ado, we bring you the live pod class with Jonathan Rowson, on 3rd of March 2021.

### Jonathan Rowson 02:06

So the letter to the Human Rights Movement, is, as I say, a kind of declaration of confusion. It's about coming to terms of the world, as we find it, as opposed to the framing of the world as I grew up with, which was a broadly liberal, liberal democratic view of the world, which said that the sort of norm for governing and living was something like individual rights, market capitalism, democratic nation states, and that was going to be a norm that was spread throughout the world. This is you know, Fukuyama's classic case. But it's, it's more generally a sort of ambient sense of the ideological battle between communism and capitalism having won. And now the arguments were all mostly technical arguments about marginal tax rates, and occasional constitutional matters and, you know, it didn't seem like the big questions of what human life was for, were a big part of public debate. It was as if somehow there was an ideological settlement. But in the last 10 years or so, I've experienced, and I'm not alone by any means, what's sometimes called the loss of liberal innocence. And by that is meant a growing understanding that many of the problems the world faces, including the unbelievably excessive power

of the surveillance capitalists, Facebook, Google, Amazon, and others. And the acute problem of climate change that we seem to be unable to adequately address. These have happened on liberalism's watch, you know, the liberals always assumed, by the way, you can nuance the hell out of liberalism and often, you know, I often do and when I say that, please understand that I'm aware that it's a very contested term and there are many different ways of being a liberal and there's lots of defences of liberalism, and I'm fully aware of that. But I just say this more in terms of my own relating to the issues, that it wasn't clear to me who the good guys were anymore. And I wasn't even sure if my way of life, fairly highly consumptive life, probably something like a two, two planet, three planet existence. living in London, relatively affluent, but this being somehow thought to be the good life and a lot the way we should live. Suddenly thinking "Hang on, this doesn't stack up on a global level. We can't actually all live like this." And then then it becomes a question of, well, what are we going to do about climate change? And when you look into that deeply enough, you realise the gap between the physics of the problem: what's possible. and the politics of it, what's really credible, is huge and it's not clear how we're going to bridge that. And human race language certainly didn't seem to be helping there. And then, of course, you're living amongst this tumultuous time of populism and to some extent, nationalism, and even authoritarianism and perhaps even proto fascism. And all these things are happening at once, right? So sometimes the language that's used is the meta crisis, or there's also a series of meta crisis, I've written an essay that I think Tom knows about, where I tried to give more detail on what the meta crisis might mean. But suffice to say the context is in flux, right. So when I write this letter to the Human Rights Movement, I'm kind of saying to them, aware that them can mean many things, but to activists, to some extent, to lawyers, to journalists, to those sometimes who are card carrying members of Amnesty or Human Rights Watch or other such organisations. To them, I'm saying, look, have you woke up, have you? Are you aware that the world has changed? You know, are you aware that our context has changed, our setting has changed? And given that it has, what is your new plot to contend with that? So that's really what I'm doing, particularly with regard to human rights, because you need a focal point. And also, because this was the premise of the fellowship under which the letter was written, which was that what do we do to sort of safeguard human rights? And I'm saying, Well, look, obviously, my life depends upon human rights. And I've lived, you know, a full and safe and have more or less happy life, because human rights are protected to some degree. And I don't want to take it for granted. I don't want to underplay the value, the heroic efforts people have made to protect human rights, sometimes at great personal cost and risk. Nonetheless, the idea that this is the world of good people who will respond to the normative claim inherent in the Human Rights Framework and that this will always lead to optimal outcomes. It's just not the case. So the question then arises, well, then what, what where does political hope lie? What do we invest our energy in? And that's really the pretext for the letter that was written?

### **Tom Pegram 07:15**

Great, thanks a lot, Jonathan. That's a pretty impressive summation there. And there's so many different sort of portals to explore in that letter. It's really an exciting read. And also, frankly, it's just incredibly accessible and actually enjoyable to read, which makes a nice change, perhaps, to some of the stuff which, which lands on my desk. So all right, we've got lots of questions. So I suppose perhaps, to begin, maybe on the question of change, keeping up with change out there in the world. Caroline, do you want to ask your question?

**Caroline** 07:46

Sure. Um, so mine's to do with like, the COVID pandemic and human rights. So do you think that the COVID-19 crisis is a turning point in history? And after the pandemic, which direction and approach should the Human Rights Movement take?

**Jonathan Rowson** 08:04

Okay, so two parts of the question. And so thanks, Caroline. So basically, I think the best way to cate- I mean lots of words have been used almost like, you know, COVID was like a new kid on the playground and people were trying to find a name for it. So, I remember Arundhati Roy, I think, called it a portal to another world. And some have called it a crisis. Of course, I personally like the word reckoning, I think the way to understand what COVID is, is it's a moment to take stock, because it's an extended period of time where we have a chance to actually make sense of the world, as it is. So as we're clamouring to get back to normal. We have a little bit of critical distance from normality, enough time to ask which features of life really matter and which maybe matter less, so one very practical example of that would be. Yeah, we like to be with people and it's good to be sociable, and it's great to be unencumbered and uninhibited about being able to meet up and Tom mentioned that very different atmosphere in which we met and. On the other hand, you don't necessarily have to go to work five days a week, for 50 weeks of the year. You know, there has been this growing awareness of look, yes, being together matters, it's but it's beginning to look a bit more like a nice to have sometimes a necessity. But there are, there is scope to change the way we live, that's less reliant on people always being in the same room together all the time. So that's one sort of background context to when I say reckoning, that's just one example of it. The other way of thinking of it, the reckoning is, biology is back, you know, we live in a time of bio precarity. Now, biology was there already it hasn't gone but suddenly we're aware of this incredible fragility, vulnerability and interdependence that we all face. And then when you add the political layer to that, that, that manifests in a very unequal way, that some are have access to much better access to health care, some are more able to work from home, some have better support systems and so forth. So there's like, so the reckoning that's going on should be a moment of reflection about the state of civilization as a whole. Will it happen? Are people doing that? To some extent, I think is the answer. And then in terms of what it means for human rights, well, I'd say towards the end of the essay, that there are some new frontiers within human rights. And I would say, whatever the Human Rights mechanisms that arise, you need to do something about surveillance capitalism. And that term, again, you can you can critique these terms, what I mean by that is, disproportionate amount of power in the private sphere, influencing the public realm, shaping the public realm, constraining the public realm, manipulating even to some extent, commercial incentive, directing where our eyeballs go, is problematic. And it's a problem that under good undergirds wherever that word is, all of these other problems. And I think you won't be able to deal with climate change or any, any issues about democratic renewal, or whatever your main concern is, even human rights abuses, unless you work with a better, a more healthy information Commons, a more healthy capacity for us to share the same version of the world, and then disagree about that world, rather than being in our own epistemic filter bubbles, where we, we're actually not speaking about the same world anymore. And so I think one of the things that, how do human rights people do that? I don't know. There's a question about the right to privacy there. Is that helping us or hindering us? There's a question about data, rights to your personal data. Big Issue, like if we, if they, if you change the ruling there such that we all have rights to our own data, and even get paid for it. So micro payments are another way of looking at this for anything that we

are contributing to, if I get even 0.0001%, of the use that my demographic data gives to, for example, Facebook, then you know, it will, it will change things, it will create enough friction and enough reflection on the system. And then related to that, rights of nature, rights of the unborn. These are these are big questions. We're actually very close to the unborn in some ways, like they're... They're already with many of us in mind, and they're actually in some people's bodies. And there's this, you know, they're coming into this world that's highly compromised, and what do we owe them? And we owe their children as well. So I would say right, data related rights, unborn related rights and rights, the rights of nature, the rights of nature is a more complex one legally, but I still think that's a frontier to explore.

**Tom Pegram** 13:09

Imogen, do you want to, to ask a question?

**Imogen** 13:13

Yeah, thank you. So you place a lot of emphasis on civic education, in your letter as the foundation to a future of a human capabilities movement? What can be done right now, to have people to converge in this direction? And what would that involve?

**Jonathan Rowson** 13:40

So this is the big question and in some ways, you could see coming back to Caroline's question as well, that one of the fallouts of COVID has been an awareness of I don't want this to become about online education, that would be too crude a sort of response to the argument. But there is a sense of becoming aware of no longer necessarily needing established educational institutions to teach ourselves what's going on. Now, there's a place Tom will be pleased to hear for establishing education institutions and there's a big difference between being educated with, with a very able cohort and very able teachers in an established place with lots of resources, than there is switching on YouTube and trying to learn something on the hop. Nonetheless, there is a kind of awareness that actually, the capacity to create educational materials that might be more directly relevant to responding to the world's crises may not come from conventional institutions. It's already happening online to a large extent and those through those online efforts. There are also offline meetings and practices arising. If you ask me more precisely: "How do you build a human capabilities movement?" I think this is almost like a conversion issue. I mean, I use that word carefully. But it feels as though sometimes when you're speaking to established NGOs, or policymakers or even some academics, they will they will go with you as far as the crisis, if you can point out "Look, there really, is this this climate crisis and look, look at these levels of inequality that Piketty has pointed out, and then look at these public opinion polls about people losing interest in democracy. There's a real crisis going on there," they'll go with you there. If you then say, "okay, we need to back up and start talking about how people are viewing the meaning of life in such a way that these are now problematic" They'll go "hang on, what are you talking about? You know, let's stay with the crisis," I'd say "No, no, no, you have to back out of the frame. You're stuck in the frame. Can we please instead of referring to the crisis from within the crisis, I'm saying the entire way of conceiving what's going on is part of the issue." Now. Why is it relevant to human capability because, I'm reminded of the Metzinger, quote, I can't remember if this is actually in the letter, I think it is. But there's a, quite a quotation I use quite often by Thomas Metzinger, who's a German philosopher who wrote an essay on lovely title, 'Spirituality and Intellectual Honesty.' And there, I'm paraphrasing, I think you can see the exact quote in the essay. But in effect, he says that the

awareness of anthropogenic climate change over many years and now decades, makes human beings start to think that we might be failing beings, as he puts it. In other words, we see the problem clear as day, but we just can't mobilise a response, we lack the coordination. We lack the humility, we lack the constraint. We lack the cooperation, whatever it is, resolve, perhaps. And of language users those that we're becoming aware that climate change is outstripping the, I think he says, the cognitive and affective abilities or cognitive and emotional abilities of the species. So that's why I say there's a capability movement opportunity, because if you frame the problem, as look writ large, the problem we have is, these meta crisis problems, these wicked problems at scale, including human rights abuses, including climate change, including problems of governance, corruption, inequality, you know, all of those things going on. They require a different way of understanding different pattern of understanding, which is not just cognitive, it's also about forms of empathy and compassion and imagination even. Now, that sounds like Whoo, right? I'm aware that people might hear that and go, yeah, yeah, that's kind of overly well, it's dead serious. Like, it's not trying to escape the hardcore political discussion. It's saying the hardcore political discussion is delusional, and wasting us precious time. That actually, we really need to get real about the fact that our model of the world is broken, and start building a new one. And that's the kind of clarion call for the human capability movement. It's one of saying, look, we need to start educating ourselves about how we're going to survive, and maybe even thrive for the next 100 plus years. Because if we don't, we're looking at not just fires in Australia, and vanishing islands, and other pandemics, and people on the streets because, you know, they're either unemployed or inequality becomes too offensive. You know, it's hard to see a story of the world where things collectively get much better over the next few decades. And I'm not particularly pessimistic by nature, I should add. This sort of sense of the world, and you know I'm very grateful for my life. And I would like people to be happy. And I'm not going out of my way to say it's all doom and gloom. You know, humanity has achieved a great deal. There has been real forms of progress, material, educational, technological. But we have reached a juncture, a kind of threshold where we need deeply to reckon with, the predicament we're in and the nature of that reckoning is educational. It's one of recasting our understanding of who we are and what we're living for. And it's hard to say it more clearly than that. It's almost like, it's a little bit of a Gestalt shift in your mind. It's like a perception shift of what, what we need to do. And I realise that's difficult. I tried in the essay as far as I could to make that case, but it's sort of making ourselves part of the problem and part of the solution simultaneously. So it's a complex thought. It's saying "We are the people we've been waiting for, and we're problematic" but once you've realised that and woken up to that you can act on it.

**Tom Pegram** 20:03

Reminds me be a bit of what Nora Bateson likes to talk about in terms of trans contextuality. That we there's no single individual persona that we inhabit, we inhabit different worlds in a sense.

**Jonathan Rowson** 20:17

Yeah. Yeah.

**Tom Pegram** 20:20

Imogen do you have a follow up?

**Imogen 20:22**

I just wondered how you see, like NGOs and established human rights organisations like contributing to this civic education?

**Jonathan Rowson 20:37**

Yeah. So a practical question so well, we're narrowing the terrain of institution building really, if you're asking, how do you do this? And there's a bit beyond one person and I don't have a quick answer. But the question is, what are your constants? And what are your variables? So if you if your frame of education is sort of legacy institutions, like schools and universities, then it'll be hard to see the kind of solution that might work out. The reference here, by the way, if you really want to get into this question, is a wonderful book by Zachary Stein, called 'Education in a Time Between Worlds.' And much of what I see on this comes from that inspiration, but there already, there's already a European Bildung movement. That's trying to bring the idea of Bildung, which is transformative civic education, to the attention of policymakers in European countries, the Club of Rome already has a rethinking civilization initiative. And then, as I say, you have all these sort of, these are some people using the language intraversity instead of university that somehow we can use online material, and use our own kind of filtering process for that to maintain quality standards. But the question then is, what are you learning? Right? So and there the educational content question is challenging, because, you know, there, there's an issue of how do you be a better activist? How do you understand, how do you think systemically? How do you understand your own patterns of habit formation? How do you persuade people? How do you how do you care for someone who's dying? You know, these kind of things that are not in the main educational remit will become part of the curriculum, the hidden curriculum, if you like, of the next few decades, and what it will mean institutionally may not be that you go to a place, it might be more fluid than that. So you'll have to find places, but it might be libraries, or it might be, businesses might have, you know, separate areas for educational endeavours. You know I don't quite know how it will look. But the role of the NGO, I think, is to help imagine that, and to start building it. And the challenge with this, it's just like at the beginning of the anti-slavery movement, which took many decades to achieve its ends. It looks a bit intangible at the beginning, right. And I appreciate that. But it's almost like that Sherlock line. Sherlock, famously, Sherlock Holmes famously said, once you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. And I feel a bit like that about human capability. It's like, we have to do this ourselves. We're not quite up to it yet. But we have the capacity to potentially make ourselves up to it. Let's find a way of doing it. And then it's up to your generation as well as mine to, to try.

**Tom Pegram 23:46**

Yeah, on the question of sort of engaging audiences, and perhaps going beyond the kind of the the orthodox academy and other institutional venues, Sarah, do you want to ask your question?

**Sarah 23:59**

Yes, sure. Um, so my question is a bit different. It's about the format. So I just I'm just wondering why you chose to write this in the form of a letter instead of a traditional essay or article academic writing. Is there something you were trying to achieve by this choice in particular?

**Jonathan Rowson 24:20**

Thank you. I'm so glad to have that question asked. So yes, is the answer that it was very deliberate and a great deal of thought went into it. I mean, I should say, I've been quite pleasantly surprised about the kinds of people who've read the letter. Tom can speak to that a little bit, but I mean, Samuel Moyn was full of praise for it, for example, and, you know, he knows the Human Rights Movement, perhaps better than anyone in some ways. And I think that's precisely because the letter speaks to people in a way that an article might not, so there was a pragmatic case for make it shorter, right between 800 and 1000 words, pitch it to The New York Times or The Guardian or whatever, reach a big volume of people and you'll feel momentarily like you have impact. But I've sort of been working in this sort of domain long enough now to know that quality, you know, eats quantity for breakfast, when it comes to impact, you've got to touch people, it's not enough to sort of impress them or beguile them, you've got to somehow reach people emotionally and the way you often do that is by sharing more of your heart, frankly, you've got to share. You know, there's a lovely line by Carl Rogers, I don't think I quote it in the essay, this one, but "what is most personal is most universal." So when you approach the medium of writing, and you give people some of your own experience, including your vulnerability, your doubts and so forth, usually you hit the right chord, because people have the same doubts and the same vulnerability, and the same confusion and they're relieved, frankly, not to have this declarative polemic, you know, carefully packaged for an easy and vivifying read. Now, it does mean you have a smaller audience. So I knew that when I was writing, whatever, I forget exactly how long but seven or 8000 words, that it would mean that the only people who would read it, or those who, you know, were asked to read it or it was brought to their attention, or it was recommended. But I felt longer term, we would have more reach and more impact through that mechanism. And the letter to make it personal, it creates a relationship. So you know, Sarah I wasn't writing to you personally, or Caroline or Imogen, or any of the rest of you. But there is a sense in which I'm trying to reach one other single human being. And that's okay, you can say that about an article. But it doesn't feel that way. To write the letter, you know, quite early on, I say you may be this, you may be that trying to sort of find the person on the other side because ultimately, this goes a bit beyond your question but if you permit me, I don't use this language in the letter but subsequent thinking, and I think, Tom knows this from more recent things I've written. You know, people often ask, "What can I do?" Right? They often say, like, "World's on fire. I'm one person, like, what can I do?" And I think the form of the answer to that is you have in essence, you have to do what you're uniquely well placed to do. You have to find what you're best at that sort of speaks to the nature of the problem. Now, why does that matter? It matters because we only really, that's part of the Bildung. That's part of the capability case, you only really find that answer when you individuate in a certain sense, when you find your unique contribution or create it. And what we're looking for at scale through Bildung and through the capability movement, is something like collective individuation. That's a weird term. But what I mean by that is helping each other to find ourselves in a way that isn't coercive. You know, it's not about we're all going to be good guys now, or we're all going to be climate activists or we're all going to have the same values. No, we're going to be radically different. We're going to be utterly unique, but we're going to be that together. And again, it's a somewhat paradoxical notion, but that's what I'm trying to get at with the letter. I'm trying to find the person on the other end, who can find not my response, but theirs.

**Tom Pegram 28:42**

I mean, speaking personally, I think my my response to the letter was, what an extraordinary blend of kind of humility, like, are we even asking the right question here? What is the terrain, but also the audacity to pose some earth-shattering questions?

**Jonathan Rowson 28:59**

I should I should speak to that. So the audacity issue, I just sometimes think through who the hell am I to write a letter to the Human Rights Movement? I go like who like, you know, why should I listen to this? And actually, a few, it's went through many drafts, as you might imagine, any, any decent piece of writing does but you know, somewhere along the way, I shared it with people and they said very early on, you have to tell people who you are. Because otherwise, they're just going to say like, why should I endure with this? And... But I think yeah, you're just like, you've got to find the audacity somehow. But I think audacity combined with humility is actually quite a nice way of looking at it. The audacity to ask the question and the humility not to know the answer somehow.

**Tom Pegram 29:49**

Well, maybe we'll turn to a slightly yeah sort of bigger frame here. James, do you want to ask your question?

**James 30:02**

Yeah, sure my question actually came from someone else on asking on their behalf. But they did quite a good job of sort of encapsulating a lot of the stuff you've been talking about Jonathan, in terms of the ecological and the sort of surveillance capitalism sort of aspects you've been referring to in their question, actually. So the question is, what should the role of the state and also national sovereignty be in the future of this, you know, in this crusade to secure human rights, in this sort of time, where we're so focused on other issues of ecology and technology, and also sort of cross national finance? And also related to that, can the political logic of nationalism be overcome in that context? Or is it always going to be sort of with us for the foreseeable future?

**Jonathan Rowson 30:43**

Wow that's a lot of, many questions in there. But that's yeah, very much to the heart of the matter. So I would begin by saying, and I mean, I may have misunderstood but the Human Rights are a means to an end, right. They're not the end itself. The end is something more like dignity, or equality or capability or even love, or, you know, human rights are always the mechanism rather than the endpoint. But in terms of how we, you know if the broader question is, where is the nation state? In the context of responding to civilizational crises? I've got two parts to respond to that. One is, although I don't know the literature, well, I would direct you to the work of someone called Joe Brewer, who writes about the bio region as the necessary sort of geopolitical unit of the future, that actually, we have to build our cultures and our practices and our institutions around the ecological substrate of the planet. And that means thinking more about streams and hills, and rivers and, you know, sea and trying to find a way of thinking more about beginning with what are the ecological resources here that can give rise to food supply and water supply? And then building your patterns of governance, and your educational institutions and your health insurance around that. So the sort of the sort of big picture answer is, the nation state is probably not the ideal answer if you're asking at a level of sort of design principles, the



design principles, it's probably more like something like a bio region, and that will have its own structures and levels and tiers of governments. Then the second part, actually three parts the answer the second part of the answers I mentioned in the essay is something like what Elinor Ostrom calls polycentric governance now, again, I'm slightly out of my depth when I say this, but the hope, the sort of hopeful signs I see, in terms of responses to the problems of the world, are not usually coming from national governments. There are some exceptions, but it's often more like collaboration between civil society actors, trade unions, churches, businesses, educational institutions. Now the question is, where do they fit, if you have a nation state that allows those forms of life to flourish, and to connect cross nationally, and then it may still work? But that brings me to the last part of the question, which is the implicit nationalism in celebrating or relying on the nation state. And here, I have a lot of conflicts. I'm Scottish. And I actually support Scottish independence. And I've written about that there's a Guardian piece I wrote in 2014, where I lay out why, despite being very British, and having lived in London most of my life, I don't actually think.. This is a bigger discussion, maybe beyond this one. But I believe the forms of civic solidarity you need to actually build a better world or keep this one intact call for something resembling national identity, even within the transnational, trans contextual, international planetary context. It's, you know, it's roots and wings. You know, it's like, there's something about belonging, however, there are, I do believe not everyone does, but I do believe there are good and bad nationalisms. You know, I don't, I don't think it's all othering the others, and say only this unique blood and soil nation is the right one, not at all. I think it's a way of saying come and live here. It's a conception of home, you know, benign nationalism, civic nationalism, is an idea of belonging, and it's an idea of homecoming, and it's potentially inclusive. Now it can go wrong, of course, but suffice to say, my vision of the governance structure is something like healthy nation states with a degree of national pride and identity, but obviously, somehow managed to education and cultural enrichment, so it doesn't sort of rule the roost. But at the same time patterns of polycentric governance, so civil society is much stronger. And then ideally, sufficiently strong transnational institutions that have some say in the informational commons. So what we're talking about and how we're making decisions is not corrupted by commercial or political interest. But that's very big picture abstract stuff. But I hope that makes some sense of how I'd begin to answer it.

**Tom Pegram 35:45**

I've been recently sort of digging into a bit of Kant, which obviously can be very abstract. But it's amazing how he kind of got a lot of this, you know, like he understood ecological interdependence. He understood the predicament that we are all living on this world, and that the ultimate task we have before us is how do we coexist as Earth dwellers. And it does strike me that some of your strongest arguments, for example, this need to move from rights to duties to confront the crises of our times, or the need for some kind of virtue ethic or an ethic of care to be salvaged in this very sort of secular rationalist age. These arguments kind of require this sense of belonging. And if it's not going to be found in the sort of the nation state, that construct where else do we look for that?

**Jonathan Rowson 36:37**

Yeah, and that Tom, actually, is quite close to the heart of some of the problems with human rights, which is that, you know, the abstract universal subject at the heart of it. It's not, you know, typically, the theory of theories of human rights are built around a construct, an idea of a self that doesn't really exist,

which has good and bad aspects, you might need that in some ways, but it does mean that when it comes to building solidarity, yeah, it's complicated. But yeah.

**Tom Pegram 37:14**

It's you know, it's play for multiple stakes, right? To use the famous phrase by Robert Frost, it's incredibly important. Yeah. James, sorry. Do you have a follow up?

**James 37:28**

Yeah, thank you for your answer. You've actually preempted like two of the other follow up, or, you know, two of the follow ups, I was considering about, like, you know, what level change should cover. And also I was looking at your Twitter earlier, and I saw that you've been following the Nicola Sturgeon interviews at the moment, and I was gonna ask you something about Scottish nationalism. But I suppose I'll ask more of a sort of short term question. Obviously, we're talking a lot about long term issues. But right now, I mean, you alluded to it at the start, there's a massive problem with companies like Facebook and Google having these enormous monopolies over data and the problems that can come out of that. And from my point of view, anyway, it seems like the nation state at the moment is like the only body that even has the capabilities to deal with those problems, say, like, with Australia's sort of recent, I mean, how effective you can, how effective the Australian government actually was, is obviously up for debate, but they seem at the moment to be the only body that can do anything. So my question is, should we allow the nation states to sort of tackle corporate entities and deal with sort of maybe, maybe privatised, or sort of take away their power? Or would that have like an equally bad effects of sort of strengthening the nation states in a way that wouldn't be appropriate either? And if not, you know, what's the alternative?

**Jonathan Rowson 38:43**

Right. So I mean, those there's a lot of implicit political theory in that question and it's kind of case by case. I mean so another thing I grapple with is capitalism as such, right? Because there are so many kinds of capitalism. We mentioned surveillance capitalism, but there's sort of green capitalism. Some people speak about financial capitalism. There's a whole sort of body of economic thought about different forms of it. So when I say capitalism, I'm aware that we're speaking of the many and not the, not a single monolithic entity. Nonetheless, the logic of capitalism in almost any of its forms, has this property. And I think it's James Moore highlights this best of basically extracting value from nature. In effect, what capitalism does is it turns natural resources into profit. And there's lots of meat, lots of intermediate stages, of course, but in effect, the logic of it is to extract and plunder and profit. Now, on the other hand prosperity is a great thing and people want their lives, and their good food and their comfortable living places and you know, so it's not as though I want to say, switch off capitalism and create something new but I do think there gets to a point where, for example, if you think economic, indefinite economic growth on an ecologically finite planet may not be feasible, and you don't think the green New Deal logic stacks up, for example. Then you get to point quite close to an anti-capitalist position. But then it's like, well, what are you a communist? You say "Well, no, but I'm just saying, like, I'm pointing out that relying on this mechanism is underlying societal economic logic. If it's crazy, it's crazy, even if it's inconvenient." So I'm conflicted there again, instinctively I don't trust governments that much. And I don't trust the market much at all, much either. Again, I think it comes down to the quality of the human beings within the institutions, which is why I think it's fundamentally a philosophy of

education issue. It's about what we know, and how and what we value and how and what we appreciate and how and if you work on that, you have hope that the market mechanisms and the government mechanisms are more likely to work.

**Tom Pegram** 41:18

The political scientist, William Ophuls, I'm just reading his book, 'Plato's Revenge'. And he argues that, have you read that?

**Jonathan Rowson** 41:26

Brilliant book. Yeah, I really love it. It's a really good book.

**Tom Pegram** 41:28

It's an incredible, it's almost like a, it's a fantastic essay. I mean, it's very readable. And he makes this very strong case that political struggle and must urgently be directed towards, towards ensuring that ecology becomes the master science and Gaia becomes the master metaphor, which, of course, is operating at the highest level of kind of the Donella Meadows idea of how do you actually galvanise change within a system, which is to change the ruling paradigm? And that seems to be the hardest thing because the tools we have at our disposal state or market do not seem to be predisposed to move in that direction. Yeah. I recommend that book. Yeah. That's cool. Jonathan's read it. Alright. Nice. Yeah. So Damien, you have a related question, I think you want to jump in.

**Damien** 42:25

Thank you. The, it seems as though to, the change that we need, we're kind of in an emergency position. So to create another generation that is well educated and appreciates the problems so that they can implement change, seems to be a good way to go about it but it doesn't seem as though we have enough time to do so, so I'm wondering if this generation could steal from the capitalists, and from the nation states, in the tools that they use to implement what we want to implement. So we saw with Cambridge Analytica, and we saw, you know, with the Mercer families, a big change in the polity, the universal polity, as far as war is concerned, as far as distribution of wealth is concerned, many of those tools are in the public domain, many, many of them are open source, could there be a kind of Renegade sort of Human Rights movement, whereby we also take on these tools, perhaps positive manipulation to very quickly spread the emergency that is before us all information on the emergency that is before us all, not to create a cult of human rights, but to create awareness that's beyond transforming individuals into the quintessential, you know, civil participant or civil society participants? So I put in my question, you know, kind of Cambridge Analytica for the good guys, do you envision something like that being potentially helpful, at least, or at least bring about change, galvanising change at a much faster rate than we're currently seeing? Because the universities and the NGOs, while they do an amazing job seem to be exceedingly slow, and we may run out of water and, you know, land before the right white paper gets to the right politician to implement the right amount of change?

**Jonathan Rowson** 44:38

Well, it's a challenging question. I mean, obviously, the specifics matter and it depends on what exactly you have in mind, but in terms of the underlying principles. Yes, time sensitivity is there, there is, there really is an emergency and the nature of an emergency is the urgency to act and so that the problem,

the apparently slow burning solution of the building capability doesn't look like it's fit for purpose, right? So on the one hand, they see that, on the other hand, here's a broader and a bit more daunting way of looking at it. The emergency is not the only problem. And this is a, again, a more recent essay, but it's sort of there in the Human Rights letter as well. I just wrote an essay published by my organisation Perspectiva, I called 'Tasting the Pickle'. And one of the main points of that essay, is that the idea of tasting the pickle that we're in, is to see that it's many things at once all caught up together. So yes, there's an emergency, a very acute ecological emergency. But then you look at, you know, given even the Paris targets, Paris called targets that is, and there'll be new ones in Glasgow, probably later this year. But then you look at the what the governments are actually doing, and then compare the speed that's called for and the speed that's actually underway and the gap is hopeless, frankly, it's not even close. Right. So the reason for that is that the emergency arises in the context of a crisis, which is a different kind of animal. Emergency speaks to the urgency of action, but it does not tell you the type of action that's required. Nor does it tell you about the constraints on that action, or the political context of that action because what goes on is, the emergency arises alongside a great deal of competing commitments, and hidden assumptions across governments across the world, existing agendas that have to be implemented, vested interests that have to be appeased. The crisis is there as well as the emergency, right? And if you bear with me, there's also a series of what I call metacrisis. And I've spoken about metacrisis already. But in that paper, actually extend it and say there are really many of these problems within the crisis and they're problems of meaning and purpose and understanding and they're as pervasive and important. So this is not a council of despair. The point is to say, look, those who say let's just deal with the emergency first. I think there's that old medical was it, *primum, non nocere*, whoever does Latin here can correct me but I think it's *primum non nocere*, it means first do no harm. And it's the advice that doctors are given when there's a patient, you know, you don't know what's wrong with them, that whatever you do, don't make it worse, right? So the same way with climate crisis, climate emergency, I can totally understand why people think like, let's just focus single mindedly on that. And my response to that is we cannot it's not there in our gift to actually single mindedly focus on the climate emergency. Because emergency arises in the context of a world that's already underway. It's already got another whole bunch of agendas that, that you know, are not about the emergency or that are actually antithetical to it in some way. So this comes back to when I say the metacrisis, one of the metacrisis, and this comes back to James's point earlier, is that we don't really have a viable we, you know, like, whenever we make the injunction, we should do X, Y, or Z we kind of assume that there is this human agency, this collective human agency that we can invoke. But no, that is a contested sphere. And very, very often on climate in particular, the we that says that we have to do something is not the same we that's causing the problem. And the we that is causing the problem is a very different idea of what the we should do. And their we is different as well. So the we space is a is part of the plot, not just part of the setting, we have to work on what we mean when we asked people to act. Again, do I single Jonathan Rowson know how to do that? No, I just see it as clearly as part of the problem. In terms of your, you know, I do appreciate the Damien that you know, people who actually think, okay, let's make this real, what do we do? I'm all for that. You know, if you have ideas of that nature to accelerate change in the positive direction. Just be mindful there could also be unintended consequences, so any action that is manipulative or coercive will have rebound effects.

**Tom Pegram 49:27**

Yeah, that's a great question. And I'm just grappling right now with thinking about the ecological peril of COVID-19. And exactly what you're saying, Jonathan, the unintended consequences of intervening in complex systems, and the kind of the inadequacy of this idea of a war on carbon, which seems to have just dominated the debate, when in the background, the ecological crisis has just been accelerating. And in many ways, it's, it probably is more about stopping and pausing and taking taking a breath and trying to understand the problem as opposed to action. But then again in a context of emergency... Yeah...

**Jonathan Rowson 50:08**

Yeah. So I sympathise and feel it myself, if it helps this sense of, we have to act, how do we act? Just tell me For God's sake, tell me something to do that is meaningful that is commensurate with the problem. And I guess my response to that is, the first thing to do is, a kind of grieving you know, it's a kind of realising that that way of thinking is not going to help. That actually there is a sense in which and I don't mean this in a despairing way. But there is a sense in which we're already too late. The nature of the problem is already underway. I don't know how many of you, like Lord of the Rings, but I'm watching with my son at the moment. So it's on my mind. But there's a line there where Gandalf says to Frodo at one point, "You must understand Frodo things are now in motion that cannot be undone." And it's just a beautiful line. But it's the same is true of the climate crisis, climate fixing crisis, because of the alliteration, but emergency because really, the world will get warmer, and there will be famines and droughts and floods and there will be further consternation about why haven't we done more about this, some say that it has to bite hard enough for us to transform, that we have to feel the pain of it. And they say that because the analogue or the analogy in human life is that you may have come across post traumatic growth, as a notion that, you know, a lot of people radically change their lives after a cancer diagnosis that they survive. Or if they narrowly avoid getting knocked down in a car. Suddenly, they have this new lease of life, "my God. Now it's all about relationships and intrinsic activity and doing good with my life. Whereas before, it was kind of hedonism, and pleasure and whatever else." What's bizarre about that is that we already know we're going to die. So, but we seem to need that kind of reminder, that pinch that personal visceral experience, this can happen to you, before we turn our life around. So if you take that up a scale or two to civilization writ large, some would say it's just not bad enough yet. Now, I don't want to say that I don't relish saying that. But there is a sense in which we haven't woken up as a species. Yeah. And then and so it's sort of like, it's not just saying it's gonna get worse before it gets better because as you know, there are tipping points and things can get a lot worse, and devastatingly so and I very much hope that doesn't happen for all of you and for my children and everyone else, but it is difficult to see exactly where the countervailing motion is coming from and my hope rests in something like a sort of more tenacious, spiritual response to the human condition, which is to really grapple with why we're here and what we're living for. But to do that, we have to escape the kind of dream that's, that's cast for us, that we are consumers that we must buy, that we must succeed, that we must get status, must have jobs, must buy houses, must have mortgages. Most of those things apply to me. You know, I'm not I'm not saying it's easy, but it's a kind of awakening that's called for, it's just a question of how.

**Tom Pegram 53:38**

Yeah, thanks, Jonathan. Well, I'm aware of time and we're rolling to a close. I think I'd like to give the last question to Flo. Please.

**Flo 53:49**

Hi. Yes, I think a lot of us when we read your text we were like, wow, but I think at the end, we were all thinking, "Well, what do we do now? What can we do?" And as like Gen Z is and millennials learning within the 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights paradigm? How can we best update our models? And how can we best prepare ourselves in the face of a rapid systemic change in the coming years and decades? I feel like you've kind of touched upon this briefly.

**Jonathan Rowson 54:21**

I mean, I'll try to answer Flo, it's a big question. It's the question of your life. I mean, I don't know what more to say only to reiterate what I said earlier about collective individuation. It's like, whatever the response is, it won't be the same for Flo as it is for Sarah as it is for Imogen, as it is for Damien like the answer will be different for each of you and it should be different for each of you. It's not about your recycling or flying less or going vegan, those things may help but they're not the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is finding your own unique response to the predicament you're caught up in, that might be building an institution. It might be becoming a certain kind of energy entrepreneur. It might be joining an NGO and becoming its leader. It might be creating a new political party, it can be any of these things. But there's a sense in which if you really pushed me and say, "What do you honestly think?" I have a slightly more mystical view. I think we sometimes know what we're meant to do. We feel it inside and for reasons that are not entirely explicable and we have to have a critical relationship to that and not just, you know, if everyone did with a little voice inside told them, we'd be really in trouble. I wouldn't want, you know, Trump to have got that voice when he had his finger on the nuclear button, for example but I'm just saying that there is something about personal intuition, about listening deeply to who you're called upon to be and you can interpret that in a secular way that says: Who are you in the 21st century developed world, given your background, your location, and your education and so forth. But it can also be somewhat more mystical: What do you feel the universe, if you like, is calling upon you to be and do? I do think hope lies in as many people as possible answering in that way because I think only then do you get deep enough traction, and have a big enough generative effect on other people, that we actually have a hope. And I wish I could be clearer, but that's wherever, the point I've reached.

**Tom Pegram 56:23**

Now, I mean, obviously, you know, everyone here has felt an intuitive calling to learn about human rights. They're all doing this course. And you know, in a postmodern age, there can be a quite a lot of irony around human rights, or, you know, well human rights becomes quite a relativist notion. So I was just wondering, Jonathan's to end you know, what is the value of human rights as we move forward, in sort of grounding, that sort of very pragmatic interiority that you're talking about here?

**Jonathan Rowson 56:54**

Yeah. Well, it's a touchstone, and maybe even a lodestar. So a touchstone in the sense that it reminds us of fundamental human values, of dignity, of a certain kind of equality, a moral equality and I think it

also implicitly is a certain kind of capability to be able to be human, and to flourish as a human and what it means to allow that capability to arise. And it's a lodestar in the sense that if you get the vision of what is shared across humanity, all potentially 8 billion plus of us, then you begin to get the spirit of solidarity and the spirit of collective endeavour knowing that, you know, ultimately, that we're in this fragile planet and this massive cosmos, and it doesn't make any sense, there is a kind of cosmic joke. But human rights are a way of of sort of grounding our sense of who we are and what we're living for together. And they're precious for that. It's just that they need constant renewal, and so Flo's question is a really good one, I would only add to it that don't outsource your agency too much, you know, by all means, ask advice, but ultimately, for Flo any the rest of you, it has to be your own answer, you have to find it for yourself, only then will have the generative power to actually make a difference. If there's a problem today is that we're, we're always looking outside for others to sort of tell us how to act but actually, in a sense, you know, I think Tom you joked about generation Z. The challenge is to sort of do things that I can't currently imagine, as a Gen Xer so good luck I guess.

**Tom Pegram 58:46**

Yeah, I think that's a really, that's a really wonderful note to end on. I mean, this is the task right, but and it's, in a way, it's a call to adventure as well. I mean, it's, it's formidable, it's daunting, but it's, you know, what's the alternative?

**Jonathan Rowson 59:01**

Right? You've got to enjoy it, you know, do everything you can, but don't, you know, enjoy your life as much as you can, too. You've got one, you know, there's only one of them and, probably, and live it fully. I think it's more fulfilling when you're actually grappling with the problems of your time but try not to get into the despair of what is a very difficult predicament.

**Tom Pegram 59:25**

Well, thank you so much for coming in today, Jonathan, for joining us, really looking forward to your future essays, but I've 'Tasting the Pickle' is, great, I highly recommend it to everyone here and to everyone listening. So yeah, thanks so much again.

**Jonathan Rowson 59:38**

Pleasure, Tom. Thanks a lot for asking me and see you all around.

**Tom Pegram 59:42**

Cheers. Thanks for tuning into imperfect utopias to get access to more of our content, and to stay up to date with future zoom calls, workshops and events and more Check us out at [ucl.ac.uk/global-governance](https://ucl.ac.uk/global-governance). If you like this content, please do leave us a comment and subscribe until next time!