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Stepping Back from the Brink

An astonishing new field of enquiry explores the deep changes that could avert a planetary disaster

We know where we're going. For many years, scientists have warned that we are crashing through the Earth's ecological limits. We know we are in the midst of climate breakdown and ecological collapse. Yet we seem constitutionally incapable of acting on this knowledge.

The United States has elected a man who promised to unleash a gigantic ecological tantrum, and has, unfortunately, delivered. The UK government has produced 150 pages of greenwash it calls the 25 Year Environment Plan: the same gutless twaddle governments have been publishing for the past 25 years. As always, it was described in some quarters as "a good start". No policy, anywhere, is commensurate with the scale of the challenge we face.

So what stops us from responding? For years, I've suspected that the cause runs even deeper than the power of big business and the official obsession with economic growth, potent as these forces are. Now, thanks to the most profound and far-reaching book I have ever read, I feel I'm beginning to understand what it might be.

Jeremy Lent's *The Patterning Instinct* was published a few months ago, but it has taken me this long to process, as almost every page caused me to rethink what I held to be true. Bringing together cultural history with neuroscience, Lent develops a new discipline he calls cognitive history.

From infancy, our minds are shaped by the culture we grow into, which lays trails we learn to follow, like paths through a field of tall grass. Helping us to construct these patterns of meaning are powerful root metaphors embedded in our language. Without our conscious knowledge, they guide the choices we make.

Lent argues that the peculiar character of Western religious and scientific thought, that has come to dominate the rest of the world, has pushed both human civilisation and the rest of the living world to the brink of collapse. But he also shows how, through comprehending its metaphors and patterns, we can step off our path and develop new trails through the field of grass, leading us away from the precipice at its edge.

There are many points at which we could begin, but perhaps a crucial one is to understand the influence of Plato's thought on early Christian theology. He proposed an ideal world perceived by the soul, existing in a separate sphere from the material world experienced by the body. To arrive at pure knowledge, which exists above the material world, the soul must be detached from the body's senses and desires. He helped to establish a deep frame in Western cognition, associating the capacity for abstract thought with the soul, the soul with truth, and truth with immortality.

Some early Christian thinkers, in particular Augustine, took these metaphors further, until not only the human body but the entire natural world came to be seen as anathema, distracting and corrupting the soul. We should **hate our life in this world**, to secure life in the next.

Christianity, in turn, exerted a powerful influence over modern scientific cognition. Far from breaking with previous patterns of thought, Rene Descartes's **famous belief that** he consisted of "a substance whose whole essence or nature is to think and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing" was an extension of Platonic and Christian cosmologies, with a crucial difference: he substituted mind for soul.

If our identity is established only in the mind, then, as the Christians insisted, our body and the rest of nature, being incapable of reason, has no intrinsic value. Descartes was explicit about this: he insisted that there is no difference "between the machines made by craftsmen and the various bodies that nature alone composes." The mind or soul was sacred, while the natural world possessed neither innate worth nor meaning. It existed to be remorselessly dissected and exploited.

This worldview underpinned the scientific revolution, which brought us the astonishing marvels and benefits that have transformed our lives. But it also embedded in our minds some catastrophic root metaphors, that help to explain our current relationship to the living world. Among them are the notions of human detachment from nature, our dominion over nature, nature as a machine and, more recently, the mind as software and the body as hardware.

These root metaphors continue to inform public discourse. Richard Dawkins, for example, **has argued that** "a bat is a machine, whose internal electronics are so wired up that its wing muscles cause it to home in on insects". If a machine with the complexity, self-organisation and self-perpetuation of a bat has been developed, Professor Dawkins should tell us where to find it.

In a world that is supposed to lack inherent value, but in which many of us have lost our belief in either the immortal soul or the sanctity of pure reason, we face a void of meaning. We seek to fill it with a frenzy of consumerism. To change our behaviour, Lent contends, we need to change our root metaphors.

This doesn't mean we should abandon science: far from it. The study of **complex systems** reveals nature as a series of self-organised, self-regenerating systems whose components are connected to each other in ways that were, until recently, **scarcely imaginable**. It shows that, as the great conservationist **John Muir proposed**,

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

Far from standing aside from nature or being able to dominate it, we are embedded in it, intimately connected to processes we can never fully control. It allows us, potentially, to see the universe itself as a web of meaning: a powerful new root metaphor that could, perhaps, change the way we live.

There is plenty of work to do, to translate these insights into a practical politics. But it seems to me that Lent has explained why, despite our knowledge and even our intentions, we continue to follow our path to the precipice. To solve a problem, we need first to understand it: this is what "a good start" looks like. We cannot change the destination until we change the path.