

Too small to make a difference?

A philosophical workshop for children on climate action and active hope

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Introduction

We developed this workshop in the aftermath of the international climate meeting, the Conference of Parties (COP26), and we really wanted to give young people like you an opportunity to talk through with each other some important and challenging questions that are worth thinking about. I don't expect that you will have any particular background knowledge here. We're going to be talking about our ideas and feelings, and I don't expect that you will necessarily find agreement with each other. You might agree on some things and disagree on others, and the disagreement is part of what makes it so interesting and worthwhile to philosophise together. The important thing is that we really listen to each other and try to understand what people are trying to communicate. So I would just ask you to treat each other with respect, as I'm sure you will, and take each others ideas seriously, whether or not you agree with them.

Power

Before we get to the heart of today's session, I want to start with a little warm-up. And we're going to use the chat function for this. Can you please try to think about a time recently when you felt powerful. It could be any sort of feeling of power, from any context in your life. Think about a time when you felt powerful.

What themes are emerging? Can anyone articulate any emerging sense of what it means to be powerful? *[Discuss]*

Natural Climate Solutions: Greta Thunberg and George Monbiot's short film on the climate crisis.

Let's move on to looking at a situation that might make us feel powerful or that might instead make us feel powerless. I'm going to show you a short video, and as you view it I want to invite to you to bring to your viewing some of these thoughts about what it means to be a powerful young person.

> Play video

[Video transcript] This is not a drill. My name is Greta Thunberg. We are living in the beginning of a mass extinction, our climate is breaking down, children like me are giving up their education to protest. But we can still fix this. You can still fix this. To survive, we need to stop burning fossil fuels. But this alone will not be enough.

Lots of solutions are talked about. What about a solution that is right in front of us? I'll let my friend George explain.

There is a magic machine that sucks carbon out of the air, costs very little, and builds itself. It's called a tree. A tree is an example of a natural climate solution. Mangroves, peat bogs, jungles, marshes, seabeds, kelp forests, swamps, coral reefs, they take carbon out of the air and lock it away. Nature is a tool we can use to repair a broken climate. These natural climate solutions could make a massive difference. Pretty cool right? But only if we also need fossil fuels in ground. Here's the crazy part. Right now, we are ignoring them. We spend 1000 times more on

global fossil fuel subsidies than on natural based solutions. Even more crazy, right now when we need nature the most we are destroying it faster than ever. Up to 200 species are going extinct every single day. Much of the Arctic ice is gone. Most of our wild animals have gone. Much of our soil has gone. So what should we do? What should you do?

It simple. We need to protect, restore and fund. Protect: Tropical forests are being cut down at the rate of 30 football pitches a minute. Where nature is doing something vital, we must protect it. Restore: Much of our planet has been damaged. But nature can regenerate. and we can help ecosystems bounce back. Fund: We need to stop funding things that destroy nature and pay for things that help it. It is that simple. Protect, restore, fund. You can be part of this. Vote for people who defend nature, share this video, talk about this. All around the world there are amazing movements fighting for nature. Join them. We can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change. And it has to start today. Would you do counts.

There's a lot to talk about with this video. But I also think it's quite useful after seeing something like that, just before we talk about what we think, to reflect on how feel. So how do people feel after seeing that? *[Discuss]*

Why do you feel powerful/powerless watching that video? *[Discuss]*

In the film, Greta says that the solutions are simple. The solutions she says, are to protect, to restore and to fund. Do you agree that the solutions to climate change are simple? *[Discuss]*

If the solutions are simple, why haven't we implemented them yet? *[Discuss]*

George Monbiot asks: 'What should YOU do?'

And I want to ask, why should we think that young people should do anything about this crisis? After all, young people aren't the ones who have created this mess! *[Discuss]*

- Since young people haven't created this mess, why should they have to solve it?
- By contrast, if older people won't live with the consequences, why should they change their ways?

Optional segment

The video urges you to (i) vote for people who defend nature, (ii) share this video and talk, (iii) join movements that fight for nature. Which—if any—of these solutions are the most viable for young people? Which do you think might have the most impact?

How much collective power do young people actually have when it comes to protecting the environment?

The video ends with Thunberg's claim 'What you do counts'. Do you believe that is true – that what each and every one you does, really counts?

Can the actions of one person really help to tackle a problem this big?

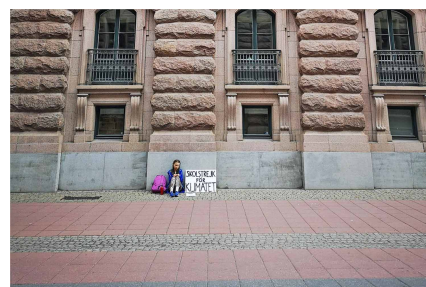
If an insufficient number of people are taking action, then does what you do count?

The Power of One

I want to show you two images that you may be familiar with.

This first image is from 2018.

[Greta Thunberg outside Parliament]



And this second image is only a year later.

[Earth protest]



So the school strikes for climate began, as probably many of you know, with the Swedish school girl we saw in that video, Greta Thunberg, protesting outside of the Swedish parliament. And it's snowballed into a global movement with regular school strikes taking place around the world.

Do you think that the growth of the school strikes show, as Greta Thunberg has claimed, that no one is too small to make a difference? *[Discuss]*

How would you know if your action had made a difference? *[Discuss]*

School Strikes:

Now I want to move on and share with you a video about the Fridays for Future movement – the youth movement set up by young people, and influenced by Greta Thunberg and many other activists around the world. Let's take a look.

> Play video [Abridged from *Make the World Greta Again* — clip from a short film about youth activism and school strikes]

[Video transcript] *'School children across the country are expected to skip classes on Friday as part of a strike against climate change.'*

'I do not accept that taking time off school is useful for children.'

'Kids should go to school.'

'Greta is an inspiration to us all. She was the catalyst of this movement.'

'She was my inspiration to start this. Together we've started a revolution. We will be in 100 countries at least.'

'Basically towns and cities everywhere. We will keep on striking until they do something.'

'We are facing the biggest crisis faced. If your house is on fire, we don't sit down and talk. I want people to panic.'

'If we continue at the rate we are now, by the year 2030 we will set off an irreversible chain reaction which will trigger event beyond human control. Then there's no going back.'

'We are outside the Swedish parliament. I sit here every Friday.'

'I just woke up as usual, had breakfast and then took some flyers and a sign, and just sat down outside the Swedish Parliament. And then some media started writing about it and already the second day, when I sat down, people started joining me. After two weeks it started spreading to other Swedish cities. And then to other countries. I would never have imagined that it was going to be this big.'

'Save the climate! When? Now.'

'We are a Federal Press Conference. So we're here with Scientists for Future which is 700 plus leading climate scientists across Germany and came together and kind of said "listen to those young kids because they are right and we got the science behind this."'

'Our position fully supports the demands of the protesting students to act quickly and decisively in regards to climate change.'

'Politicians need to be held accountable for their words. And I think those this movement can keep pushing them to actually do what they say that they will do.'

'Climate change is a big thing, and school – it educates you, but sometimes it doesn't educate you on the right thing. Climate change is not on the curriculum.'

'We strike because we want a future and we will continue.'

'I think this is just the beginning of the beginning of the movement. I think we haven't seen anything yet.'

There was a lot in that video. Let's start with this: Greta Thunberg and many other climate activists strike every Friday from school – every Friday. So my question is, should you strike from school? Should you strike from your education, every Friday? Just take a moment to reflect. And I'll ask you to please write a response in the chat: yes, no, or question mark. I want to remind you that all answers are welcome here. Should you strike every Friday – yes, no, or question mark. *[Discuss]*

- Do you think the Fridays for Future movement has the potential to achieve real change?
- Is it worth missing school to take part on a weekly basis? (or at least on a monthly basis?)

I want to share something else with you.

[show slide - headline]

This is a front headline from the newspaper in 2019, in which Greta Thunberg says the school strikes, which she helped initiate, have achieved nothing.



She says the school strikes have achieved nothing, even though we saw this image of her alone...

[show slide - Greta alone]



...and this image of thousands of young people...

[show slide - mass protest]

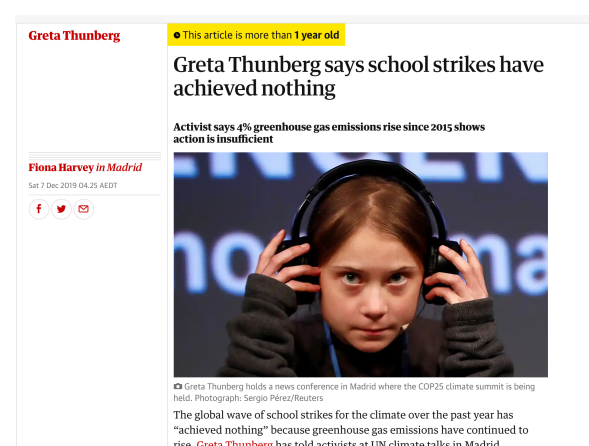


... so that she's clearly helped to organise a mass movement.

But she says...

[show slide - headline]

...the school strikes have achieved nothing. She says in this article, a 4% greenhouse gas emissions rise since 2015 shows that the action that is happening is just not enough.



Is Greta right that the school strikes have achieved nothing? Might she be wrong about that?

[Discuss]

- i. If she is wrong, what have they achieved?
- ii. If she is right, what should happen next?

Double-down or YOLO?

What I'm going to share with you now is some possible ways forward. So far, we've been thinking about whether one person can make a difference, about whether joining mass movements is something useful and effective.

We've also considered the idea that the activism so far may have achieved nothing.

Now, I want you to consider these proposed ways forward and I want you to think about which best describes what most people think, and which best describes what you think is the best way forward.

So imagine this is a sort of continuum goes from one extreme which is doing stuff that could be really quite bad for the environment to the other extreme, which is dedicating everything to addressing this problem. And let me pick out a few points along the continuum and describe them to you.

YOLO (You only live once)

The environment is probably too broken to fix. We should enjoy life as much as we can, acquire things that make us happy, eat what we like and travel as much as possible. We should ignore the crisis, because it makes us feel bad and there's nothing we can do about it anyway.

Business as usual

There is no need to worry about the crisis too much. We're already doing some things to slow climate change, like increasing uptake of solar panels. Something is better than nothing. If we carry on like this, technology might help us out in the future. Plus, for the time being, we can enjoy the kind of normal life we are used to.

Keep plugging away

If we act now, we can slow global warming. Individual and collective action can work, it just hasn't happened yet. We should keep voting (where we can), talking about the environment, and lawfully protesting. In time, it will hopefully cause leaders to act and we may still avoid the worst impacts of climate and ecological breakdown. We should regularly think about the crisis.

Double-down

We have no choice but to do something. What we are doing isn't working. Radical action is needed. Citizens of all ages should engage in acts of non-violent civil disobedience. To get political attention, protesters should break the law where necessary (for example by blocking roads and blockading polluting businesses). The crisis should be at the forefront of everyone's mind.

The first option, I call YOLO, which stands for You Only Live Once. So a YOLO person thinks this: they think we should ignore the climate crisis, because it makes us feel bad and there's nothing we can do about it anyway. We should enjoy life as much as we can. We should acquire stuff that makes us happy. We should eat what we like, we should travel as much as possible, we should take part in the joys of life and not worry about the climate crisis because it's beyond our control. Okay, so that's one end of the spectrum.

Here's another option: Business-as-usual. There is no need to worry about the crisis too much. We're already doing some things to slow climate change, like increasing uptake of solar panels. Something is better than nothing. If we carry on like this, technology might help us out in the future. Plus, for the time being, we can enjoy the kind of normal life we are used to. OK, that's another option, slightly less extreme than YOLO.

Here's another option. Keep on plugging. So these people think the climate crisis is important. And what we do now matters. Individual and collective action can work, it just hasn't happened yet. So concerned people should keep on voting, they should keep talking about the climate crisis, they should keep lawfully protesting – so not breaking the law– and hopefully their continued efforts will eventually persuade leaders to act and help us avoid the worst impacts of climate and ecological breakdown. So that's kind of like, 'activists, keep on going'.

Now here's a really extreme proposal and this is what I want you to consider. These people who say Double-down: work twice as hard. The people who say work twice as hard think this: The climate crisis is the biggest challenge humanity has ever faced. Whatever, what we're doing now is not working though radical action is needed. Citizens of all ages should engage in acts of non-violent civil disobedience: breaking the law. To get attention, protesters should break the law, for example they should block roads, they should blockade businesses, and they must not stop until there is real change. So this is a kind of action at the other end of the extreme.

What I want to ask you now is firstly, which one of these ways of looking at the climate crisis, do you think describes what most people think? Does anyone want to speak on this?

Double-down

Keep plugging

Business as usual

YOLO

Questions:

- Which best describes most people's view ?
- Which one best describes your view?

Final thoughts

We're moving towards the very end of our session. So what I want to do is just to take a few moments to reflect. I asked you at the very beginning how that video made you feel I want you to think more broadly about the whole session. There's a series of questions here: How did this session make you feel? Is there a connection between what you feel about this topic, and what you think about this topic? Is there a connection between what you think and what you'll do? So instead of working through all these questions, I'm very happy for people to comment on any or all of them in the closing moments of our session.

- a. How has this session made you feel?
- b. Is there a connection between what you feel and what you think?
- c. Is there a connection between what you think and what you'll do?
- d. What—if anything—should people do about the climate crisis?

End of session

Optional additional questions

If an insufficient number of people are taking action, then does what you do count?

People think 'I'm too small to make a difference, but it is important that people act'. Who are the people who should act?

Can wealthier people make a bigger difference?

If wealthier people have a bigger chance to make a difference, does that mean that there are some people who are too poorly-resourced to be able to make a difference?