

Richard D North's environmental thinking interrogated

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Richard D North was interviewed by Richard Douglas about the background to his long career as an environmental, and later a “contrarian” or revisionist environmental, writer and broadcaster.

Richard Douglas (RDo), is a PhD student, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity / Goldsmiths, University of London

RDo's project works within the CUSP research stream on the meanings and moral framings of the good life, and is analysing the "limits to growth" debate in light of the "secularisation thesis".

This version was lightly edited for brevity and clarity by RDN. Deletions are not noted. Most large additions are in square brackets.

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Key:

RDo: Interviewer

RDN: Respondent

Interview:

RDo: I'm carrying out a reading of the 'limits to growth' debate through another debate, the 'secularisation thesis' debate, on the extent to which we should understand modernity as having theological origins. My hypothesis is that a main reason for the political resistance to the 'limits thesis' is that it contradicts some foundational tenets of the modern world...

RDN: My counter assertion is that Christianity was always anti-growth, always anti-material, always powerless in the world to change people's attitude to those things; that the Romantic movement embedded and embodied the person-centred, neurotic, dreamy, romantic, anti-materialistic, anti-commercial view very deeply in people's thinking. To say that there is a modern thesis in favour of growth is to not notice - is to gloss over - the absolute historical assumption about growth. The only specifically modern feature that we see in the modern world is a secular anxiety about growth and materialism which is actually very similar to the religious one that

used to go before it. It is proving equally powerless. But both pro-growth and anti-growth strands are equally modern and both are equally ancient.

RDo: One thing that I found really interesting in *Rich is Beautiful* was your discussion of the influence which Teilhard de Chardin and Ivan Ilich had on you, and I was wondering what first excited you about those thinkers, and to what extent would you say that they or your response to or perhaps reaction against them has had in shaping your ideas, particularly about the environment.

RDN: I was born in a secular household to a Roman Catholic mother and for some reason there were books of Teilhard de Chardin around and I've no idea why, but I read them as a late teenager, I would say, and I absolutely adored them and I think I adored them pretty well in the terms that they were written. Teilhard de Chardin was a Darwinian but he was a Darwinian with a heavy overload of religion, being both a Roman Catholic priest and a palaeontologist, and a pretty good one. And what I loved about him was that he was positing the notion that there was a geosphere, a biosphere and a noosphere and I felt myself to inhabit this noosphere. The noosphere is peculiar because it is a layer of consciousness spread round the world like an atmosphere and it has the oddity that it is - though he doesn't talk about this much - in my head and it is also a conglomeration and agglomeration of what's in everybody else's head. Now that we've got the internet we find it relatively easy to almost imagine what that is like; I've got my computer and it talks to every other computer in the whole world. He believed that the noosphere was God sucking consciousness towards him and sucking his creation towards him. "Sucking" was never his word but it conveys the way that the world is evolving towards God and the peak that it has reached at the moment is the consciousness we know.

Now, I didn't believe in God but I did believe in the noosphere. And what I loved about it, and I still do, is that it is deeply in love with the human species as having consciousness, which is evolutionarily the latest and most interesting thing that had yet happened. And I think that, curiously, Brian Cox is good in much the same way. He says somewhere, very briefly - and it's quite explosive, granted the political correctness with which I think he's normally perceived and happy to be perceived - he said on TV that the most interesting thing about the human beings is the risks that they will be prepared to take and that they are colossal to the point of planet destruction. And *au fond*, deep down, I feel that the enterprise of human consciousness will go on and that it is inherently extremely risky - in other words, "Nuclear power, who gives a damn?", or "Global warming, who gives a damn?" Of course I did and do give a damn about both those

things. What I mean is that *au fond*, right down, if you had a cataclysm the most interesting aspect of creation, namely human consciousness, would go on. It would probably thrive, prosper and reach whatever destination, if there is ever a destination for it, that it's going to. I have said all that, I've written all that down, I doubt anybody, more than perhaps ten people, have ever read what I've written about it, nobody has ever commented to me about it. It's a core thing for me but hardly anybody that I've ever mentioned it to, and that's very few people, have the smallest idea of what I'm on about; to most people it would seem simply unintelligible, I think.

One of the parallels, a quick useful parallel, is with Lovelock's Gaia. Lovelock looks on the surface to be positing an animate earth, and I think that's nonsense because the earth is not an organism, but it's a jolly good metaphor for what the earth is. Likewise I think the God dimension of the noosphere is not what's happening but I found it extraordinarily illuminating.

Coming to Ivan Illich. I found him a few years before *Limits to Growth* came out in 1972. I think my mother had his *Celebration of Awareness* (1968) on her shelves. What I liked about Illich was that he was a Roman Catholic development specialist who said that the West was shoving our failing mindset onto what I think he would probably still call the Third World. He posited that they actually stood a chance of having a development that escaped that mindset. And the interesting thing about that is that it wasn't fundamentally about limits, it was about *De-schooling Society* as his first really famous book had it. He sketched out the institutions and above all the institutional, self-crippling, mindsets that we could do without. I agreed with him and thought it was extremely interesting to say, "Let's get rid of education if you want to liberate the human mind and spirit; let's not school curiosity out of our young. Schooling and academia in my mind then was basically about narrowing people. And roughly speaking, oddly enough, and the more I deal with PhDs and so on, I'm astonished really to see how narrowing even higher education is. So I'm still a bit of a de-schooler in a way. But then he had ideas about convivial development which were very obvious, to do with intermediate technology and all the kinds of things that were fashionable then or became fashionable, not least because of him, which was to do with saying that certain tools are liberating and certain other tools are not. And I liked the idea of his radical monopolies, such that certain technologies, especially the car, looked like liberating people but in fact locked them up - they locked them up in physical space, they were in the car all the time. And he measured the amount of hours it took for a man to

earn the money to own a car to go at 60 miles an hour from A to B and the sum says you might as well have walked and not bothered to earn the money. I mean, that's simple stuff but it's true.

I wrote a book about all this because Illich said in several meetings that I used to go at the AA that English was not his mother tongue. It was an absurd thing for him to say since he was he was a fabulous linguist and he spoke the most exquisite English with very slight Viennese syntax. But anyway, he said, "I'm in search of translators, I need people to translate my ideas into different cultures. I thought, "That's me, now at last I've got something I can do with my life." I settled to write a book about which I mostly remember that it had "radical" in the title. As I did it I just kept bumping up against the fact that in effect you couldn't get anything that he wanted without huge impositions on people's freedom. And I had my inner Toryism, my inner liberationism, came up against what I found in effect to be his inner Leveller and what I suppose it's right to call his utopianism.

Luckily, I couldn't get the book published, so I wasn't stuck with having promoted this thesis which in any case had tied me up in knots. In short I realised that I was not an Illichian but I remain very grateful to him.

When *Limits to Growth* came along I think I was briefly drawn to it. But *Limits to Growth* very quickly spawned amongst Americans a cornucopian revolt which I found very liberating and which I thought put the primacy of the human enterprise much closer to things. It was a much more realistic view of our relations with nature and a much more realistic view of our relations with ourselves than the emerging "limits" thing, the green thing, the hippy thing, which I thought were littered with illiberalism. My core believe is that very much of the left, whether it's the soft left, green left or the hard left, is an affront to the orderly freedom that I call liberty and that the Western civilisation has been brilliant at developing.

So I've never fallen away from my Teilhardian view and I've explained how I fell away from an Illichian view.

RDo: Is there anything in the fact that they were both Catholics?

RDN: It's very, very hard for me to say. They were both writers whose books were in my house and I've taken a lifelong interest in Catholicism. I wrote a book about monks which was in effect a book about monks in the Greek, Russian, Coptic and Roman Catholic - in effect the pre-Protestant Christian traditions . So yes, I was interested in Catholicism but on the other hand I

loved the Protestant reformation and Erasmus was my hero as a compromising reformer. I am for having cake and eating it. I have never been an extremist or a revolutionary of any sort and that's a version of a Protestant tradition. On the other hand the Catholics got across The Enlightenment pretty quickly; you'd have to go some to stay well ahead of the papacy's capacity to catch up with you.

RDo: Can I ask about a couple more names? One, I know you explicitly refer to him as one of your influences or somebody you admire, is Julian Simon.

RDN: Yes, I'm glad you've come to him because Julian Simon is the most interesting of the cornucopians, more interesting than Herman Kahn and more interesting I think than the left wing lot (even including the fascinating Spiked Online crowd) that came a bit later and some of those that are talking more recently whom you have put me in touch with. Simon was a depressive and it is core to him that he found that his creed of believing that each human birth was an opportunity not a challenge cured or helped his depression. I don't like pathologising things, I'm with Anthony Daniels on that, but I do think that it is interesting how powerful Simon and lots of people find certain ideas very, very powerful to themselves, a little bit separate to their intellectual merit.

I am struck that every decade or so someone comes along to articulate a scepticism about the green case about strict limits and imminent doom. There have been Ronald Bailey and all the others, and Herman Kahn and all those others, Gregg Easterbrook, me later and then Lomborg, and then Matt Ridley's *Rational Optimist* now alerted by you I find Skinner has developed a similar thesis. Very early on, and I didn't read him until the 1990s, more fool me, there was John Maddox, an important editor of *New Scientist* who wrote *The Doomsday Syndrome* in 1973. That was a very important book, I think, but no-one reads it now. So there is a continuing update of the thesis that says, "Hold your nerve, things are getting better, we will sort it all out, let's not fret, at least on environmental grounds."

I was aware of Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011) and the general thesis that the last 50 years have not been particularly violent. I adore that. I like the idea that we're not getting nuttier, we're not getting more destructive, we're not killing each other more than we ever used to. I am always thrilled by good statistics, in any of these discussions.

RDo: Thanks, by the way, for putting me on to John Maddox. So I ordered his early book on the *Doomsday Syndrome*.

RDN: Yes it's a fine work. *My Modern Planet* was not a good book because it's far too boring. I thought it was going to be a university textbook - I must have been mad. For a start, I assume from some experience that the university departments which teach this area generally have a premise of what's beyond the pale. As to cornucopianism and so on, they just don't go there except in hostility. There was no way a book like mine was going to get on syllabuses or curricula or whatever they are.

I do feel that the real merit of *Modern Planet* is in the Nursery World chapters and one or two others later on in the book which address culture and what greenery is *au fond* and rather better than I think it had been done. Actually that work wasn't just done better than had been done before; I don't think the other writers were in that ballpark, it just didn't much interest them, whereas it did interest me a lot and it was at least a third of that book.

RDo: Just one more name at this point. Does the name Christopher Lasch mean anything to you?

RDN: Nothing, sorry.

RDo: That's quite all right. I only mention him because it's through reading him that I came across Ivan Illich and I think Illich influenced him quite a bit in the seventies, and he's got quite an alternative perspective to you. He was one of Jimmy Carter's intellectuals and he criticised the idea of progress.

RDN: Ah, the idea of progress. I called *Life On a Modern Planet*, "a manifesto for progress" and I did it almost being deliberately sloppy. I don't believe in progress in the sense that I don't believe there is some fabulous endpoint to the human enterprise. Even if there is one, I've certainly no conception of what it is and it follows I don't know what direction heads towards it quickest or anything like that. I just think things on the whole do get better. I'm with George Macaulay Trevelyan who rhetorically asked in effect, "Why is it that every generation looks back on the past and imagines that the present they're living in betrays it?"

RDo: Right, yes. But I must say I'm very taken with the line from Thoreau that you never gain something but that you lose something so that it can be qualitatively different things happening, things can be better in

certain qualities and then you lose something in certain other qualities and that's kind of indivisible but -

RDN: Well I'm glad you cite Thoreau for that because almost everything that Thoreau says that's interesting is bollocks. I don't think he's a very interesting character. And certainly I think it's wrong that life is a zero-sum game, in which for instance for every Nike T-shirt you buy you must throw out a prayer. That would be a very dodgy proposition. Suppose it was posited that every minute you spend on social media destroys a minute's capacity for reading long-form. Maybe we'll end up doing both. I am for long-form and I'm not for social media but the young will have to work out what they make of social media and how to turn it into something worthwhile and you and I probably won't be the ones that guide them well on it.

RDo: **You touched on *Life on a Modern Planet* and I am wondering if there's anything you'd like to say about what motivated you to write both that and *Rich is Beautiful*, and also how would you characterise the reception they received, especially from environmentalists?**

RDN: *Life on a Modern Planet* was a perfectly obvious book to write for a person who was approaching 50 and had been at the environment, development, alternative society game for 25 years. I had been obsessing about it - researching, digging, worrying, wondering, shifting my feet, changing my position, whatever - for 25 years. I thought it was the book that I could write that would be a valuable result of that time and a way of drawing a line under it. I had another thought: that I might turn both the book and my huge archive into a nice little academic career in being useful and intelligent in challenging green stereotypes and green nonsenses. That didn't happen. But actually another bit of me said, you know, "Enough." And when that secondary career didn't happen - knew within about six months that it wasn't going to happen - and I rather gratefully said, "Right, now I can move on." I couldn't think of anything more tiresome than spending my high middle age or my dotage flogging these dead horses. It's for other people to move the debate on. So I wanted to get it all out there once and for all, bang, done, dusted.

After *Life on a Modern Planet* life changed in all kinds of ways but one of them was that I became a think-tank writer. There was no serious pretence of being a journalist now. So I hardly ever again did projects that took only a week or a fortnight to research or a book which was a summary of all those processes, instead I became somebody that people came to. The Institute of Economic Affairs or the Social Affairs Unit came to me and

said, “Do you want three months’ budget to do so and so?” or whatever. In my book on the BBC I wrote a chapter about my writing career in journalism and I found myself saying, “What I am now is much more like an 18th century pamphleteer; people pay me because it suits them to have the kind of message that I’m going to put out there at that sort of length, that sort of duration of enterprise.”

Rich is Beautiful was a slightly expanded version of that type of job where I was able to haul together various strands of the critique which one might call anti-capitalist. I thought there were multiple strands of nonsense. *Spirit Level* hadn’t been published but there were other nonsenses about how ghastly choice is and how affluence was dispiriting. These issues weren’t primarily about environment. These things weren’t posited as being ghastly because of the environment, it was - rather - a Naomi Klein type of ghastlinesses.

The Chomsky-Naomi Klein thing was of interest. And you have drawn my attention to a more up-to-date version from Bastani. Adam Curtis, the filmmaker, is also of interest in this area. They suggested and suggest there was a kind of a mind- and wallet-grab by the forces of the system. Capitalism, consumerism, the media, and politicians were all trying to grab your wallet and your mind and suborn you. I can’t remember the exact history of how these things evolved. But in *Rich Is Beautiful*, I especially wanted to challenge the idea that now we’ve enriched the working class and the lower middle class we will be swamped by vulgarity and material excess. I think really all I was pointing out was that the people that are liberated into hamburgers and obesity in this generation will produce a generation that become athletes and vegetarians and that they will go from X-Factor to opera. And this is a progression that’s been happening historically with everybody who gets a bit rich; I mean, from the commercial grandfather, the slightly commercial father, then the absolutely hippy child has been going on for generations, centuries.

And so I thought when one looks at mass affluence - and I still think mass affluence is like that - one shouldn’t look at the present vulgarities of recent affluence, but rather wait and see how it matures.

RDo: Well, we’ll come on, if we can, particularly to environmental debate.

RDN: Every publisher I took *Life on a Modern Planet* to said, “Absolutely not. There are very few people who are interested in this subject and they’re all green; why the hell would they go out and buy an anti-green book? So, no, not a chance in the world.” At last one publisher at Manchester

University Press said, “I’ve just done a Master’s in environmentalism and I see exactly what you’re on about. This is the book we need because generations of people have been turned out with an absolutely unchallenged mindset and thank God this book’s come along because it saves me working out how the hell we would get such a book done.” That is my memory of Richard Purslow, for whom I was and am enormously grateful. (I hope my colloquialism hasn’t traduced his actual message at the time.) The book was published in the middle of a book-selling strike such that there were hardly any copies of it in shops. It was widely reviewed, but it’s exactly the kind of book that nobody would ever bother to read because they could read a long review of it in, say, *The Sunday Times* and think, “Well there’s a thing I don’t have to read. I’m glad I’ve come across that line of argument but I don’t have to read it.” As to the greens, they sneered at it with various degrees of loftiness and said, “What a pity, poor Richard, he’s in a frightful muddle and has been for years because really he’s one of us.” I get that a lot on almost any topic.

RDo: Right. Could you say any more on that?

RDN: I’m clearly a perfectly good liberal, I’m a perfectly good, kind worrier about the poor; I’m a perfectly good green, I love nature and all that, of course. And I was one of the earlier voices in modern British greenery writing. There were groups and I was part of none of them but I was a founding figure. I was little bit opportunistic, in that I was a writer looking for a subject. But it was also a completely natural process, and I inhabited it and I was articulate and I was almost well known and I lived at the very heart of it in some people’s minds, but they didn’t detect that I never was a real member. Maybe I was wrong in the days of *Vole*, say, not to make it much more clear that I was drifting away from orthodox greenery. But in *Vole* there are articles by me saying, for instance, that municipal waste incineration was not all bad. My wife had our children in the best London hospitals on the National Health Service, and I thought, “I feel safer because these children have got all the benefits of modern technology and modern pharmacy.” And at *The Independent* after 1986, as I pursued environmental matters with more budget than I’d ever had, I went, for instance, to chemical plants.

I went and talked a lot to ICI and once they trusted me and let me in we had proper conversations about chemicals. I had proper conversations about waste disposal, with the people who were doing it. I was infinitely more impressed by the people who were churning out chlorine or running landfills than I was by the green people who just *knew* chlorine and landfills were disgusting. Actually, I was *infinitely* more impressed. I have

always been more impressed, frankly, by people who are actually having to do something than I have been by their critics. I never met a whaler whom I didn't prefer to any Greenpeace person I ever met. I also tend to like people who get their hands dirty, actually and, often, metaphorically.

RDo: I can understand why people play back to you that kind of confusion or try to claim you for different [causes]....

RDN: They don't, by the way, I mean, there is only the merest bat squeak of noise out there in the ether as to what Richard is or is not.

RDo: Okay. But I mean that *Rich is Beautiful*, for example, combines both a very liberal attitude towards affluence and economic equality and democratisation of affluence in that sense, but also it does seem to have very strong conservative streak in it as well, in terms of some of the vulgarity that you've just been talking about, and some of it is quite severe in its criticisms of 'Grandpa's into bling', 'Dad's got an adolescent crush on sport', 'Mum's dreaming of a boob job' and 'Tracy and Tyrone are micro-tarts'. So I was just wondering how would you categorise yourself politically or which political thinkers do you most admire or feel closest to?

RDN: Well we've said the Erasmus sort of thing, those sorts of heroes. I was too snobbish to be a Conservative. I was brought up in a period where the Conservatives were identified in young people's minds as, as it were the British Legion, which I would have sneered at, quite wrongly. That was a horrible thing and I apologise for it, it was a ghastly reaction of a teenager. But also I thought the Tories represented the worst of awful British management of the kind that wasn't capable of getting anywhere and helping us move ahead. And there was the blue rinse thing and the hanging and flogging thing. So I was not a Conservative. I just didn't vote. I certainly wouldn't have voted Labour. I was an anti-socialist, for sure, but I was never a happy Conservative. Now I'm a happy Conservative and now I almost feel that the team matters. I will follow Mrs May because she is the leader now. I certainly also of course admire her for her courage in putting up with the nonsense that she's had to put up with, just as I very much admired John Major. And of course there was Mrs Thatcher. One began easily thinking, "Oh God, how she despises the tweedy types. And I quite like the tweed, the old tweed in the Conservative Party." And then quite soon one realised the ghastliness of the opposition to Thatcher within and without the Conservative Party and all around, the sheer snobbery about Thatcher that went on, and my inner suburbanite rose up and said, "She's my girl." And in any case she's saying what I believe about, "For

God's sake, we cannot run the country as a fudge." The Macmillanite, Baldwinite fudging accommodation with the Labour impulse seemed to me a dead-end.

[I should have said in the interview that my admiration for the Tories is, contradictory to some of the above, that it is a pragmatic broad church as to the running of the country. I mean that it is the party in which there is within its wings sufficient dryness of economics and sufficient compassion of welfare policy to make it almost dangerously the party of the vast middle ground of the electorate. The Labour Party usefully disciplines it, for sure, but has never for very long seemed capable of supplanting the Conservative Party.]

The Labour impulse is what it is: wrongheaded, bad for the working class, bad for the un-working class, certainly bad for the rich. Even as a youngster I didn't fancy the Macmillanite fudge which has the Tories straining to always to trump Labour's pseudo compassion. That compromise depressed me. I was often asking myself, "In what sense is this the Tory Party? It hasn't got any loftiness of economic ambition". I was simultaneously thrilled by the party's dry, free market wing and rather scared by it. It has taken me a long time to become really quite enamoured of free market economics, and very very interested in trying to understand what might be the right regulation of it.

I realised, pivotally at the *Independent* especially, that I was going to be a Thatcherite. And that was a liberation for me and a lot of things I think flow from that. I feel strongly about why Farage is important, I feel strongly about why Trump is important, because I feel that I know what it is to feel that the liberal hegemony, which I think is almost a thing you could describe as a stubborn reality, is terribly alienating to those who happen not to share it, and as a matter of fact there are lots of things about the liberal hegemony which I think are deeply illiberal and I don't share them. Does that answer the question?

RDo: Can I just ask you again about the ideas you had about criticising vulgarity and criticism of kind of social immaturity, wanting people to grow up? This is a big theme in *Rich is Beautiful*.

RDN: Is it?

RDo: Yeah.

RDN: Right, okay. Grow up?

RDo: Yes. But in any case what if -

RDN: Amongst the new affluent, they need to grow up, or we all need to grow up?

RDo: I think as a general social condition, as in society has kind of drifted that way.

RDN: I think I probably do think that a bit, yes. I worry quite a lot about the current generation of 30, 35 year olds, 40 year olds, whether they are growing into adults of the kind my parents were and my generation haven't quite achieved either. I mean, in one's teens and 20s one should be talking nonsense, but in one's 30s and one's 40s one should be, if middle class, looking around quite broadly about quite big themes in society and one should be quite well informed and one should be learning and challenging oneself about it and one should be being quite realistic about what can be done and what ought to be done. And I don't know how much that means that one should be taking an active role in politics but I certainly wonder at the extraordinary situation where large numbers of people think *Have I Got News For You* is funny and useful and interesting. I note the sheer unpleasantness and small-mindedness and knee-jerkery that seems to pass for a lot of people as their engagement in current affairs. When I am in the mood to worry, that worries me. And, luckily, in my own family, if my own family comprises perhaps thirty people at its most extended, a few of them seem to taking quite an interesting interest but that seems a rather low percentage amongst middle class persons.

By the way, "middle class" means almost anybody who reads a broadsheet newspaper from time to time. I don't mean it's two cars on a gravel drive: it's people who are capable of looking at long-form journalist with interest and do.

RDo: Right, okay.

RDN: That doesn't answer your question.

RDo: Okay, I'll just ask one more question on this kind of theme. I suppose what I'm trying to drive at is to what extent is mass affluence and various currents of social and economic developments since the sixties, to what extent are they indivisible? Do they go hand in hand, so that you have a general democratisation of affluence but also a decline in deference and civility and possibly seriousness?

RDN: Possibly. I'm perfectly happy with the thesis that since 1968 academia has become pretty useless and I think that the number of people that bother with a broadsheet newspaper and take it seriously and challenge it by reading several others perhaps is diminishing at least as a proportion of people with tertiary education under their belts. And I do often feel that parents are extraordinarily indifferent to the trivialisation of their children's minds on social media or extraordinarily unable to do anything about it. So yes, I could do all that kind of riff pretty easily but I resist it because I think modernity is always peculiar and has been peculiar for as long as we've had it, which is forever, so that, yes, it's peculiar but out of this peculiarity will come Trevelyan's mechanism. Out of this peculiarity and out of all this stuff that we can identify as a betrayal of a great tradition will come the next good thing.

RDo: **Right.**

RDN: I mean that vibrant, more or less orderly societies are always creating new *mores* which blend with old ones and retrospectively look like a natural progression. I don't mean the next definitely good thing on some inevitable progress route. I mean that fifty years, people will say, "God, I'm glad we got over that fashion. That was a funny little fashion, that, but we got over it. It looked big at the time, but it's all gone, done, dusted. It's 2069 and middle-aged women are not showing their upper arms flabbily bare on television, they know decently to cover up." You know, whatever it is you're currently spitting at the television about will all blow over. It'll be, "Funny how we dress now. Funny how we talk now. My God, children are serious now." You know, whatever it turns out to be, it's a passing fad, it's important not to get too hung up on it.

RDo: **Right, okay. Going more particularly on to environmental debates now, who would you say you most closely identified with or was closest to your own views. It's interesting to see that you have made some criticisms of aspects, I read, of writings by Matt Ridley and also the approach taken by the Nigel Lawson's Global Warming Policy Foundation, so I was just wondering how you would position yourself relative to those people?**

RDN: One green-ish author in 1995 put Matt Ridley and me and Wilfred Beckerman as the contrarians as though it was a sort of team, and I thought, "Well I don't feel like a contrarian because I'm pretty mainstream really. I hold a perfectly ordinary point of view actually." Day by day my wife reads me Matt Ridley articles and I think they are probably pretty

damned good, though I always suspect he's one degree over the top, one degree too far, which is better than not, and the basic insight is often very, very good and the basic fact basis is there. I don't pursue these things in detail anymore. It's a debate that goes on and I feel that the young will have to take up the cudgels on either side. They've got to look after themselves now. I'm not going to fuss around every damned debate of any sort.

I was never exactly a cornucopian. I was not exactly a Simonite or a Kahnite or anything else. I very much understood and accepted that the green anxiety was informing, let's say, rulemaking and to some extent consumer habits and the culture in general in such a way that the cornucopians might turn out to be right, not least because the deregulation and the gung-ho-ness that they wanted to espouse and which I understood and sympathise with was constrained by political realities. That is why the *Limits* view could never be said to have been unfruitful. But its very effectiveness proved to be part of it undoing.

When you come to climate change as a perfectly good microcosm of lots of other things and just the worst and sharpest of them. I thought the Nigel Lawson mistake and that Foundation's mistake was to make it easy for the opposition to declare them to be deniers when they weren't deniers necessarily. Certainly their being deniers wasn't necessary to their very useful case which was "Okay, what should we do in the face of this phenomenon?" Then you get into all the complication that some people think that actually AGW is quite survivable and that it's cheaper to work out how to survive it than it is to stop it. And then other people say, "Well it's going to be extremely easy to deliver growth without the global warming impact, and, okay, the cows are farting, well it's probably a good idea to give up meat anyway." So there is rich complexity in the ways in which you might solve this problem, whatever it was you decided the problem would be. I was interested in the rich complexity of that and it was very important that there be lots and lots of discussion and challenging and experimenting with the different techniques. There was also the issue about whether you just get governments to fund research into all the things that you think will alleviate the problem, whether it's getting stuff without greenhouse emissions or working out how to bolster your sea defences. Or do you try to price carbon right to bring down its usage? And how do you do any of this while going with the flow of what politically is possible?

One of the things I thought was important to stress was that politicians almost of any stripe take this issue far more seriously than the public do.

So we have been well served by the seriousness of the politicians and of course they failed. I enjoyed of course pointing out the hypocrisy of people who feel deeply green, live green in small things and then jump on a jumbo jet owned by Virgin and fly off to walk in the Hindu Kush and commune with Eastern detachment mysticism. It's very, very important to point out all those hypocrisies. And if you want to care about this stuff then for God's sake care. I mean, that to care means to be hands on. It doesn't mean one vaguely signs up. You can't care by ticking a box; caring is living. Does that answer your question?

RDo: I was just trying to map out this debate and where you stand on it.

RDN: Oh right, okay. I'm Lomborgian in the sense of I perfectly cheerfully accept that climate change might be a bit of a problem. I am probably Lomborgian or something like it in saying I don't think we will prove to have been very good at predicting the when, where and for whom its impact will be very bad. I can imagine that surviving what are now thought to be quite bad likely or possible effects might actually be quite easy and quite cheap. In other words whatever it is, we'll learn how to live with it, or even to manage it.

It is important for me to stress] that *au fond*, deep, deep down I don't mind if the population is annihilated. I don't mind if we get down to a billion or even a million people. I mean, after all lots and lots of people are going to die in the next few hundred years. I don't really care if they all die at once or live to a normal lifespan. Deep, deep down I think that if the flourishing of the human enterprise involves the risk of blowing it, but that it was a great party while it lasted, then so be it. Perhaps and even probably we could regroup round a population of a billion, and that billion could carry on this great human story that I care about. That's a mad point of view but I actually take some comfort from it. Brian Cox said something similar along the lines of, "Take the risk, if you really, really want to, for all kinds of other reasons, take the risk." In my case I can imagine that it would be right to preserve freedom and you fail at this thing about controlling climate change because you don't know how to be bossy enough to your people to stop them doing it, if you can't exert enough nasty control over people to get them to stop doing this bad thing, and if the upshot is that we're reduced to a population of a billion, who cares? That billion is good enough. This is seemingly mad stuff.

[I rather wish I had said something like the following in the interview: I think my shit-or-bust view expressed above bears inspection as a matter of what we think the human enterprise is about. I am the opposite of a

Utopian. I think humankind may take huge risks almost unconsciously, sooner than give up their freedom or their selfishness or even, occasionally, their nobility. Utopias always involve the pretence that you can get humans to sacrifice their urge for freedom and instead become orderly and disciplined, as though being boring and obedient was the best we could achieve.]

More broadly and very importantly to your whole proposition about the dangers of a religion of prosperity and the measurement of GDP and economic growth and all of that: I can't see why we might not dematerialise our economic activity to the point where we have huge amounts of economic growth with very, very little environment impact. This whole thing might be a busted flush.

And, by the way, before I forget it, I think one of the most interesting lot of cornucopians are *Spiked Online* and the old Revolutionary Communist Party, of whom I once asked in the *New Statesman* in a letter are they still revolutionary, are they still Communist and are they still a party. But *Spiked Online*, when they lob up, are so often the most interesting voice. You asked me who I was interested in? In the mid-1990s, I went into the Brazilian rainforest as the guest of a group of teenagers that I was sure were RCP, and I thought they were very, very interesting. They were a little over-programmed, but they were only over-programmed in an anti-green way to the degree to which almost all their confrères were over-programmed in a green way, so what the hell?

I think the RCP people are saying that much of the green impulse is about controlling people's aspirations downward and that that is a deeply bourgeois enterprise, a deeply illiberal enterprise, and I rather agree. I think the greens are not intellectually interesting. I don't think they're factually interesting. I don't think they're honest to the facts, such as we have them. I don't think they're morally interesting. I don't think they've got anything to tell us about how to live from any position of moral superiority or insight and I don't think they're spiritually interesting. And I think they're way too downbeat for me. It's much more finger-wagging than it is liberating or liberal.

RDo: Okay. Regarding cornucopians, you said you had a bit of separation between you and people like Julian Simon but you -

RDN: I'm not a completely happy neoliberal economist. I'm not completely happy that -

RDo: So where's the reservation?

RDN: I think capitalism was a beautiful product, or should I say, "effect". It's not a single product, it's just a thing that happens, a multifarious thing that seems to happen in civilised, well run, law-based societies. It can also happen in a form in disciplined societies, so China can do it in a way, but we in the West did it first as a function of order and freedom in a beautiful balance and we did it within rules of human trust, reliability, backed up in the end by laws and contracts and disciplines and rules and taxes and controls. The neoliberal mindset is that when the government gets involved it screws things up. Well actually, yes, that's often true. But free markets are the creation of government much more than merely of anyone's entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship lives in an orderly society with a free press that enables and challenges it, and with legislatures and executive branches which enable it, and curtail, harness and indeed also risk stifling it.

I don't buy that there is an awful hegemonic capitalistic maw which must be beaten by extraordinary means. I think actually once it is decided thoroughly that there is, say, too much inequality then I think we can handle that politically without great difficulty. I think we're way short of having demonstrated that we can't in an orderly governmental way do those things that are necessary to rein in whatever is perfectly dreadful about capitalism.

Now, I agree with anybody who says, "Well we haven't reined in global warming". On the other hand we're within a bat squeak of having done bugger all and yet maybe heading off the worst of it. We haven't really taken it seriously and we may be, whatever it is, at a prediction of a rise of two degrees in global temperature. Now, two degrees may be way too much, so we may be proved to have cocked it all up. And yes, I myself have off and on in my life had long periods in which I wouldn't go on a jet plane because I thought, "This isn't a good thing." I thought that on Illichian grounds earlier on. More recently I have avoided flying on AGW grounds. I'm amused at the number of people who jump on aeroplanes to go and see their children in Australia when we've got Facetime. After all, we could, if we wanted, dematerialise travel by seeing it as often obsolete or otiose or excessive. I don't need to go to Australia to see Australia, we've got perfectly good televisions and reality TV. It always amused me that Ivan Illich who was very against high speed - he thought 50 miles an hour was about the maximum culturally sustainable speed - would fly in a jumbo jet to talk to people when we were at the same time reading books called *The Wired Society* which demonstrated how easy it was to

teleconference. And that was a hippy thing then, right back then at the heart of hippydom was technology.

By the way, there's a thing that is interesting to me at the moment. People talk about cognitive dissonance, and apparently it's the discomfort when your brain and your heart aren't aligned, but I think there's a much more amusing and interesting and a much more powerful phenomenon. It might be called cognitive assonance. I'm amazed at the ability of people to hold two wholly contradictory thoughts in their head; recycling like mad at home and then jumping in a jumbo jet to go to Australia, and saying "Yeah, but that flying is for family and this recycling is what we have to do for the environment." They seem to feel no discomfort between these two. Jon Snow at the drop of a hat zooms off to present a show from America because there's been a shooting, even though Channel 4 has talented young people who are already in America and who can talk about shootings. Jon Snow probably cares about the environment, probably cares about global warming, but cares about camera time far more.

RDo: Do you have any views on ecomodernists?

RDN: Ecomodernists say some agreeable things. One of them is "Yeah, we were wrong about GM and nuclear." I fought in those two battles. I didn't exactly fight for nuclear, but I fought against the irrationalism of some of its enemies. Again, I didn't fight for GM crops, though I was mildly in favour of them, but certainly I fought against many of the arguments of their opponents. So I fought those two good fights; they were two of my last big things. So naturally I was very, very pleased to find good people saying, much later, "Yeah, sorry, I was wrong about that." That's a nice thing and a good thing. The other they talk about, quite rightly, is dematerialising economic activity, dematerialising affluence. You pointed me at Bastani, who wants communist affluence and green communism, which I'm not keen on. But dematerialising stuff, why not? Why would we not be glad we may be quite close to being able to dematerialise air travel - make it less gassy - and rendering it obsolete for many purposes?

RDo: Just on the ecomodernists, their big difference, it seems to me from environmental sceptics such as Matt Ridley, is that they are very much in favour of big government intervention -

RDN: Yes, exactly. It comes off every page that they write. It comes off that the government's got to do something. They don't want carbon pricing which is lightish government intervention so much as they want us to fund like crazy the good stuff, and I always think to myself, "Yeah, well maybe,

but the market will probably get there.” And if you fund it like crazy one of the things is, you might build a whole vast generation of windmills that are actually a little bit too small because you got so excited about them. Maybe it will turn out that it would have been better that the market built a very few small ones, realise that they’re crap and then get quickly on to the next generation of zonking great big ones which work.

I think ecomodernists often back the idea of government research. I’m mildly sceptical of the ability of government ever to pick the right thing to back in research. However, I’m also well aware that half the good things that I’ve lived with and depended on and can thank goodness for were the result, say, of military research funding or American big government research funding. So I have to be properly humble about sneering at government expenditure. But yes, I noticed that, as you say, the ecomodernists want big government. You suggest it’s high on their list of what makes progress, and I would always be putting it a bit lower down.

RDo: In *Rich is Beautiful* you suggest that it’s a fallacy that wealth creation must destroy the planet. So far as we know there is nothing that we want - energy, materials - which are not abundantly available to an ingenious species such as ours and in forms which do not cause worrying pollution. An environmentalist criticism of that might be that certainly we are an ingenious species but does that mean that we can do anything that we want to. Is there a gap between imagination and desire and physical reality? So what’s your view on what the potential for ingenuity is and does it itself face any limits?

RDN: We’re not infinitely ingenious. But then] nor do we often suddenly invent a goal and go for it thinking, “Well one day [our ingenuity can put the damage from this right].” [More often the damage from some practice eventually reveals itself and we think, say, “Well we want to go on having air travel, so let’s go on doing it, we’ll just get better and better at it and one day we’ll be clever enough to have the air travel we want,” and so on. Critics may posit that we have an ingenuity gap. But I don’t see [that such a thing has opened up. We usually fix our practices or render them obsolete and abandon them.]

Of course we are not infinitely ingenious. Infinity is a thing with you, isn’t it, and I certainly don’t think we are infinitely anything much. It is interesting that ingenuity produces its own new horizons of aspiration. It’s not just that aspiration needs ingenuity; it’s that we produce, say, social media through ingenuity, and then we have to work out what to do with this. It’s a different class of ingenuity which comes along. We are gadget-

ingenious almost out of playfulness and then we are mentally adventurous in working out what the hell to make of it. So no, I don't think every technical problem has a solution but, goodness, a lot do. For instance if fission turns out to be no good we've still got to work on fusion. We probably shouldn't abandon nuclear power technology just because our first stab at it proved not to work. That would be a Brian Cox-y onwards and upwards kind of thing to say. Because Brian Cox is a fusion person, it's in the context of that that he talks about the risk and the risk being exciting. In effect he says, "Don't be frightened of the risk, that's what we are, we are those people who unflinchingly looked at fission, and when we start flinching at going on to look at fusion, when we start flinching at the risks of everything and anything, then we start being too frightened to be fully human."

It's interesting by the way how the precautionary principle's now dead, or at least nobody talks about it. At one point it kind of loomed over people like me: it was an important stick in the green armoury.

I am not very worried that we will fail in ingenuity over the use of materials and I am not very frightened that we will fail in ingenuity when it comes to environmental headroom. We may fail in political will and I do think that will be a matter of mass or popular failure rather than elite failure.

Of course a lot of the ingenuity that we achieve is mind-bending in the sense that we're going to engineer things which are a matter of brains and genes and societies. We're going to have a different eugenics. Indeed we have already. Every abortion is eugenic in an admittedly odd sense: it preserves a woman's right to have the birth she wants or at least avoid the birth she doesn't. The ingenuity with which we handle DNA produces a phenomenon much more peculiar than social media. Parents will increasingly be able to decide whether they want boys or girls, or clever babies, or whether to get rid of babies that are potentially disabled. Those choices, which come from ingenuity, are very challenging and very interesting. They're not very environmental. And yet you might say they're highly environmental because you might go, say, for fewer people. I am not especially worried that we will mess all that up. But we might of course.

I should have said that I have changed my mind, or rather my feelings, about the matter of materials, of stuff. I think the Revolutionary Communist Party people - *Spiked Online*, and The Institute of Ideas - those people quite effortlessly let off a little bomb in my head about how

obsessive we can be about stuff. I think they were very good at ridiculing a middle class, public school, bourgeois snobbery but above all a guilt about consumption which afflicts green Bossy Liberals. The Spiked Online view is that we mustn't let people like that cramp our aspiration. And I don't know why I had that in my head but there was something in *Spiked* that was so fresh that surprised me and it was a question of my thinking, "They don't think like me at all and yet almost everything they say I think, 'Yeah, you're not wrong there, kid.'"

RDo: **Could I ask about mass affluence and -**

RDN: *Rich Is Beautiful* said mass affluence is going to be beautiful. But I am not worried about inequality. I don't mind there being very rich people. I don't mind there being grotesquely rich people; there always have been and they've done us good on the whole. It worries me that lots and lots of the very, very rich people especially recently used a kind of rip-off. They're mining rich, not manufacturing rich, which pisses me off a bit. And they mined the state: Russian oligarchs used the wobbly state to rob the Russians. [Actually, I should have said, only very sound societies can survive minerals exploitation. It's the old "Dutch Disease" conundrum.] But the fact of inequality doesn't bother me. The fact of poverty bothers me.

RDo: **Oh right, okay. Well on that point, what about Donald Trump then, the man who is incredibly vulgar and who wasn't even a success on his own terms because his dad kept having to bail him out? I don't know, is -**

RDN: I do suppose that it was important, perhaps especially to blacks, that America have a black President though I found very little of interest in Obama, or rather, much less than was promised. Equally, though, I do think it was very, very, important that America have Trump as President, a man who is something quite extraordinary. Let's call him a buffoon. No, I think that won't do it. But, yes, he's grotesque in some ways. And both these Presidents are equally important and they're both equally transitory. Trump was a result of Republican failure to produce a better Republicanism with which to oppose Democrat smugness. One has to hope that Trumpism makes the Republicans work out how to do a better Republicanism.

We're lucky in this country because we've got a pretty good Conservatism. The Conservative Party is quite a good working broad-church. The left of the Conservative Party - is it a fifth of the party? - overlaps with the right of the Labour Party, which might be a third or a fifth of it. Indeed, apart from the very peculiar issue of the EU we haven't got a problem in the

Conservative Party but we've got a big problem with the left. All too many of the young have fallen for Corbynism and so on. There's a fake liberal thoughtlessness and a lack of historical context and a general silliness that they've fallen for. But one doesn't have to worry about the Conservatives. They've got the necessary broad width, they've got potential leaders of every class and type. They know they have to temper their Nasty genes with their One Nation genes. Labour is much more problematic in its balancing of Marx and Blair.

With America you feel the Democrats are just sort of boring. One doesn't] have to worry about them very much because they're not profoundly anti-capitalist or whatever. They're a bit in hock to the unions, and their liberalism is rather gushy. Trump for his part just expressed an ache that was in America and that matters in democracies. He couldn't be the safety valve that was wanted, and be polite. What he has done administratively is pretty ordinarily Republican.

One way of thinking about it is to remember that in our European context we had fascism, which was quite a powerful thing for several countries, and its main effect in those several countries, apart from varying amounts of oppression, killing and violence, all of which were reprehensible, was that in the end they produced an appetite for democracy. The modern Anglosphere democracies don't look like a breeding ground for fascism, but anyway fascism was not a permanent state in those countries which rather understandably succumbed to it. So what the hell. White-van-man America is what it is and it's one of the best bits of America, just like white-van-man Britain is what it is and it's one of the best bits of Britain, and it's not a good idea to have an elite that pisses on them morning, noon and night.

By the way, when I said I liked rich, I also like elite; I'm hugely in favour of there being good elites. One of the things that have gone wrong is we've had an elite that has been trained to hate the idea of elitism. That's tricky because we need a very, very good elite that knows what it's there for and is chosen by the people osmotically or politically. But if The People stop respecting elites and elites stop respecting elitism we are in a bit of a difficulty because the mass is inchoate. It's also preoccupied and bored, it works hard and wants entertainment and it wants leadership. So we're at a bit of a risk if we put the idea of leadership at a discount. We may get bad leadership or none and it's hard to tell which is worse.

RDo: Are we alright just for ten more minutes?

RDN: Absolutely as you like. Nobody has ever asked me all this stuff as though it was interesting that I should speak - nobody, not remotely. So this is the first conversation of this sort I have ever had.

RDo: Right, one question about mass affluence. You talk about over time through generations tastes becoming refined, you also on a kind of a physical and an environmental basis were talking about progress towards dematerialising economic goods, basically. I wonder to what extent you would actually share some views of the likes of Tim Jackson whose *Prosperity Without Growth* is very much based around an idea of doing without material growth but having an accent on the conditions for life and the activities and providing the time and resources for people to pursue the activities that most fulfil them? And one of the bits of research which CUSP is working on is looking at what are those activities where people find their greatest sense of fulfilment, and frequently they are ones in which people experience what's called "flow" whereby they get into an activity, they forget themselves, they lose themselves in the activity, frequently a creative one or semi-creative one; they're possibly making something with their hands or some other creative work. So yes, I'll just put that to you and wonder to what extent you might actually share that mindset?

RDN: Of course I share it whether or not it's people looking after one another or singing in an old people's home or being in a choir or birdwatching or whatever or woodworking or whatever. Of course finding a way of letting people get to that quicker is not a bad idea and certainly if there was a trade-off between consumption of obese-making meat and bigger houses and faster cars and that, the flow thing, you would want to achieve it.

The obvious thought is that, so far as we know, more and more people are doing more and more of the flow stuff and they would regard it as something that they can do partly because they've pensioned themselves up well enough to do it and partly it's because they've got a car that will reliably take them to the moorland where the birds are. So they might take a bit of persuading that somehow if they were less affluent they could have more flow.

Anyway, there's been a hundred years of prediction that technology might take care of tedious business, so again, one might have the affluence and yet have more leisure. (There is some chance that there will be a problem of a small minority of the population owning or profiting from technologies and becoming grotesquely rich whilst the rest of us fester.)

There is quite a widespread thought that people may decide that their prosperity comes at the price of allowing their minds and lives to be suborned and hegemonised by the capitalist consumer maw which, in that narrative, controls their economics, their politics, their media and much of what passes for the arts. I am sceptical of that case, but it intrigues me.

Another little case in point. I was very moved when this summer I went to Toledo - big ferry, big car, long drive. It was a city full of tourists being entranced by Toledo. And I went round it and was moved and well-informed by guide books and felt myself to be spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically alert. I loved the experience of Toledo, and I thought, "Yeah, and so do all these Japanese and Spaniards and everybody else. We're all here loving it and a lot of consuming has gone on to get us here."

Now, a lot of the time I say, "Thank God for television, it means I don't have to go to India." I don't want to have to go to India and I don't want the smells, I don't want the diarrhoea, I don't want to be that close to the poverty, but with the television I have the most fantastically rich if vicarious experience of it. I have dematerialised my experience of India and I've been in enough other smelly poor places where I'm upset by the poverty without having to go to India to have that flow, I can see it on telly. And yet I loved Toledo and I'm not going to be the person to say to people, "No, you're Chinese, stay in bloody China and have Toledo on a television." I loved being there and they're loving it and who am I to say, on what basis would I say, on what basis would anybody say one should stay away?

RDo: I really want to ask you [one thing] because it was a very interesting point. In *Rich is Beautiful* you write about how "orderliness and progressiveness have their own message about and to death: their cry is of defiance against the entropy we know is the underlying fate of our universe. So sometimes we buy something new, and love it for being ultra-modern, and should perhaps acknowledge (as when we smoke) that we are deliberately defying death, and acknowledging it too." So there's a message there about some of the meanings that we can find in consuming things and about technology and progress and novelty and so on in which we are taking some extra meaning and enjoyment over and above the actual things themselves. And this is interesting because this is one of the only references to this point. Where does death and the awareness of morality fit into your understanding of affluence and spirituality?

RDN: I should have said at some point before this that I don't fundamentally believe the Greco-Christian take on what it's all about. I don't believe that we should get rid of ambition, I don't believe that we should be free of the world's material needs or ambition and all of that detachment stuff. I don't put those at a discount and say we've got to look up there above the material world and the present. We're here, this is where we live. Alasdair MacIntyre says that Edith Stein, who's my current little obsession, is onto that, as was Teresa of Avila. We have to live, even when we aspire to spirituality, as humans. I think that is a rather Jewish or Levantine thought.

In our time and for many of us if spirituality has any meaning it has to be a non-transcendental spirituality. That may be a contradiction in terms, I grant you. But the point about death, the beautiful thing about thinking about death is twofold. It sharpens the activity of examining your life - that is where I do agree with the Greeks, on the examined life. One's life has to be lived on the assumption that you don't know when death is going to come and you had better have achieved as best you can those things that you want to have achieved or which you want your grandchildren to know you did, and so whether you're 30 or 90, you should be thinking about death. Thirty is a bit young to think about it, 90 is a bit too late. But at any point you've got to be ready for death, if possible, and that informs life. Only the finality of life informs life and informs the examination of one's life as to what it would be that is actually worth bothering with, which I take to be very, very important.

But the image I have in my mind always is the man in the gleaming white brand new speedboat who may be having his spiritual moment on the bouncing blue briny of the Mediterranean under the hot sun with a bimbo or an astro-physicist in the back. And for all I know, for the rest of his days achieving that moment is what he is proud of, for whatever reason. And the person who's on their knees in the church may be experiencing exactly the same defining moment as the guy in the speedboat; we can't know.

And that's where the risk thing comes in. Radio 2 has a programme about the point of being human. I have often wanted to go to it and say, the point of being human is to tackle and take risks. Everything has an opportunity cost. Take the case of being a musician. You are risking a very uncertain career as a musician. But of course you're also risking not embarking on the more obviously stable career of accountancy that would have made you happy, had you but known it. Ditto if you become an accountant you don't know... etc, all of that. So every choice is a risk because there's a road not-taken.

I hope you'll see that this chimes with my view of our risk-taking as a species. We may in some sense pine for adventure, both individually and corporately.

RDo: So this is very much about throwing yourself into life as a good attitude towards life, being aware that one is alive.

RDN: Or being a monk.

RDo: But it's living intensely, is that your -

RDN: Or being a monk.

RDo: But that could be living intensely as well?

RDN: Yes, indeed, I do think I think that extremes are everywhere - a monk is an extremist, a musician is an extremist. But then there is also tremendous nobility in being moderate - say in being a supportive if unadventurous earner and parent.

Surely, adults often find themselves saying to a young person, "I don't care what you end up doing but for God's sake blossom." Now, does that resonate with them? Probably not. It just goes straight over their heads. One can't sensibly say, "Be fulfilled", or "Be true to yourself", because that's often just an invitation to indulge their current whim or fancy. I think the idea of a person or the human species blossoming has importantly to do with an understanding of, or a quest for, the many richnesses and opportunities and challenges one might have and have to choose between.

RDo: So my final question. The word which very much comes to mind talking to you is "humanist", going back to your first reference to Erasmus. "This is a preoccupational concern with the human potentiality" and you talked about the importance of the human enterprise going on. Now, you made a massive statement earlier where you said, "If global warming, for example, leads to mass death, people have to die anyway, what's really important is that the human enterprise continues." How do you approach the sincere views of a lot of environmentalists that they are sincerely concerned that in this epoch which they now dub the "Anthropocene" that there are genuinely existential risks to human civilisation caused, for instance, by careless greed, or maybe even by misguided intellectual exuberance?

RDN: Yes. A Lovelock would say, “Well the planet will go on without us and that’s what matters.” Other people would say that we threaten to extinguish even ourselves with our folly. I can easily imagine that we might do something or many things which turned out to be very silly indeed. I could readily imagine myself exonerating that on the grounds that at least we took the risk, at least we had the party, at least we tried to have fun or to make something, to be something, to be as serious as we wanted to be or trivial or whatever. Whatever it was, we did it, and then “bang”.

Well okay, Lovelock may be proved right, the planet spins on and, you know, between now and the end of the world something else happens that’s at least as interesting as the people that were there at, or even caused, the anthropogenic apocalypse.

But what are the odds? The odds are much more likely that it might mean that, say, only Africa is left, with some Africans - well thank God they’re very resilient people. The one thing you could say where Africa is world leader is that it’s a pool of resilience and they will pick up and go on. And they will not lack any of the things that we’ve already got; the stuff that matters, they will have. Providing there’s some computers and Wikipedia is downloaded and all the books and the Enlightenment and all of that, they’ll still have it all and they’ll still be the living embodiment of human potential because it’s in our heads and our skills, not in our numbers or even in most of our stuff. I wouldn’t have our aspirations cramped by the thought that we might cock it up and produce a world with only a billion human beings in it. A billion’s not a bad starting point. And what are the germs, what are the threads of civilisation, what are the threads of the human enterprise that matter and are they likely to be broken? No, I think they’re likely to be there still.

Of course I like post-apocalyptic movies, they amuse me and they thrill me. I like these big imaginings of what would happen if it had to start all over again. It might be a bit cavemanish at first but somebody would find a computer and find a way of plugging it in and, you know, it all would start up again and we wouldn’t have unlearned anything. So far as I understand it, we’ve never unlearned anything.

RDo: Okay. So my very final question is do you have any questions or suggestions for me? Which you don’t need to answer right now, you could...

RDN: No, let it be. I would need to see what you write to be useful in that because you've been very quiet and very good and let me rave on, so I know very little more of you now than I did before. But we will equalise that. And it may be anyway that off-thesis we're in touch or not about other stuff. Right now I'm drained, there isn't much more where that came from except for lots of jokes and a certain number of life experiences, but, I mean, the big stuff is in this recording. And you've bothered to read my books. A couple of reviewers ploughed through them, but they're mostly unread books. I mean, the best ideas in *Rich is Beautiful*, or any of the others, did not go on to be big things out there in the ether. They were quite useful but they're unread. So I am very pleased that this recording is a pretty decent record of what I most wanted to say.

I loved your questions and I liked the whole spiritual dimension that you've got lying around behind your thesis. I like every bit of it. Of course I accuse you of being likely to be, willingly or not, stuck in a groove. I assume there are PC, green, anti-materialist parameters outside which it would be inconvenient of you to come to certain conclusions. Certain conclusions would be deeply inconvenient to the groove that the groove wants you to be in. That groove may be much looser than I take it to be, I'm being cynical and -

RDo: Well it's looser than it would have been a few years ago. I remember actually it was *Rich is Beautiful* that I read originally and I must have read one or two of the reviews at the time, and I did read it at the time -

RDN: Oh really....?

RDo: and it did make me cross, yes, and the thing is ...

RDN: The trouble is my awful flippancy.

RDo: (Laughs)

RDN: Do you see, there is an awful...

RDo: No, that's quite fun though, that's quite fun.

RDN: Well yeah, but not if you're on the wrong side of it.

RDo: But more recently I am, well, I'm quite critical of aspects of environmentalism as well and I've become less interested in writing

things to try to demonstrate that I'm right and that other people are wrong and more interested in trying to understand why I disagree with people, why they disagree with me, trying to seek some common ground, and particularly on issues on the environment because they're so polarised. If you take an environmentalist position seriously, which I do on things like climate change and think that does require very urgent and dramatic action on things like decarbonising our energy systems, that will require such rapid transition that it'll require a lot of social consensus and solidarity, and when you consider that -

RDN: But that solidarity must be such a long time in the making. It's a decadal, if not a generational thing to achieve, and in that time, on your own analysis probably, it's a busted flush, it's too late. So, again, you know, let's hope it doesn't require social cohesion to achieve it because that takes too long to build.

RDo: Yes, well in any case it's the right thing to be pursuing and not least in terms of responding to environmental change that, again, we'll need social cohesion for that.