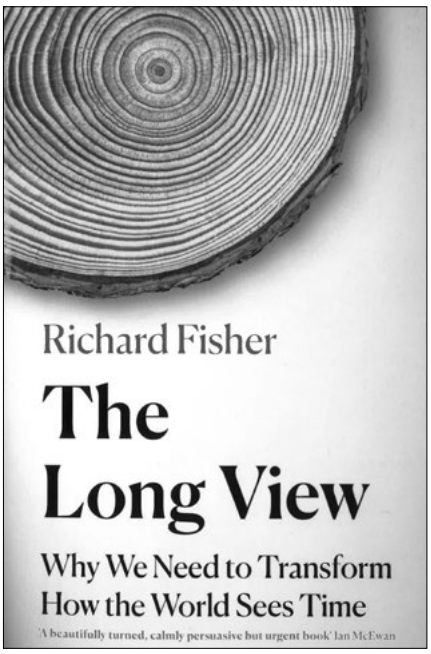
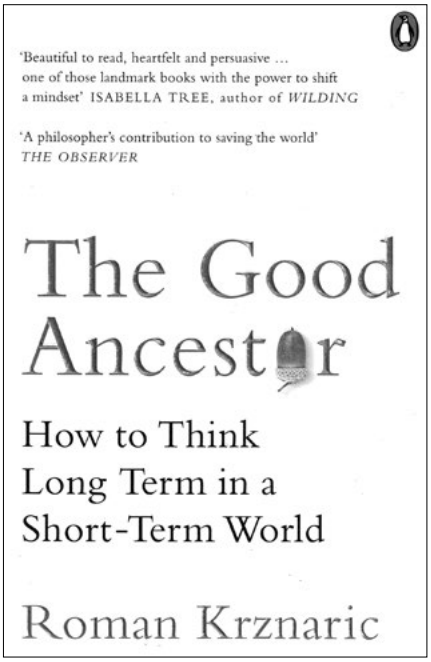
# Richard Fisher: The Long View: Why We Need to Transform How the World Sees Time
# Roman Krznaric: The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World

*Reviewed by Grace Clover*

Trees have long populated the allegorical world of long-term thinking, taken to represent long-term growth and long-sightedness, aged wisdom, and stability in the natural world. In *The Good Ancestor* (2020), Roman Krznaric – a public philosopher and senior researcher at Oxford University's Centre for Eudaimonia and Human Flourishing – even proposes the phrase 'acorn brain' as a synonym for a long-term and self-reflective mindset, a sentiment which is upheld in Richard Fisher's work *The Long View* (2023). Fisher – a trained geologist turned journalist who writes on themes of time perception, long-term thinking, technology, and philosophy – takes this ecological metaphor one step further, noting the powerful imagery of stones as symbols of deep time and constancy. Krznaric also emphasises the symbiotic relationship we have with the natural world, declaring he felt an "an awe, a reverence, and an expanding sense of now" while looking at the felled trunk of an ancient sequoia tree (54). Beyond this however, Krznaric – the author multiple monographs on the themes of empathy and the power of ideas – seems more inspired by economic and political metaphors, writing that we treat the future "distant colonial outpost devoid of people" subject to ecological degradation and nuclear waste (7).




Beyond their semantic choices, there are a number of important similarities between the texts: Both authors note a range of existential risks – defined by Krznaric as "low-probability but high-impact events which could be caused by new technologies" (5) – which might be mitigated by the adoption of a long-term mindset, including threats from artificial intelligence, genetically engineered pandemics, and nuclear war. Though not defined as existential risks, they both also list slow-burning problems which are consistently ignored by those in power, including a failure to invest in preventative healthcare, child poverty, and ongoing racial injustice. Most importantly, both Krznaric and Fisher make the threat of ecological collapse the key thematic focus of their works.

Described in just broad brushstrokes, both authors aim to promote a global shift towards long-term thinking, mitigating the risk of civilisational collapse, and establishing a harmonious and sustainable relationship between humans and the natural world. Thus, despite some key divergences (which will be expanded upon later), the journey to becoming a 'good ancestor', and the search for the 'long view' are in many ways two mutually supportive offshoots of the same idea. Let's first explore Fisher's perspective.

Fisher's aims are twofold: To understand how blinded short-termism became integrated into our thinking and institutions and to suggest how we develop deeper temporal perspectives. He believes that short-termism is not innate, employing many examples of communities from outside the Western neo-liberal world with distinct kinds of long views. He defines the 'long view' as a temporal lens on the world, which allows us to see beyond short-term desires, sensationalism and immediate challenges and better understand our roles and responsibilities in the long term. It serves as an antidote to "time-blinkered" thinking (the pernicious and invisible spread of short-termism into all realms of society), allowing us to prepare for future risk, as well as being a source of hope and perspective in the present (11). "Time-blinkered" thinking is distinguished from being "present-minded", which refers to the deliberate prioritisation short-term goals as a response to emergencies in the present (78). Fisher portrays this allocation of public and private attention as a spectrum from "fast fires", such as upcoming elections and celebrity scandals, to "slow burns", such as growing inequality and climate change (77). Adopting a temporal lens would help us better understand the present as a

constant interaction between the past and several possible futures, rather than a transient moment with no consequences.

In *Part I: Time-Blinkered: The roots and causes of short-termism* Fisher offers a potted history of humanity's relationship with time, tracing the onset of our time-blinkered age into the 21st century. Fisher leads the reader through a series of vignettes, from the theatre of the second century BC to the industrial revolution, which saw an ever-increasing population being forced into synchronised working hours. He characterises our current age as one defined by "capitalism's unforgiving immediacy," embodied in the prioritisation of quarterly targets over long-term growth in the business sector (51). He also notes the shortening impact of election cycles on political thinking, quoting Jean-Claude Juncker, the former president of the European Commission, who wrote "we all know what to do, we just don't know how to get re-elected after we've done it" (75). Finally, Fisher describes (with some dismay about the state of his profession) the impact of the internet and journalism in promoting "short, loud and relentless" sensationalism (92).

*Part II: A temporal state of mind* offers an extensive psychological analysis of time-blinkered thinking. Fisher suggests that short-termism is culturally influenced; indeed, one of the key abilities which distinguishes *homo sapiens* from other non-human animals is our ability to comprehend the future and retain detailed memories of the past. Despite this, the future rarely features in our day-to-day experience, beyond planning for the coming days and weeks. Fisher introduces the reader to several psychological concepts which explain why this is might be the case. For example, "construal level theory" suggests that we perceive a psychological distance between ourselves and the future, meaning that we do not conceive of future life, needs, or suffering as concrete or even real (123). "Shifting baseline syndrome" refers to the acceptance of changing environments, which leads young generations to normalise the deteriorating environments that they inherit, without considering whether these conditions ought to be the norm (140). This also obscures us from appreciating positive improvements, such as moral and technological improvements, which become accepted into the standard societal framework. Further to this, Fisher analyses the relationship between language and the perception of time, encouraging his readers to replace phrases such as the 'distant' or 'far' future with alternatives such as the 'long' or 'deep' future. These alternatives linguistically bridge the gap between future and present and thus avoid the connotations of physical and psychological distance (166).

*Part III: The long view: Expanding our perspectives of time* is dedicated to describing a broad range of deeper time views, based fields as broad as science, religion, indigenous tradition, moral philosophy, and art. Fisher introduces the concept of "timefulness" coined by the geologist Marcia Bjornerud, which refers to being conscious of and drawing comfort in the age of the natural world around us, as seen in the rocks and earth we encounter daily. Referring to religion and spirituality, Fisher notes both the "continuity timeview" (192) – the transfer of tradition and belief across generations over hundreds of years – and the „transcendental timeview" rooted in a belief in eternity and heaven (203). Fisher also recounts the ethical basis for longtermism as proposed by theorists such as William MacAskill which sees the sheer quantity of humans who could live happy lives in the future (a far greater number than those alive today) as a moral basis to prioritise them at least as much as current people. Finally, Fisher introduces the reader to a number of artistic projects such as Katie Paterson's *Future Library* and David Nash's *Ash Dome* which reflect symbolically on our relationship with future generations and on the act of forward planning.

In the final chapter (285 – 297), Fisher summarises the benefits of deeper temporal perspective and achieving 'Deep Civilisation' in nine parts: 1) The long view is restorative. 2) The long view is a wayfinder. 3) The long view makes the present more meaningful. 4) The long view can be accessible to everyone. 5) The long view is democratic. 6) The long view can be politically unifying. 7) The long view leads to a healthier media diet. 8) The long view provides a clearer picture of progress. 9) The long view is an engine for hope.

It is clear from this summary that Fisher's primary focus is on the grounding, unifying, and positive impacts of a deeper time perspective. While this has important implications for the prioritisation of sustainable goals and policy which benefits "all people and living creatures in all time" (293), *The Long View* does not offer concrete policies for individuals or governments dealing with existential risks. Nor does Fisher recommend a single long view: While he seems most drawn to a long view rooted in the natural world and generational transfer, he also sees the benefits of religious timeviews, artistic gestures, and even many of the principles of the philosophical school called longtermism. What Fisher does offer is a holistic world view which can be adapted to each individual and society.

As I discussed, Fisher's background as a geologist is evident in his use of case studies and metaphors. He places particular emphasis on the profound impact of discovering tectonic plate movement on beliefs in biblical timeframes of the world. However, his style is also unmistakeably journalistic, showing a penchant for introducing academic case studies with anecdotal vignettes about the scholars involved. The impact of Fisher's breadth of expertise and sometimes anecdotal style is – for better and for worse – a monograph which reads like a beautiful patchwork quilt. He offers a very wide range of studies, from religious practise in Japan to small-town businesses in America. There is also certainly a cohesive structure and narrative which is satisfying to read. However, the reader sometimes runs the risk of skimming over concepts and case studies because of the sheer quantity of detail being offered. For example, Fisher frequently introduces psychological and economic terms in passing, which might appear superfluous to the reader not well acquainted with these academic fields.

Ultimately however, Fisher is highly successful in fulfilling his self-declared goals. The reader is left with a clear understanding of the development of short-termism in the past century. The detailed focus on the psychology of time-blinkered habits and short-termism is something that sets Fisher's monograph positively apart from other works on existential risk and long-termism. Overall, Fisher offers a personal but informative, engaging, diverse, and accessibility written book, with a clear structure and message.

A key divergence between Fisher's *The Long View* and Krznaric's *The Good Ancestor* is the extent the two authors critique the role of neo-liberal capitalist systems in enhancing the likelihood of existential risks. While Fisher is highly critical of the role of Western free-market capitalism – which he associates with quarterly reporting, short-term targets, and consumerism – he believes that capitalism can be reformed and cites new practices such as "conscious" or "inclusive capitalism" as potential ways forward (63). Normative theories for political change are, however, not Fisher's focus. Roman Krznaric on the other hand much more explicitly frames the journey to becoming a 'good ancestor' in terms of a

fundamental political, social, and economic structural change, seeing a central tension between the neo-liberal prioritisation of perpetual growth and the promotion of ecological civilisation.

Let's now explore Krznaric's perspective in more detail. Having introduced his thesis that we treat the future as a colonial outpost, Krznaric opens *Part One: The tug-of-war for time* by asking two key questions: First of all he questions how we can be good ancestors, drawing upon the words of Jonas Salk, the medical researcher who developed the first safe polio vaccine and left it unpatented for global use. Secondly, he asks how we can unlock and fully harness our acorn brains. These two questions demonstrate conceptual similarities between Krznaric and Fisher's works, as they seek to unlock the part of the human brain which can think far into the future, so as to leave a liveable, regenerative ecosystem and sustainable institutions for generations to come.

In *Part Two: Six ways to think long*, Krznaric proposes alternative ways to conceive of our ancestral relationship with future generations. He dedicates one chapter to each of these six perspectives, which he names: Deep-Time Humanity, Legacy Mindset, Intergenerational Justice, Cathedral Thinking, Holistic Forecasting, Transcendental Goal.

Under the banner of 'Deep-Time Humanity' Krznaric encourages us to acknowledge our own insignificance as a species. Compared to the age of the earth, homo sapiens have just around for just seconds. In accepting this, we can re-connect with a deeper sense of time which allows us to break free from the tyranny of the clock and acceleration of life and re-join the cyclical rhythms of the natural world.

Second, he proposes that modern society age should re-connect with the presence of death. In removing the societal taboo surrounding death, we would receive a "death nudge" which – rather than being a negative force – can act as a positive reminder of posterity (59). This legacy mindset encourages use to think of a communal legacy for many generations to come, beyond the direct inheritance we might leave for our children.

Third, Krznaric describes a sense of intergenerational justice, which instead of fostering empathy and connection between generations, encourages a sense of moral responsibility and justice between those alive today and those yet to be born. On this theme, Krznaric details the moral violation presented by the economic theory of discounting: the mathematical equation which discredits the value of measures to aid future people at increasing rates away from the present. This practise is used by governments and businesses alike to justify avoiding projects with long-term benefits if they have high upfront costs. Krznaric also touches upon various moral philosophical arguments for prioritising future generations on the basis of intergenerational justice, including Derek Parfit's (1942 – 2017) suggestion that people should be treated as having equal worth, regardless of when they are born.

Fourth, in the chapter named 'Cathedral Thinking', Krznaric lists a number of projects in fields as diverse as architecture, public policy, cultural projects, and social movements which either show a deeper reflection on our relationship with time or have showed long-term planning. Drawing from the example of the Victorian reform of London's sewer system, Krznaric explicitly problematises those in political or financial power being insulated from the impacts of crises they themselves often create. He demands that they a show a sense of urgency long before such problems begin to impact them personally or existential risk scenarios ensue.

Fifth, Krznaric introduces 'holistic forecasting' as a means of reaching a deep-time humanity. This perspective involves the acceptance of uncertainty as an inherent part of thinking about the future, while still looking for long-term trends so as to plan for multiple different future scenarios. Integral to our forecasting about civilisational collapse, Krznaric argues, is the S-Curve or sigmoid curve. This model has been used to trace the downfall of many historic collapses and shows that civilisations standardly reach an inflection point where the rate of growth slows, followed by a period of maturity, and then decline. Such a trend significantly challenges the Enlightenment assumption that progress can and should be pursued indefinitely – a criticism which is foundational to Krznaric's work. Without a full transformation of our global structures and consumer culture, we will be unable to mitigate the devasting impacts of dramatic decline, allowing issues such as drought, extreme weather, and food insecurity to become even more present in the future.

Finally, Krznaric promotes the value of a transcendental goal in governing our relationship with the future. Rejecting the idealisation of perpetual progress and dreams of techno-liberation, such as space colonisation and transhumanism, as solutions to impending existential risk, Krznaric promotes a goal he calls 'one-planet thriving'. This is defined as a society in which we live "within the life-supporting systems of the natural world", respecting its boundaries and capacities (156). This involves acknowledging that humans are not separate from nature but are actually "an interdependent part of the living planetary whole" (158).

In *Part Three: Bringing on the time rebellion,* Krznaric introduces a number of 'time rebels' who have pushed against the short-termism of our society. Drawing inspiration from these rebels, Krznaric proposes concrete political, financial, cultural structural changes which could guide us to becoming good ancestors.

To begin, Krznaric describes a system he calls 'Deep Democracy', the structural political counterpart to the psychological time perspectives he proposes in *Part Two* and that Fisher proposes in *The Long View.* Much like Fisher, Krznaric points to election cycles, vested interested of elite groups, and the pressures of social media cycles as causes of political presentism. Further to Fisher however, Krznaric details the structures which he argues prevent us reaching political longtermism, problematising the lack of international cooperation between nation states, and the fact that future generations are completely disenfranchised in representative democracy. In response to these issues, he proposes four design principles which could guide us towards deep democracy: namely, 1) guardians of the future 2) citizens' assemblies 3) intergenerational rights and 4) self-governing city-states.

Firstly, he proposes that 'guardians of the future' should be appointed in national and eventually international bodies with the specific role of representing disenfranchised young and unborn people. He refers to the example of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, who has the role of reviewing all policy against specific sustainability criteria.

However, such appointments are just the first step, Krznaric argues. To keep these officials and institutions in check, and to ensure diversity and inclusivity in representation, he writes that citizens' assemblies – randomly selected from all citizens aged 12 and upwards – should support the work of 'guardians'. Assemblies would have a defined enforcement power and meet with experts to discuss themes related to being a 'good ancestor'.

The enshrinement of intergenerational rights in international law, Krznaric argues, would also act as a guiding mark for citizens' assemblies and help them hold governments and organisations to account. Specifically, Krznaric strongly advises establishing "eco-

cide" as crime in international law; that is, "extensive destruction of the natural living world" (186) which would transform our perspective on the world, seeing it as a living being, rather than private property. This perspective change is already implemented in Bolivia with the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, which gives nature equal rights to humans.

Finally, Krznaric notes the power of cities and city states to go above and beyond national and international law to transform their environment into a sustainable, citizen-friendly urban spaces. Alongside a 'deep democracy', Krznaric proposes the need for a 'regenerative economy' to replace the current system of speculative capitalism. Such a global economy would meet "human needs within the biophysical means of the planet, generation after generation", creating an ecological civilisation in balance with the regenerative systems of the Earth (195). He cites the study *The Limits to Growth,* published by Donella and Dennis Meadows in 1972, which shows that if the current growth in population, industrialisation, and resource use continues, the limits to growth will be reached in the next hundred years, leading to a fundamental decline in human welfare (199). Krznaric also refers to the ecological economist Herman Daly who notes that the "economy is a subsystem of the larger biosphere that is finite and not growing in size, which means that the economy's material throughput cannot keep growing forever" (199). To this end, Krznaric proposes five economic measures, including the taxation of stocks based on the amount of time they are held for, the promotion of a circular and localised economy, and the democratisation of (renewable) energy. This third measure would avoid renewable energy becoming held by a small elite, helping mitigate the impacts of a 'climate apartheid' – a situation in which the rich would be able to insulate themselves from the impacts of climate change. Finally, Krznaric – as influenced by the environmentalist George Mombiot – proposes a focus on rewilding rather than conservation, allowing ecosystems to return to a place of wildness which can sustain itself, rather than conserving the current depleted ecological state. This would create new natural carbon solutions and prevent biodiversity loss.

Finally, Krznaric details the importance of a cultural transformation in supporting the systems of deep democracy and regenerative economy. Much like Fisher, Krznaric discusses artistic projects such as John Cage's *As Slow as Possible* and Kate Paterson's *Future Library* which thematise our relationship with time, noting the ability of art and literature to foster a shared identity with future generations.

One can only conclude that Krznaric is successful in fulfilling his self-declared goal to fill the 'intellectual vacuum' surrounding long-term thinking. He provides a conceptually sound, wide-ranging, academic, but empathetically argued text which not only defines long-termism but speaks volumes for its benefits. One could also argue that Krznaric is successful in bringing long-term thinking away from the academic and scientific margins where it resided in 2020, providing space for authors such as Fisher to write works on the topic for a slightly broader readership. Indeed, Fisher's monograph shows multiple points of influence from Krznaric's work, including many of the same cultural and political examples detailed particularly in the chapter 'Cathedral Thinking'. Whether Krznaric is successful in influencing a global transformation of mindsets and structures is unfortunately much harder to measure.

Structurally, there are moments in Krznaric's text which feel somewhat repetitive. For example, at three separate points in the text he raises the contentious question whether long-term planning is most likely to thrive under authoritarian regimes – once in relation to Ancient Japan, once in relation to modern China, and once as an introduction to his discussion of the Intergenerational Solidarity Index. While this question is very important to the debate surrounding political myopia and its solutions, it could have been answered (or in Krznaric's case, debunked) in one comprehensive section. Secondly, at times Krznaric appears to mention cultural projects in passing for the sake of it, without engaging as deeply as Fisher in their metaphorical weight. Accordingly, Krznaric's chapter 'Cultural Evolution' is less slightly less evocatively written than the two preceding chapters 'Deep Democracy' and 'Ecological Civilisation', and thus weakens the momentum being built towards the end of the text.

That said, this only further emphasises Krznaric's strength as a political philosopher, who is highly successful in making political theory accessible to his readers, while offering concrete suggestions for reform. An interesting point of comparison between Krznaric's work and the work of other political philosophers theorising about long-term perspectives, is his proposal of 100 years as a minimum threshold for long-term thinking. As Marina Moreno points out, in comparison to the strong longtermist proposals of scholars such as Hilary Greaves and William MacAskill, who include horizons of thousands if not billions of years, Krznaric's work might even be considered 'presentist'. Unlike Krznaric and Greaves/MacAskill, Fisher does not explicitly offer any defined suggestions of timeframes and promotes a long view which is just as much rooted in what we can learn from the past, as well in as looking forward.

In conclusion, I for one am more than persuaded by the arguments for deeper temporal perspectives proposed in *The Good Ancestor* and *The Long View.* Having reflected on 'long views', I am aware more than ever of the symbols of deep time all around us – be they in the trees and stones outside or in the art and culture we consume – and can see the positive psychological benefits of adopting a long view for current generations. An important second phase, however, is a wider cultural, societal, political, and economic transformation, which has the principles of a good ancestor at its heart. I can thus only encourage these two books to be read in tandem. The individual adoption of the long view can form a strong basis for the creation of a global society of good ancestors. Both Krznaric and Fisher open our ears to the voiceless majority of future generations and offer significant nourishment to the tree of long-term thinking.

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1 Moreno, Marina (2022): Does longtermism depend on questionable forms of aggregation? In: Intergenerational Justice Review 8 (1), p. 15.

*Fisher, Richard (2023): The Long View: Why We Deed to Transform How the World Sees Time. London: Headline Publishing Group. 344 Pages. ISBN-13: 9781472285218. Price £25 (hardback).*

*Krznaric, Roman (2020): The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World. London: Penguin Random House. 324 Pages. ISBN: 9780753554517. Price £12.99 (paperback).*