

Why We Think Only the Measurable is Real

Transcript of Charles Eisenstein's Talk at SAND (Science & Non-Duality) Conference

<https://charleseisenstein.org/video/why-we-think-only-the-measurable-is-real/>

The notion that “only the measurable is real” is a kind of reductionism that says that all of the difference, all of the uniqueness, every relationship in the world and the universe can be characterized by numbers. It's a deeper kind of reductionism than just saying that everything is built of these building blocks and they are built of smaller building blocks, down to the atom and electron etcetera. This is a conceptual reductionism that says that all of the difference in the world is just number. And if you want to be scientific about something you have to be quantitative. I know graduate students who get into trouble with their professors because they haven't quantified their hypotheses or subjected it to a quantifiable approach.

The problem with this idea that “only the measurable is real” and the validation or the cult of quantity, is that when we approach the world that way and begin to make decisions based on the numbers... and where do we get that habit anyway? It's from the money world, where you are supposed to make economic decisions based on essentially solving a max-min problem. It's turned into a theory of human nature. That human being seek to maximize their rational self-interest. And then it's extended into biology too. That all beings seek to maximize reproductive self-interest and are performing implicit calculations every time they make a choice or enact their genetic deprogrammed behavior, etcetera.

It sounds good, like science based policy, metrics based policy, but what happens is that it ignores everything that we choose not to measure, cannot measure or that is unmeasurable. Usually what we choose not to measure are the very things that would disrupt the status quo and the interests of the institutions that are already in power.

A prime example would be GDP as a measure for human wellbeing, as a measure for progress. So what is it actually a measure of? It's a measure of the total amount of goods and services exchanged for money. And what does it leave out? It leaves out tradition, relationship, sacredness, beauty, it leaves out actually all of the things that make us rich: community, in fact it's the opposite of community, because GDP grows when you convert relationships into services and the thing that people once did for each other without using money, like taking care of children, cooking, growing food, building houses, providing entertainment, singing songs, etcetera, get converted into paid services. So that's what gets left out and when we see reality through the lens of the numbers that we accept, then everything else atrophies.

The same thing is happening in climate change. It's such a familiar comfortable habit to focus on the numbers, that we look for the easiest way to do that: adopting a convenient problem in the place of an inconvenient problem that we don't know how to solve. So the convenient problem and the comfortable problem is greenhouse gas emissions which we can measure on a global scale and which have a linear cause, the levels of greenhouse gas is caused by emissions, that we can attack. Here is the enemy, very comfortable. What gets left out and this is why I think that the climate change narrative is a disaster for environmentalism, because it sucks the air out of the room for any environmental issue that seems to have no bearing on climate change.

For example the whales. Remember the days of “Save the Whales”? That was an important environmental issue and now you never hear about saving the whales. Because what did the whales matter? It's nice, we should save the whales, but what does it matter when we are facing near term extinction because of high greenhouse gasses? Well, maybe what we are missing is actually the salvation. Just to give an example, we decimate the whales, then the orcas are deprived of their major food source, so they begin to eat the seals and the sea otters and they decimate the seals and

the sea otters, which then no longer predate the sea urchins, so the population of sea urchins explodes. Then the sea urchins decimate the kelp forests and the kelp forests actually sequester more carbon than land based forests. "Oh darn it, we should have included that chain of causality in our measurements. The whales are important after all."

So from the mindset of the cult of quantity the solution to the failure of measurement is to measure even more. And the utopia of the metrics based approach to reality would be to encompass everything in one big dataset so that we could rationally administer the world through the precise application of force.