

# Singularity



Escaping our ecological quandary

Mohism resembles  
Jedi Order beliefs

"Darkness is not to be feared"

Cover photo by  
Aaron Neo

July 2010

# from the editor

It has been a month of cool mornings, hot afternoons, rains that seem to trap the heat rather than dissipate it, then a reversal of temperatures at night. Singapore seemed to be deciding whether to be hot or cold, and settled for rapidly switching between the two.

There comes a time when a polymath wants to do something more than affect himself/herself. Something bigger than the immediate family and friends. Something big, like the world and her other inhabitants.

I believe individual efforts sum up to unstoppable forces, whether in drips from the same person, or collectively from a group of people.

So in this issue, we'll take a look at how our Mother Earth is faring. I will present a few points and their merits, and you can then make up your mind on what to do with it. (Aaron's cover photo had nothing to do with inspiring this article. It was a coincidence!)

I thank Christopher Ng for writing an article on Mohism. He explains what the philosophy is about and compares Mohism with Confucianism. You will also learn practical applications to your daily life.

And finally, you will learn how a hero's journey is actually a metaphor for battling the darkness and the fear.



Vincent Tan

# Singularity

*scientia potestas est*

**Vincent Tan Wai Lip**

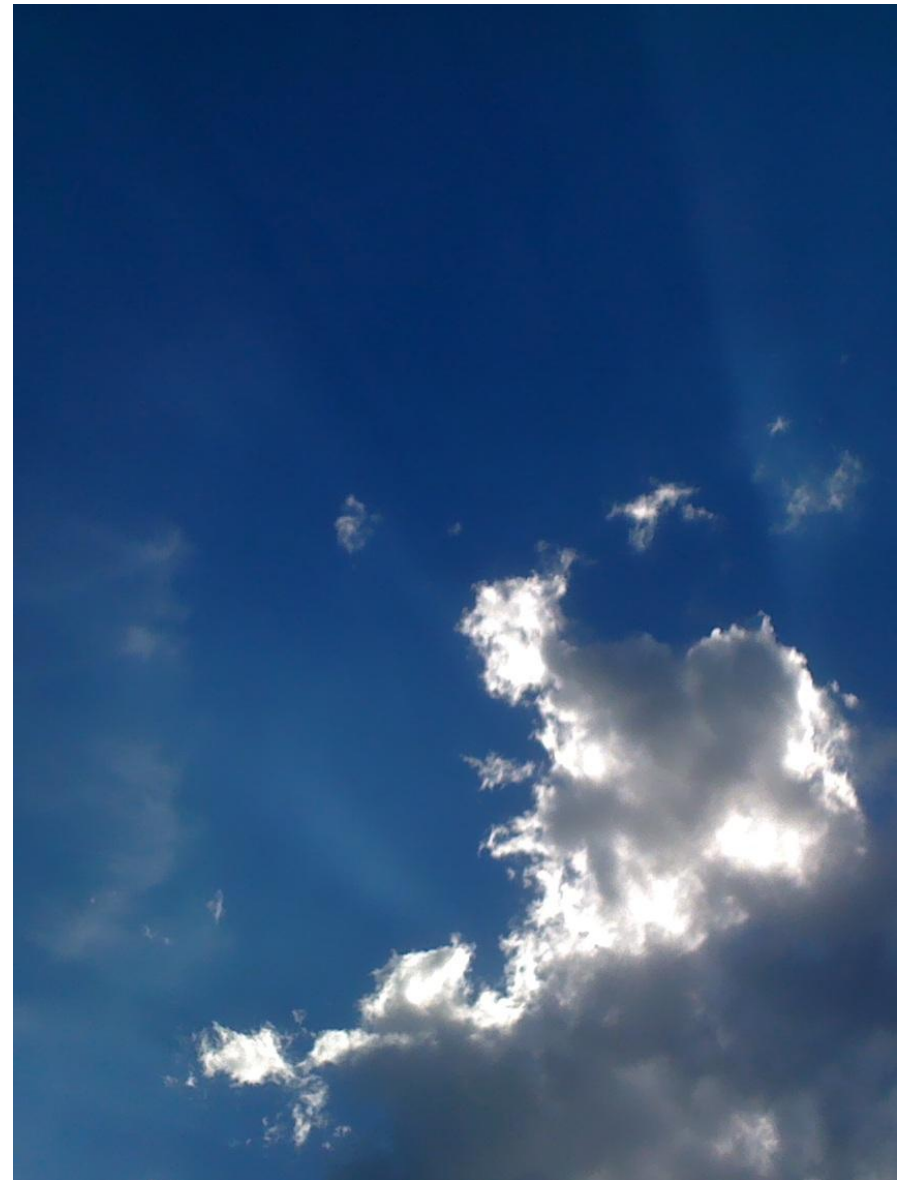
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ecological  
escape  
velocity

Eco-friendly, conservation, recycling, environmentalism, and "going green". These are terms associated with the concept of sustaining our planet.

There are differing opinions on this, some people saying our planet is in crisis, and some people saying we're far from any danger of it happening. What I'm going to focus on, is you. What you feel, think and act about it. This is not propaganda for or against the "planet crisis" argument. This is about you being aware of the situation, and making up your own mind about it. We can then have a discussion on it.

To ward off accusations of pretentiousness and hypocrisy, yes, I do support recycling, and that we should be concerned about our planet's sustainability. But I'm not a fanatic about it. And this non-fanaticism is partly due to me consuming little. I'll get to this point in a bit.

I am going to present to you, *The Story of Stuff*, a video by Annie Leonard. She's basically saying that blatant consumerism and capitalism (of America in particular) are destroying Earth. Then there's *The Story of Stuff, The Critique*, a 4-part video series by Lee Doren calling out the factual incorrectness in Annie's video. You're encouraged to watch the videos and get a more balanced view of the situation (videos can be found on YouTube).

## “We should be concerned about our planet's sustainability”

Some of Annie's points in her video were:

- **Planned obsolescence**, where manufacturers design their products to be unusable as soon as possible and yet last long enough that people still buy them.
- **Perceived obsolescence**, where peer pressure "forces" people to buy new versions. For example, in fashion and technological gadgets.
- **Recycling on an individual basis** is still important. It's just that non-recycled industrial waste counteracts much of our individual efforts.
- **Products with tightly combined materials** are difficult to recycle. For example, juice packs are made with a combination of paper, metals and plastics.

Some of Lee's points in his videos were:

- **Resources are not running out.** The greater part of the Earth's core (as opposed to the Earth's surface) is unexplored. A resource is something useful. Just because you don't know how to use something doesn't mean it can't be a resource (in the future, or to another person).
- **Technology is improving.** Computer parts are smaller and hold greater amounts of information, and they take less space if they go to landfills. Compacting waste is more efficient now, allowing existing landfills to take in more.
- **Toxicity** is meaningless unless risk is involved. A factory producing toxic gases as a by-product is not harmful to a person directly, unless that person lives close to the factory, thereby increasing the risk to that person's health.
- ***The Story of Stuff* video induced too much fear.** The video was shown in schools, and a 9 year old was afraid that buying Legos would destroy the Earth.

The finiteness of Earth's resources is real, unless reusability increases. In a linear system of consumption, we *will* run out of resources, regardless of how big and unexplored the Earth is. If we put reusability into the system, when a product at one end becomes the input of another, then a circular system emerges.

We already have this circular system. It's called recycling (I'm using it in a broader sense than its original literal meaning). The problem is that some parts are moving too fast (consumption and production) and some parts are moving too slow (reusability and waste breakdown).

We do not have to revert to our older way of life, when our activities did not impact the Earth as much as today. Some call it defilement. Some call

it progress. I call it change. Change is immutable and inevitable. It is neither good nor bad. It is our perception that makes it good or bad.

The past has gone. The question is, what are *you* going to do?

Ever since I started working for myself, I started walking. A lot. Mainly because I was cutting costs. But also because I get to walk among trees, feel the breeze on my skin, and hear the sound of birds chirping. (There's also the scorching Singapore sun and wicked withering weather, but I'm ignoring them) Public transport became a luxury for me, but I gained other luxuries.

“A 9 year old was afraid that  
buying Legos would destroy the  
Earth”

I've also started to buy groceries more often (because I'm working from home). And I tell you it pains me, almost physically, when I see the cashier lady dump my groceries into a plastic bag, and then dump *that* plastic bag with the stuff into *another* plastic bag. The reason is that the single plastic bag might break. I now have a cloth bag for carrying my groceries from the supermarket.

Your individual efforts are still encouraged. There are many ways you can help, and you can find them easily on the Internet. But you might also be experiencing the phenomenon known as *eco-fatigue*.

You suffer from eco-fatigue because you feel like it's taking too much of your time and effort to save the Earth, with minimal results or results that only becomes significant in the future. You have to change your habits,

your routine, and your commonly used items. You have to switch to a different brand of paint for your house, search for organic produce and get a water-efficient washing machine. It costs more and you feel it's a waste of time since the disasters might not even happen in your lifetime.



In summary, there are few short-term benefits. We are not hard-wired to exert effort and endure for the long haul. Consider the experiment conducted by Walter Mischel, where 4 year olds were given a marshmallow. The children were then told that if they waited for 15 minutes before eating that marshmallow, they would get another marshmallow. Some children ate their marshmallow, some waited.

It turns out that those who waited tended to be better adjusted, scoring higher on SAT scores, exhibiting self-control in frustrating situations and generally being more successful in their later lives.

“Your pursuit of the perfect lawn might be the death of you. Literally.”

There is nothing wrong with wanting (and getting) some short-term benefits from all your Earth-saving efforts. I have a simpler, more generic rule of thumb. And it's beneficial to you even if you don't subscribe to the "Earth is in peril" notion.

Consume less.

Eat less. Drink less. Read less. Watch less. Buy less.

As a result, you are more careful about what you eat and drink. The Internet has brought on an explosion of information that we'll never be able to finish reading in our entire lifetime. So choose higher quality material to read.

You don't have to watch every television show that your friends are watching. Nor do you have to throw your television away so you don't watch anything. Just follow a couple of the higher quality shows (I'm sure they are out there...). I happen to have a fairly high level of self-discipline so I've followed that suggestion easily. If you lack self-discipline, then you might want to consider the option of throwing your television away. But then there's the Internet...

As you start consuming less, you should typically experience better health, higher quality social interactions, and more interesting activities. At least I hope so. The one thing that *does* happen is that you start buying less stuff.

Switching to organic produce? No problem, since you can afford it now that you're drinking less alcohol. You start biking instead of using the car to travel short distances. It takes longer but you saved time from not watching so many television shows. And you no longer wheeze from climbing the stairs because of the cardiovascular training you get.



And your pursuit of the perfect lawn might be the death of you. Literally. You buy tons of fungicides, herbicides, pesticides and synthetic fertilisers to use on your lawn. Your son might play on this lawn. Your dog might eat some of the dirt. The vapours and particles float into your home. The factories don't have to kill you with their toxic chemicals. You're already doing it yourself. You don't need to buy all that stuff for a perfect lawn. A few dandelions here and there are fine. It might even make your lawn more beautiful by adding some colour.

The ultimate result is that you actually have the power to affect industries. And economics is why.

A company exists because you buy their products and services. You stop buying, and they disappear. You have more power than you think. Vote with your money.

The other complimentary solution to consuming less is producing more. Let's say we have a limited amount of resource and time. Other than consuming less to allow the existing resource to last longer, what else can we do?

**Effecting a quantum leap in our advancement in technologies and sciences.** This can greatly extend the lifespan of our existing resources, and we might even find new resources.

There is an **ecological escape velocity**, where our current way of life can be preserved (or even bettered) and our resources remain sustainable. Our top experts in their fields are working on renewable energies, better waste disposal methods and the like. Perhaps a new perspective and insight on the problem might help?

We need the specialists. I'm saying the generalists, the polymaths can help in effecting that quantum leap. We've certainly drilled at the problem long enough.

Now the question is, will you step up and help?



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# 墨家

What can we  
learn from  
the Mohists?

*by Christopher Ng Wai Chung*

The Chinese philosophy which most resembles the beliefs of the Order of Jedi is Mohism.

Mohism originated from the followers of Mo Zi who lived in China from 470 BCE to 391 BCE, and was one of the four main philosophical schools of China during the Spring and Autumn Period which lasted from 770 BCE to 480 BCE. The Mohists believed in Thrift, Discipline, Meritocratic Government and Universal Love (an early form of utilitarianism). If the Qin dynasty had not initiated an attempt to wipe out all other philosophic schools in favour of Legalism, the China that would have arose would have been very different from the China that we would know today.

[read the rest of this article in the full issue]

*Christopher Ng Wai Chung graduated from the National University of Singapore with a 1st Class Honours in Electrical Engineering and a Master's of Science in Applied Finance. He currently works in the finance sector doing IT Compliance and is an author of three personal finance books "Growing your Tree of Prosperity", "Harvesting the Fruits of Prosperity" and "Sowing the Seeds of Prosperity".*

*He also writes at <http://treeofprosperity.blogspot.com/>*

# The Descent Into Darkness

**I remember making a choice nearly 2 years ago.** I decided I'm going to meet people. Now that might sound silly to you. Then you should also know that by nature, I'm an introvert. I feel perfectly fine reading a good book at home.

My decision was made partly because I want to talk with interesting and intelligent people. Sure, it might boost my blog ratings and stuff, but most of my blog readers (you're probably one of them) aren't in Singapore. Networking in this case will probably do little for my Internet presence.

I'm meeting people to overcome my inherent shyness. Once I do that, I can still be an introvert. The difference is that I can then choose if I want to be around people or be alone. Having a choice is liberating.

The only problem? Fear.

[read the rest of this article in the full issue]

# have a nice day!

If you've enjoyed this issue of *Singularity*, I appreciate it if you tell your friends about it. You can find out more about the magazine and sign up for a notification mailing list at

<http://polymathprogrammer.com/singularity/>

I will love to hear your feedback. This is how *Singularity* can be tailored to your interests. Your comments are most welcome. And you're encouraged to submit articles. Information for submission at the link above. Send them to [singularity@polymathprogrammer.com](mailto:singularity@polymathprogrammer.com)

