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**Could Google become God?**

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The evolution of artificial intelligence could change the sustainability conversation.

What links the record $2.74 billion EU fine imposed on Google for abusing its market dominance, the firm’s relationships with DeepMind and Planet Labs, a study on the health of the world’s pollinators and an out-of-the-blue wasp sting?

The answer is that all drove me to take a closer look at one of the world’s biggest market gaps.

Simply stated, we need a global intelligence system to detect future planet-wide challenges before they become unstoppable.

The worrying thing about the EU fine, as technology critic [Evgeny Morozov put it](https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-observer1702/20170702/282011852379152), is that it tries to rein in "the Google of 2010, not the Alphabet of 2017." The focus is on Google’s comparison shopping service, not the oceans of data Alphabet is accumulating, feeding artificial intelligences that increasingly underpin our economies and societies.

Canadian colleagues often point me to Wayne Gretzky’s observation: "A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be." Similarly, regulatory authorities should ponder where the Google and Alphabet pucks might be by 2030, let alone 2050.

Nature famously abhors a vacuum — and markets, too — so my bet is that by 2030 one or more of those pucks will be headed in directions unimaginable today.

As Earth’s human population tears towards the 10 billion mark, its biosphere, atmosphere and oceans show increasing symptoms of strain. So, given our willingness through the ages to sacrifice a degree of self-interest to appease the gods of the day, perhaps we need artificial intelligences able to steer the world toward more sustainable futures?

**Re-framing the picture**

In terms of the market brief, one thing about God was that he, she or it always saw a bigger picture than we mortals and could point out the errors of our ways. Raised in countries where religion was an excuse for tribalism, I acquired fierce antibodies to all of this early on. But I long have wondered whether saving the world ultimately might require us to revive and repurpose our God-building instinct.

Blame sci-fi author [Frank Herbert](http://johnelkington.com/archive/inf-people-herbert.htm). When I took a sociology of religion course in the late 1960s, "Dune" was a set book. Why? Because it showed how a religion could be constructed with the express purpose of driving environmental — or, in Dune’s case, planetary — regeneration.

The architectures of the world’s monotheistic religions are not designed to protect our planet, instead seeing it as a staging post to somewhere better. By contrast, future generations will demand ethical and global governance systems with characteristics sketched by people such as Kevin Kelly and Larry Brilliant.

Time and again, vested interests blind us to such emerging challenges.

Kelly talks of the evolution of what he dubs [The Technium](http://kk.org/thetechnium/what-technology/) toward increased complexity, diversity, alignment with nature and "evolvability." He has hugely influenced my own thinking on the future of the sustainability agenda, as has Larry Brilliant.

Indeed, when I ponder the characteristics of the global superstructure we must evolve, one initiative that comes to mind is [InSTEDD](http://instedd.org/about-us/). Its mission, outlined by Brilliant in a [2009 TED talk](https://www.ted.com/participate/ted-prize/prize-winning-wishes/instedd), includes the early detection of emerging pandemics before they take hold. Reading Laura Spinney’s ["Pale Rider,"](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1110253/pale-rider/) I was reminded of the so-called Spanish influenza that a century ago may have killed more people than two world wars combined. With several such pandemics forecast this century, tomorrow’s global governance systems may yet emerge from the chaos that ensues.

Clearly, none of that was on the mind of the wasp as it inserted its sting into my throat, but it painfully reminded me of media reports I had read the same day on the impact of neonicotinoid pesticides on honeybees and other pollinators. A major field study co-funded by neonicotinoid manufacturers Bayer and Syngenta had uncovered significant effects, particularly on weaker beehives.

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**A God’s-eye view**

My early exposures to these dynamics date back to when asbestos was under threat of extinction and DuPont and ICI were disputing growing evidence of the impact of CFCs on the stratospheric ozone layer. As it happens, I advised both companies during that time, and saw at close quarters how denial works.

A key problem was that the computers processing satellite data had been programmed to ignore data showing anything like an Antarctic ozone hole. Such things were thought to be impossible.

Similarly, several years before I was dubbed "Chief Pollinator," I had a meeting with the chairman of Bayer. That day, protestors were staging massed bee "die-ins." But my questions about neonicotinoids were stonewalled with assurances that the science proved the chemicals were innocent. Most science, however, as DuPont and ICI found to their cost, is only as good as the latest data fed in.

So where next?

Pointers can be found in Yuval Noah Harari’s mind-bending book ["Homo Deus."](http://www.ynharari.com/book/homo-deus/) On his website, he asked: "What will happen to democracy when Google and Facebook come to know our likes and our political preferences better than we know them ourselves? What will happen to the welfare state when computers push humans out of the job market and create a massive new 'useless class'? How might Islam handle genetic engineering? Will Silicon Valley end up producing new religions, rather than just novel gadgets?"

Maybe Google and Facebook eventually will be broken up for antitrust reasons, as Standard Oil was — and Microsoft almost was. But such firms now occupy an increasingly important nexus in our economies and societies. And the fact that Google has bought [DeepMind](https://deepmind.com/) and taken a stake in [Planet Labs](https://www.planet.com/) hints where we may be headed.

With the AI genius of DeepMind combined with the God’s-eye view provided by swarms of [Planet Labs nanosatellites](http://breakthrough.unglobalcompact.org/briefs/planet-robbie-schingler-the-startup-taking-the-planets-pulse/), we may be much closer than we imagine to building global brains able to take subtle control of Homo sapiens and all its works.

Run well and in the future’s interests, they could help deliver true sustainability. Run badly — well, take a look at the film "Minority Report" and its exploration of the perils of predictive policing. The ethical, societal and political issues at stake are, as they say, far from trivial.