THRESHOLD

A Grounding Philosophy

The Threshold Initiative

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thresholdinitiative.org

Before you read this

This is not a process document. It does not describe what the programme does, how to participate, or what the next steps are. Those documents exist and you are welcome to read them.

This is a philosophical position statement. It describes what the programme believes about the human condition, about power, and about why the situation we are in is as serious as it is.

It says some things that are uncomfortable. It does not resolve them with easy answers.

If what follows persuades you of anything, there is one act available to you at the end. If it does not, the argument stands regardless.

> *“People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does.”*
>
> Michel Foucault

Power is the problem.

Plastic entered commercial use in the 1950s on a promise of necessity. The promise was delivered. Our lives are measurably better.

The question of what to do with the material when it was no longer in use was never asked, and was never resolved. It became rubbish, thrown away.

There is no such place as away. There is only everywhere. Two billion tonnes in seventy-five years, and everywhere now includes our blood.

This was known, measured, and written about as a threat to life on earth for over fifty years. The facts are done. The research is done. The understanding is done.

What has not been done is to stop it.

For half a century, every pathway has failed. Regulation has been outpaced. Voluntary pledges have been broken. Advocacy has been absorbed. Markets have not responded. Litigation has resolved single cases while the system continued.

The reason is not ignorance, and it is not lack of will. The reason is power. The wealth created by plastic does not want the wealth to stop, and has the resources to ensure it does not. [1]

This is not failure. This is function.

Power does not merely benefit from comfortable certainty. It produces it.

The tobacco industry engineered addiction, adding compounds to accelerate nicotine absorption, while simultaneously funding scientific doubt about whether smoking caused harm. Two operations, one purpose: manufacture certainty in the consumer, prevent it in the institution.

The plastics industry invented the recycling symbol and the consumer recycling campaign knowing, from internal analysis, that mechanical recycling was not economically viable at scale. The campaign was not a solution. It was a certainty product: the knowledge that you were doing your part, that the system was handling it. Guilt transferred. Responsibility privatised. Curve unchanged.

This is the mechanism. What looks like weakness of will in the individual is often the end-product of an industrial process. The certainty that makes amathia possible was, in these cases, deliberately manufactured.

I

Philosophy has circled the same question for two and a half millennia without resolving it. Why do human beings act against their own evident interest? Why, when shown that something causes harm, do they continue?

Socrates asked it differently: if virtue is knowledge, why do people who know what is good choose otherwise? He concluded that they did not really know. That genuine knowledge of the good would compel action toward it. That what we call weakness of will is, at root, a failure of understanding.

He was wrong. Or rather: right about the mechanism and wrong about the solution. The problem is not ignorance, agnoia, the simple absence of knowledge. The problem is what the Greeks called amathia: the confident possession of wrong knowledge. Not not-knowing, but knowing the wrong thing with certainty, acting on it, causing harm, without malice, without awareness of error, because the certainty feels like understanding.

This is a more serious condition than ignorance. Ignorance can be corrected. Amathia resists correction, because the person exhibiting it already has the answer. They are sure.

Voltaire understood. “Doubt,” he wrote, “is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” The discomfort is precisely the point. Doubt requires holding a question open, tolerating the unresolved, living with the possibility that what you know may not be what is. Certainty closes the question. And certainty is comfortable.

We are very good at certainty.

Consider what we have done.

We identified, documented, and litigated the harm caused by cigarettes over half a century. We watched millions of people die of diseases traceable, with statistical precision, to a product they continued to buy. The evidence was not obscure. The mechanism was not disputed. The harm was measurable, individual, and fatal. And people continued, because the certainty that it would not happen to them was more comfortable than the doubt.

We have done the same with war. We have sufficient historical record to understand exactly what war does to human bodies, economies, cultures, and the generations that follow. The record is not hidden. It is the dominant subject of recorded history. And we continue, because the certainty that this war is different, this cause just, this outcome controllable, is more comfortable than the doubt.

We are doing it with AGI. Building systems we do not fully understand, whose failure modes we cannot predict, whose alignment we cannot verify, at a pace that makes careful evaluation impossible, because the toy is too interesting and the advancement too intoxicating to stop.

For all the genius of human advancement, we are incredibly stupid in the choices we make. This is not a moral judgement. It is a diagnostic. The genius and the stupidity are not opposites. They are

connected. The same impulse that builds the toy cannot easily be turned against it. The intelligence that produces capability does not automatically produce wisdom about its use.

When we say power is the problem, we usually mean legal and financial power. The lobby in Brussels. The regulatory capture in Washington. The investment flows that price alternatives out of reach. These are real.

But there is a third register, and it is less visible precisely because it operates through us, not on us. Social power, the power of normalisation, of comfort, of what it is acceptable to know and to say, does not announce itself. It has already done its work by the time you reach for a plastic bottle without thinking.

The plastic convenience economy is not only financially entrenched. It is socially normalised. Questioning it has a social cost. You become the person who complicates lunch, who reads labels, who raises uncomfortable questions at the wrong moment. The social reward for certainty, for knowing that it is fine, that the scientists disagree, that someone would have said something if it were really serious, is the maintenance of ease. Of frictionlessness. Of belonging to a world that is not in crisis.

This is amathia at scale. Not one person holding a wrong certainty. An entire culture transmitting and reinforcing the comfortable position, rewarding those who hold it and making the cost of doubt socially visible.

Socrates asked the uncomfortable question. His fellow citizens killed him for it.

II

The person who does not respond to this situation is not one kind of person. They are three.

The oblivious have not connected the industrial decision to the personal consequence. The plastic in your bloodstream passed through systems so diffuse, so geographically and temporally dispersed, that you could not trace the path if you tried. This illegibility is not accidental. The distance between production and harm is a feature of the system.

The complicit know enough. They have read something, heard something, felt the edge of the question. And they have made a deal, not cynically, not consciously, but effectively: not to look further. The convenience is real. The cost of looking is real. The deal is struck.

The cowardly see. They understand, at some level, what the evidence means. And they turn away, because the implications of full seeing are more than they are willing to carry. This is not weakness of character. It is a human response to an impossible-seeming demand.

None of these positions require bad intent. All three produce the same result.

And then there are those who are none of these three. The majority, perhaps, of the people who encounter this argument. They know something is wrong. They have read enough, felt the discomfort, looked for somewhere to put the knowledge and found nothing adequate. They are not waiting to be convinced. They are waiting for direction, for facility, for a place where the act of knowing can become the act of doing. That is a different problem from obliviousness or complicity. It is the one this programme was built to address.

Why, when the harm is to the self, when it is your arteries, your children's blood, your placenta, does the same pattern hold? A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine in March 2024 found that people with detectable levels of microplastics in their arterial plaques faced approximately four and a half times the risk of heart attack, stroke, or death over the following three years compared to those without. This is not a contested finding. It appeared in the most rigorous medical journal in the world. It was not buried. [2]

Why are we not more alarmed?

Because alarm requires sustained doubt. And doubt is not pleasant. And the toy, not just plastic but the entire architecture of comfort and convenience and frictionless modern life that plastic enables, is too beloved to give up on the basis of something we would rather not know.

When does it become too much to explain away? The answer is not when people feel it. The human capacity for not-feeling evidence of self-harm is, as we have established, essentially unlimited. The answer is when institutions, courts, insurers, regulators, the bodies that run on certainty as a structural requirement, can no longer maintain the amathic position. When the cost of institutional certainty exceeds the cost of institutional doubt.

That moment is approaching. It is not here.

III

What, then, needs to happen?

Litigation moves at institutional speed. Courts have been weighing these questions for years. Regulatory bodies have been receiving the evidence for longer. International advisory bodies have spoken. The institutions are moving. The production curve is not. The legal machinery, however correct and however necessary, does not operate on the timeline the harm requires.

The only force strong enough, and fast enough, is the market. Consumer choice at sufficient scale changes the production economics before any court can. When the demand signal shifts, the investment case shifts. Not through a judgment. Through a price.

But here we return to our problem. The force we are proposing to rely on is the same agent whose limitations we have just described. The same humans: oblivious to the connection, complicit in the convenience, flinching from the implications, sustained in their amathia by a culture that makes

certainty comfortable and doubt costly. We are asking them to change the market.

This is where instinct must be distinguished from cynicism.

What we have described is a condition of the human animal under specific structural circumstances. It is not a fixed characteristic of the species. The capacity for outrage is not absent. It is latent. Very few people, confronted with clear evidence of injustice, remain unmoved. The callous exist, and their number is not negligible. But they are not everyone. They are not even most people.

What the current structural conditions do is not destroy the impulse. They suppress it. They make the connection invisible, the cost of doubt high, the action unavailable. The Spotter is not a new kind of person. The Spotter is what most people already are, in the moments when the conditions permit them to be.

This matters for what we are building. The task is not to manufacture outrage from nothing. The task is not to construct a podium and invite people to perform their concern. The impulse is there. What it needs is a channel: a mechanism through which it becomes consequential rather than private, cumulative rather than individual, legally actionable rather than emotionally exhausting.

Three things need to happen simultaneously, not in sequence.

The connection must become legible.

Evidence with a chain of custody, specific, local, verifiable, placed in a permanent record before any conclusion is drawn, makes the harm visible in the way moral argument never can. Not “plastic is dangerous.” But: this sample, from this location, on this date, by this method, contains these compounds at these concentrations. That is a different kind of claim.

The individual act must feel consequential.

The classic failure of collective action is the sense that one person’s choice does not matter. When each observation becomes part of a cumulative record that feeds institutional action, the feeling changes. Your act is not a gesture. It is a data point in an evidence base that courts, regulators, and insurers cannot dismiss.

The social cost of certainty must rise.

Amathia is socially transmitted. It is also socially reversible. As the record builds, as the evidence accumulates in a form that institutions cannot ignore, as the question becomes normal to ask, the comfort of certainty becomes harder to maintain. This is the slowest of the three. It is also the most durable.

None of these are guaranteed. They are bets, not convictions. The architect of this programme is also its author. That is a conflict of interest and it should be named. What we claim is therefore methodological: the evidence is not our interpretation. It is a record with a chain of custody that predates any conclusion we might draw from it. We are not asking people to trust us. We are building something they can verify independently of who built it.

The aim is not to destroy the plastic production industry. Not to achieve zero production. It is to bend the trajectory: from the catastrophic path it is on, toward something less consequential. That gap between one trajectory and another is what the programme exists to create. The willow bends with the storm and survives. What we are building is made to bend.

There are people who make the other choice.

Not because they have resolved the philosophical question. Not because they are braver or more virtuous or less susceptible to the comfort of certainty. But because, for whatever reason, something they saw that they could not unsee, they will not look away.

This is the deliberate act of not looking away. It is not heroism. It is a choice.

We call that person a Spotter. We built The Threshold Initiative for them. Not with the belief that human nature is better than it is, or that evidence alone changes outcomes, or that moral conviction is sufficient architecture. We built it because the record, at sufficient density and with sufficient chain of custody, changes the calculation for the institutions that have been sustaining amathia. Not because it persuades them. Because it makes the position too expensive to hold.

The Threshold does not ask people to be other than they are. It asks for one act, freely made.

The wind is coming. A wind of change. Not negotiable. Not for or against any position in particular. It blows across everything and everyone.

What it changes depends on
what is ready to meet it.

Build toward it.

This document is a philosophical argument. Its empirical claims are graded using the programme's A–F evidence scale. Claims marked [D] are informed inferences derived from cited primary sources. They are not independently verified findings. The derivation logic is stated below.

1 — On the claim that wealth resists regulatory constraint [D]

The sentence "The wealth created by plastic does not want the wealth to stop, and has the resources to ensure it does not" is a structural observation, not an assertion of personal intent. It is designated [D]: an informed inference derived from the documented lobbying expenditure of the petrochemical industry, the historical pattern of capital behaviour under regulatory threat, and the structural incentive of production-scale industry to resist binding output constraints. It does not require malice. It is consistent with the document's own diagnosis: the people who hold this position believe it with certainty. That is amathia, not conspiracy. Lobbying expenditure figures are publicly disclosed in the United States (Federal Election Commission; OpenSecrets) and the European Union (EU Transparency Register). The inference does not depend on any specific figure.

2 — The cardiovascular study [B]

Marfella R, Prattichizzo F, Ceriello A, et al. "Microplastics and Nanoplastics in Atheromas and Cardiovascular Events." New England Journal of Medicine. 2024;390(10):900–910. Published 7 March 2024.

Grade [B]: evidence-based. The association between microplastic presence in arterial plaques and elevated cardiovascular risk is established in this peer-reviewed study. General causation has not been established to a legal standard. The finding appeared in the most widely cited medical journal in the world and has not been retracted or substantively challenged in the published literature as of the date of this document.

Principal sources

— OECD. Global Plastics Outlook: Economic Drivers, Environmental Impacts and Policy Options. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022. [Production and leakage baseline figures]

— OECD. Global Plastics Outlook: Policy Scenarios to 2060. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022.

— PlasticsEurope. Plastics — the Facts. Annual market data series.

— Ragusa A, et al. "Plasticenta: First Evidence of Microplastics in Human Placenta." Environment International, 146, January 2021.

— Leslie HA, et al. "Discovery and Quantification of Plastic Particle Pollution in Human Blood." Environment International, 163, May 2022.

— Full references for all programme documents: thresholdinitiative.org/references

WHAT FOLLOWS FROM READING THIS

If you have read this far, one act is available to you.

If something here troubles you, there is somewhere to put it. Download the Threshold app and become a Spotter: look at the record, and add to it what you see.

The record is being built now.

thresholdinitiative.org

The Threshold Initiative is an independent initiative in founding development, building a record of environmental evidence that no funder can own. Enquiries: info@thresholdinitiative.org