Sustainability According to Pinker

From *Enlightenment Now: the Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Steven Pinker, 2018

"It is a fallacy to think that people "need resources" in the first place. They need ways of growing food, moving around, lighting their homes, displaying information, and other sources of well-being. They satisfy these needs with *ideas:* with recipes, formulas, techniques, blueprints, and algorithms for manipulating the physical world to give them what they want. The human mind, with its recursive combinatorial power, can explore an infinite space of ideas, and is not limited by the quantity of any particular kind of stuff on the ground. When one idea no longer works, another can take its place. Why should the laws of nature have allowed *exactly one* physically possible way of satisfying a human desire, no more and no less?

Admittedly, this way of thinking does not sit well with the ethic of "sustainability…." The doctrine of sustainability assumes that the current rate of use of a resource may be extrapolated into the future until it rams into a ceiling. The implication is that we must switch to a renewable resource that can be replenished at the rate we use it, indefinitely. In reality, societies have always abandoned a resource for a better one long before the old one was exhausted. It's often said that the Stone Age did not end because the world ran out of stones, and that has been true of energy as well. "Plenty of wood and hay remained to be exploited when the world shifted to coal,...Coal abounded when oil rose. Oil abounds now as methane [natural gas] rises."...gas in turn may be replaced by energy sources still lower in carbon well before the last cubic foot goes up in a blue flame.

The supply of food, too, has grown exponentially…, even though no single method of growing has ever been sustainable. In *The Big Ratchet: How Humanity Thrives in the Face of Natural Crisis,* the geographer Ruth

DeFries describes the sequence as “ratchet-hatchet-pivot.” People discover a way of growing more food, and the population ratchets upward. The method fails to keep up with the demand or develops unpleasant side effects, and the hatchet falls. People then pivot to a new method. At various times farmers have pivoted to slash-and-burn horticulture, night soil [a euphemism for human feces], crop rotation, guano, saltpeter, ground-up bison bones, chemical fertilizer, hybrid crops, pesticides, and the Green Revolution. Future pivots may include genetically modified organisms, hydroponics, aeroponics, urban vertical farms, robotic harvesting, meat cultured in vitro, artificial intelligence algorithms fed by GPS and biosensors, the recovery of energy and fertilizer from sewage, aquaculture with fish that eat tofu instead of other fish, and who knows what else---as long as people are allowed to indulge their ingenuity. Though water is one resource that people will never pivot away from, farmers could save massive amounts if they switched to Israeli-style precision farming. And if the world develops abundant carbon-free energy sources…, it could get what it needs by desalinating seawater.”

Now prepare to answers these questions orally:

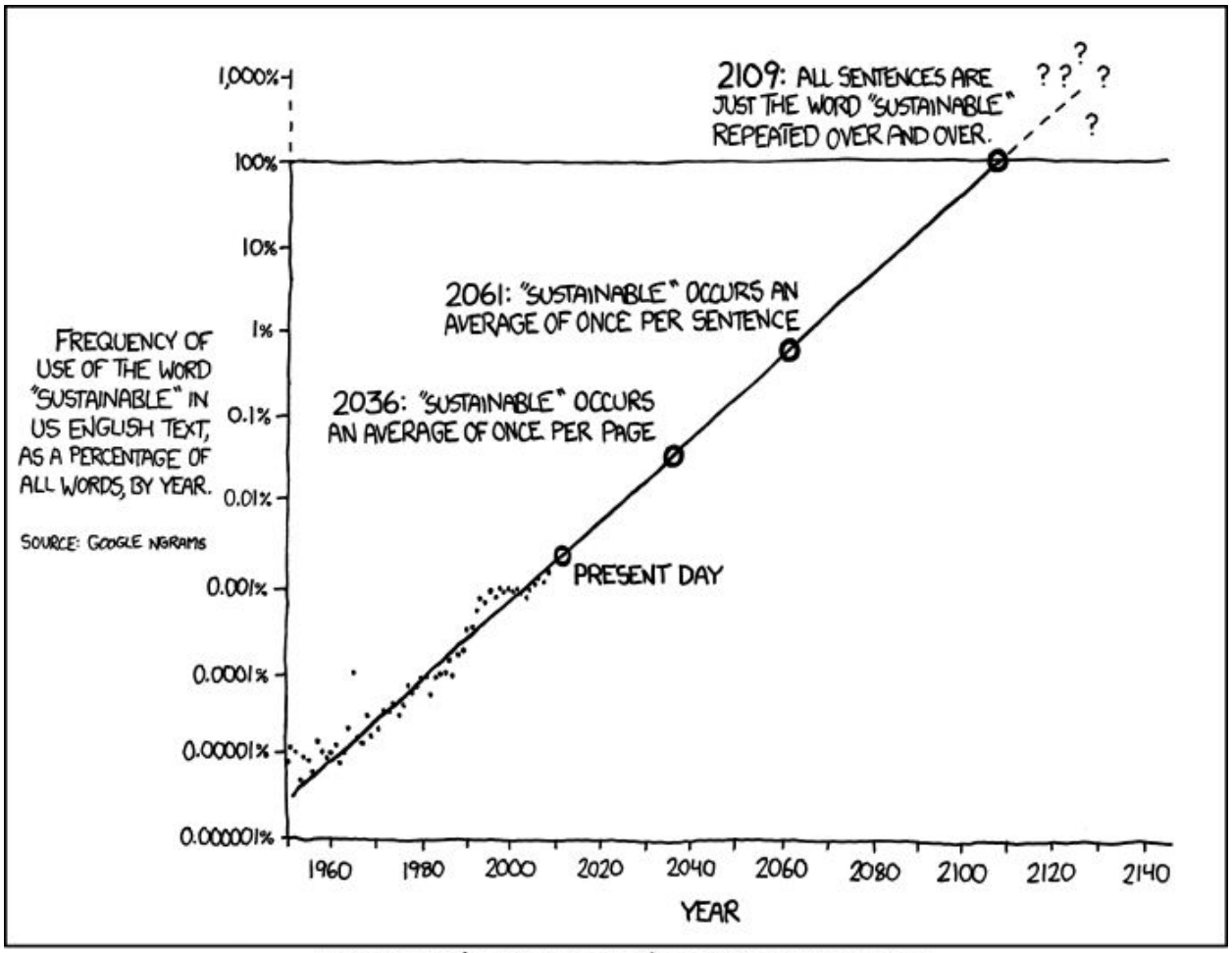
What is Pinker’s argument?

Do you agree or disagree with his argument? Why or why not?

Answer the following questions in full sentences on a piece of paper:

Do you believe that human ingenuity will bring us out of the climate crisis? Why or why not?

Look at the following cartoon and explain why it is funny using some of the ideas seen in the reading :



Source: *Randall Munroe, XKCD,* http://xkcd.com/1007/