

AN INCOMPLETE THEORY OF NEARLY EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED, SO FAR...

This essay began as an interrogation of a few of my assumptions. At the outset I had a disparate collection of ideas, with no overall direction, very few solutions, but with a sense that they were all connected somehow. I also had an open mind to what might come from combining the ideas. Upon reaching the end of this exploration, I've concluded that we should adopt world government, introduce a suite of weird and wonderful taxes, overcome stoicism, reject personal responsibility do away with being authentic, sort of, that we are grappling with a second alignment problem, and are soon to face a third, the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics is coupled with a Law of Emergence, everything meaningful is subjective, and yet not subjective, profound discoveries make no difference to our lives, until they do and that capitalism is beautiful and yet awful. I've concluded that I should meditate, regularly walk the dog and become a vegetarian - and yet am unlikely to do any of these things any time soon. Let's begin.

A BAD DECISION

In 2016 Debbie Wassermann Schultz of the DNC made a decision to prematurely support Hillary Clinton over her democratic primary opponent Bernie Sanders. This was with the intention to secure, what seemed at the time to be, the safest option for maintaining the democrats' leadership. However, this back-fired when the emails were leaked and fell straight into Trump's narrative that the election was "rigged" confirming every criticism of Clinton's entitlement and establishment cronyism.

Humans make bad decisions every day and occasionally they have disastrous consequences. Sometimes they do so en masse; 62,984,828 individuals then voted for the least qualified candidate ever to run for office.

WHY?

My purpose in writing this essay is to build a framework in which to think about the world, in order to make better decisions in it. We share the same future and the story of the community of conscious beings is made up of our own stories, which in turn are made up of the decisions we humans make. The crux of the essay is the position we are hard-wired to have ***inescapably value-laden experiences*** developed through evolution for the continuation of evolution. However humanity has diverged from this path putting us at odds with evolutionary imperatives, and forcing us to reconcile evolutionary instincts with emergent human values. It is this gap that we must acknowledge in order to thrive as an end in ourselves rather than simply a means to an evolutionary end.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO YOUTUBE

Today we find ourselves in a world of ever growing abundance and ever growing distraction. Although it may not feel that way too many; people in the west have it better than ever and even in developing countries quality of life indicators are rising. But this is not publicised, so people live under the illusion that the world is something they need to escape. If you ever make the mistake of going on the youtube home page without being logged in, you will see the result of a combination of a distracted populous and a burgeoning algorithmic lens that facilitates and amplifies our most base evolutionary instincts.

WHAT NOW?

Good question, in fact “What should I do now?”... is the primary question that drives minds.

This question is both at the inception of the brain’s evolutionary purpose, it’s what differentiates us from the plants. We have options and deciding our path is always at the very edge of our experience, whether consciously or not. It is the question we hope to control. It is this question that drives me to write this essay; the desire to live consciously, perhaps even free.

My answer at the beginning of writing this is...

I HAVE NO IDEA.

What I think I know are my opinions about a range of issues tied together by an intuition informed by overarching beliefs and values, but this doesn’t satisfy me. Intuition is a blunt instrument and I want to know that those views are built on a strong foundation and that they are consistent. In writing this, I will return, as far as is possible to first principles and hold none of my opinions sacred. My opinions, after all, being a result of my own experiences, are like the inherited religion of someone’s parents, why should I trust my opinions above others?

FORMULATING THE QUESTION

Before discovering answers we must formulate the question “What should I do now?”.

"WHAT"	suggests the answer is not self-evident and yet might be reasoned about
"SHOULD"	implies value and choice, both of which need to be interrogated.
"I"	refers to conscious experience and self-awareness.
"DO"	refers to the action determined at any moment.
"NOW?"	means in the present moment; fleeting and intangible and yet also eternal as it is forever "now".

FIRST PRINCIPLES

When embarking on an exploration of ideas, it’s important to return to first principles and recognise (there are always some) your founding assumptions.

Asking questions itself assumes a number of preconditions. First of all questions can only exist in a world where questioners exist, questioners can only ask questions in a world where knowledge is possible and answers to those questions can only be meaningfully reached in a world where logic can be relied on. If one does not assume that we live in a world that satisfies these conditions then exploration is meaningless.

1. Conscious agents exist
2. Knowledge is possible
3. Logic is reliable

In choosing to have a meaningful exploration - I concede these axioms.

ARE ALL QUESTIONS ARE WORTH ASKING?

I do not assume the validity of the question “What next?” in particular. Some questions are leading or otherwise flawed. In answering this question I seek to validate or invalidate this question. And if it is invalidated propose a better question.

THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG

Self and knowledge-of-self live in a chicken-and-egg paradox so, building a hierarchy of meaning begs the question “Where to begin?” - with epistemology or physical reality? The philosophers will claim that we must begin by interrogating what we can and cannot know. The scientists would counter-claim that we cannot ask this question without a scientific understanding of the source of knowledge; the brain and the world it perceives. Given that I have conceded epistemological axioms, I will build on a materialist foundation.

THE MATERIALIST

A materialist account of the world has the benefits of some degree of certainty in some areas, as opposed to the myriad ideas that have failed to come under rigorous quantifiability - namely; Philosophy. Further to this point, science has grown out of philosophy, and as such has built in mechanisms to mitigate philosophy's shortfalls.

EMERGENCE

Is there a general principle with which we can make sense of... everything?

EMERGENT LAWS

Now, I'm no physicist... but bear with me, we all have to make sense things and this is my attempt to, I'll try to keep it science-y. In a sense the universe itself may be inevitable. If you look at the way particles can interact, they can either pull or push other particles - this is all they can do. But apply this en masse to a field of points, even completely randomly, and you will create patterns - surprisingly lifelike patterns that will remind you of gravitational bodies, atoms, even life forms. With no design it seems there may be consistent patterns that are inescapable. This is an idea I have explored in [simulation](#).

ENTROPY

The 2nd law of thermo-dynamics states that order will tend toward zero.

THE FIRST ALIGNMENT PROBLEM: CHAOS VS ORDER

We see the emergence of order spontaneously all around us, that is because we are surrounded by systems that perpetuate by capitalising on the meta-process of entropy. For example; as the sun slowly dies via entropy, it leaks an energy stream in such a frequency that it can be consumed by a system that has been naturally selected for that purpose; plants. Gravitational bodies come together for the same reason, as do orbiting systems, as do brains. There are also a [2nd](#) and a [3rd](#) alignment problem which we will get to.

SUBSTRATES

I take a position that emergence is a fundamental property of the universe in which we find ourselves. That while the universe is trying relentlessly and *consistently* to destroy itself it seems we are the byproducts living on the very consistent substrate of continual destruction. At many levels we can observe phenomena emerging on top of more primitively ordered systems, most obviously the emergence of terrestrial life is by definition impossible without gravitational bodies to reside on. The process is so ubiquitous, and can be observed at so many levels it would be fair to call it a law of our universe.

ON THE SHOULDERS OF CYANOBACTERIA

One of the most memorable stories for me of substrate emergence is of course that of cyanobacteria, you'll remember it of course, it's very memorable. No? Well, what happened was for 2 billion years bacteria were the only form of life, and they were getting by with an atmosphere Bill Bryson¹ describes in which...

“there was no more oxygen to breathe on Earth... than there is on Mars today. It was also full of noxious vapours from hydrochloric and sulphuric acids powerful enough to eat through clothing and blister skin.”

Bryson relays...

“At some point in the first billion years of life, cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, learned to tap into a freely available resource — the hydrogen that exists in spectacular abundance in water. They absorbed water molecules, sipped on the hydrogen, and released the oxygen as waste, and in so doing invented photosynthesis.

Cyanobacteria were able to thrive by exploiting a substrate of water and in turn, over the succeeding billions of years raised the level of oxygen in Earth's atmosphere to 20% creating the substrate that would be necessary for mitochondria which would thrive and become the substrate for... us.

¹ A Short History of Nearly Everything

ENTROPY'S PARASITE

It turns out emergence requires the existence of an entropic substrate. Entropy, by breaking objects down, and by doing so consistently creates a vast store of raw material from otherwise non-useful material, this has been capitalised on by a process of cosmic and biological natural selection and is now being used by humans to create even greater order in the form of computation by taking a product of entropy; sand - and turning it into the silicon-based semi-conductors that power our smart phones and computers.

THE END GAME OF EMERGENCE

We could imagine an advanced civilisation, let's call them the Emergions who have colonised the entire universe due to a technological capacity for harnessing every raw material in the universe. The Emergions are so successful, that they eventually run out of universe... or more specifically they run out of all the raw, disordered material, because everything else is busily performing some function in their universal civilisation. Now, the Emergions are faced with a grim reality; their society is based on order emerging from chaos, but with dwindling chaos reserves they cannot continue or the system will stall out completely - not just locally, but throughout the universe!

Could it be that far from the universe seeing an entropic fate, the universe may well draw to a halt with peak order? Could all matter be subsumed into an ordered system leaving no further energy available? Alas, we are getting way ahead of ourselves!

A UNIVERSE AWAKENS

Even if emergence is an inevitable quality of the universe, why should an emergent system become conscious?

THE PROBLEM OF FINE-TUNING

When we apply anthropocentrism and assume that perception is only as we understand it to be, we fail to conceive of other forms of consciousness and so marvel at a fine-tuned universe with "laws" responsible for the existence of our own perception. Religious apologists will claim that the universe is so perfectly fine-tuned for our existence that this fact only be explained by an intelligent god.

But if we grant that other forms of perception are possible and could be formed by other physical laws then we have no way of measuring the probability of conscious existence.

PROBABILITY

In order to find the probability of a particular event, one must know three data points; what the constraints of event are, the "Sample Space" or the set of all possible events, and the number of possible outcomes that satisfy the constraints. So, when predicting the probability of consciousness we are missing all three necessary data points to calculate a probability.

1. We cannot define what consciousness is, and although we have one example of it, it is currently unknown how many different ways it might emerge.
2. We do not know the possibility space, in that we cannot define the limits of all possible universes or even the frequency of inhabitable planets for the one type of consciousness we know about in the one type of universe we know about.
3. Because we only have one data point of the emergence of consciousness, and very little scope in our ability to search for it elsewhere, we have no way to measure the frequency of consciousness, except to say, it has happened at least once in the observed universe.

AN ANTHROPIC UNIVERSE

The Anthropic Principle is a philosophical consideration that observations of the universe must be compatible with observers. In particular the Weak Anthropic Principle holds the tautological position that the universe is necessarily fine-tuned for consciousness. It seems we are the winners of a cosmic lottery. Our prize; consciousness.

THE LOTTERY

Imagine you wake up one morning to a phone call, you've won a million dollars in the weekly lotto draw, but you don't remember entering. The operator informs you that the government has, in a bizarre act of wealth redistribution, put your tax dollars towards a single lottery ticket every week for every person in the country. Somehow you have been completely ignorant of this fact for over a decade. You receive your cheque and are handed an NDA, the program is completely secretive, no one knows about this lottery until they win it.

What are the chances you would win such a competition? Well, since the lottery has been running for 10 years, your country has a population of, let's say 10 million, all of the money each week is allotted to the winner and no one can win twice, you have a 1 / 5000 chance of having won it by now. Not great odds. However, from the perspective of everyone who is aware of the lottery (the 2000 winners so far), the chances of winning are 100%.

We have no idea how many entries we've had in the cosmic lottery, but we know that all the other entries that did not win the prize of consciousness are not aware they haven't won. The fact that we live in a universe where there exist beings that perceive the universe, is actually unremarkable, on the contrary it is inescapable. If there were to be other possible universes that didn't contain agents capable of perception, they would never be perceived.

THE UNIVERSE REACTS

So, we are here, the universe perceiving itself. And this has been a long time coming, in fact the ability to react to the environment precedes the development of brains. First bacteria had large proteins called ion channels that allowed them to selectively transmit electrically charged cells called ions in and out, effectively communicating inputs from their environment. So, neurons are not the only examples of information transferral, they are just the most effective we know of, the first that have really had a good think about the universe. Brains gave their hosts the capacity to build predictive models of the world, and coupled with a nervous system allowed them to react accordingly.

WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

One conception of consciousness is that it is one and the same as the function of the brain, processing a stream of data into models. You could understand our consciousness as an input-output process. We input in the form of experiences and we output by reinforcing neural pathways. The neural pathways then shape our perspective of the input and the cycle continues.

LIBET'S REAR VISION MIRROR

Recent research by Benjamin Libet has demonstrated that decisions precede conscious awareness. The concept of decisions preceding conscious awareness was not new, and had been toyed with by western behaviourists in the mid 20th century and by various eastern religious traditions. It is illustrated nicely by the theologian and "Guru" Alan Watts when he described consciousness as "driving the car with eyes glued to the rear vision mirror". Are we really driving at all?

FREE WILL

Does the fact that we experience decisions after they are made undermine free will?

UNCONSCIOUS DECISION-MAKING?

Let's concede for the moment there is no free will; is it correct to say, because my conscious awareness comes after unconscious decision making, that it has no part in the decision? This is a false equivocation. Consciousness is best understood as an evaluation function in a computer program.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS EVALUATION FUNCTION

An evaluation function is used by game-playing programs to estimate the value of a particular game position. The idea that "The whole function of the brain is summed up in: error correction" was put forward over 50 years ago by British psychiatrist and cyberneticist W. Ross Ashby. Today, with greater specificity, Neuroscientist Dr. Andy Clark suggests that the brain is perpetually modelling the world and predicting the next state - consciousness therefore is the process asking "What next?" and weighing errors in this predictive state against the raw sensory input. Coded prediction mechanisms like this are used in the compression of .jpegs, mp3s and .mp4 video.

CONSCIOUS DECISION-MAKING

If the role of consciousness is to evaluate the results in relation to the stimulus and the action just taken, feeding back in a way that moulds your neurophysiology, which in turn influences future behaviour, then "conscious" decision-making could be the process of going through a fast, iterative process within the mind where neural pathways are strengthened in near real time.

THE NOVICE VS THE GRANDMASTER

If you take a game of chess, a novice player will consciously play out moves as far as they are able, a process of forced simulation, iterating on predictions in their own head before actually making the move. This could give us the illusion that this is how the mind makes decisions. However take, for instance, the GrandMaster; they play from strong intuitions (neural pathways) about a complex field of possibility, they build a sense of a move, not one specific path.

In our life we are in some places grand-masters and can play well intuitively like walking, talking or driving a car. In those areas, the conscious decision-making that a novice chess player employs in a game is simply read as hesitation, and results mostly in missed opportunities (and of course in a few close calls). We very rarely stop for a full 5 minutes to think about a given path as we would a chess move. More likely we will take a guess or leave the decision until it "comes to us" at a later time.

The fact that letting something “come to us” is often the best way to make a good decision suggests that conscious decision-making is not only seldom employed, but is also not well trusted. At best it seems that conscious decision-making is simply playing out a trial and error process, based on hunches that originate in our subconscious.

WHAT ABOUT QUANTUM MECHANICS?

Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle posits that there is a fundamental limit to the precision with which certain ratios of particle dimensions such as position vs momentum can be known. While this is often confused with the “observer effect” it is in fact a fundamental property of quantum systems, and not about observational interference. As the activities of the brain take place at the quantum scale it has been proposed that randomness may play a role in thought.

RANDOMNESS IS NOT FREEDOM

Sam Harris argues in “Free Will” that one does not get around determinism by the introduction of randomness. While this introduction of randomness undermines a deterministic and predictable universe, it does not make one’s thoughts any more free.

He is correct in the sense that flipping a coin gives you no more freedom to choose who kicks off in a game of rugby than if the referee ruled it by fiat. However this is like saying “There is no point adding white to black to make grey because you cannot derive grey from white”. A combination of two elements can produce emergent phenomena that are not present in either element.

DETERMINED RANDOMNESS

A caveat to determinism might be found not in randomness, but the determined application of randomness; “freeing your mind” as Morpheus would put it. Introducing a process outside of what is usual like having a shower (making a decision to change the state of your brain by physical means) or travelling abroad (exposing your brain to novel experiences) might change your brain’s state and reveal new pathways. This process of determined selection, to me at any rate, seems to be at the heart of free will, illusion or not.

THE COIN TOSS

Take for instance the kick off coin toss. Let’s assume you want to kick off. You call heads, the referee flips a coin... tails. You purse your lips, disappointed. The referee turns to you and says “Another go?”. For some reason you have another chance... and another... until you get the result you want.

This is what it is like making decisions, you have options you can run through in your head, they arise without your volition, but you can choose from a number of them. If you can’t see a promising option you can try something to change your state of mind and try again. Reduced to its component parts, each stage was either determined or random, but the combination of the two resulted in a decision based on *your own desires*.

INFINITE REGRESS

Sam Harris, in his essay “Free Will” often punctuates his points around free will by bringing them back to our desires - and claiming that we don’t choose these desires. In a pure sense he is correct. “Will” derives its meaning from “wish” or “desire” so, to speak of “Free Will” could be interpreted to mean your freedom to choose your desires. But when interrogated this interpretation is absurd. What would it mean to choose to want something you don’t already want?

OUR DESIRES ARE NOT PART OF FREE-WILL

No one is under the illusion they can choose their own desires, just try it; Can you want to watch grass grow for 10 hours straight? Can you choose to enjoy drinking a bottle of vinegar? Can you choose to desire Brussels Sprouts? No one can will these desires into existence, no one!

Because we know that we do not choose our desires it can seem as though our sense of free will falls into infinite regress. However, this is a straw-man. The common conception of free will is associated with another definition of “will” that relates to one’s power of control over one’s actions when faced with their desires. We do not have free will not to want an ice cream, only not to *have* an ice cream. Our desires are where any free decision bottoms out, not as in it becomes meaningless but in fact where it gets its value as value can only be measured in terms of conscious experience.

HIERARCHY OF VALUES

But what about our personal values, are these out of our control? They seem to be pretty important to owning the decisions I make. Well, Frodo might think me an elf for saying it but no and yes.

“Go not for the Elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes”

While we cannot choose our core values, we can override them with stronger values.

GYM JUNKIE

Your value for the comfort, pride and strength that comes with long-term physical fitness, might override the value of an ice cream in the moment (until you are hungry enough and the returns will outweigh the cost).

PRISONERS OF VALUES

On the other hand people may be stuck with core values that shape every other value in self-destructive or anti-social ways. For instance someone who has been abused may override all other human emotions with the drive to maintain power, safety or seek vengeance. In fact some mindfulness meditation programs in prisons have been found to backfire for this very reason. Researchers lead by clinical psychology professor June P Tangney noted that...

"This level of non-judgment and acceptance may not be as beneficial for people suffering from externalising disorders marked by higher levels of impulsivity. Externalising disorders are common among an incarcerated population who may benefit from some self-scrutiny in reducing patterns of criminal thinking and behaviour".

OUR INTERESTS

There might be a way through conditioning or conversation to intercept these pathways and bring healthier values into play. The idea of this thesis, is a position that while it is naive to build an ethical framework based on altruism, it is reasonable to believe that I could convince others to better act in their own best interests. So, if it is the case that everyone at present is not acting in their own best interests and are also doing so in a way that is detrimental to human well-being as a whole (a negative sum "lose-lose" game), then helping people to act with enlightened self-interest would make the world a better place.

YOU, BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

You are synonymous with your stream of conscious experience, and therefore the neurophysiology that is formed by that stream of consciousness is making decisions based on that stream, so you, in a sense are making the decision.

IDENTIFYING WITH OUR DECISIONS

When you say that you have no free will, we can view the issue more clearly if we establish what "you" means. In order to understand why the illusion of free will is not entirely false, you need to look at "you" as *the entirety of your experience*. So, while you have your genetics *invisibly* influencing your behaviour you also have all of the memories and heuristics developed through experience firing as you manifest your action - your association of that process with your yourself is actually quite accurate when you define "you" as the sum of your experiences. Your experiences (you) are, in this way, significantly influencing your decisions, even if they are doing so pre-consciously.

A NECESSARY ILLUSION

In many respects we are blind to many of the limitations to our will, and so it is important to recognise that we do not control our desires, or consciously bring thoughts to our own mind, not to mention the genetic and circumstantial experiences that are out of our control. While facets of much of what we experience as a sense of free will can be understood meaningfully, the whole will and the idea of some unified metaphysical conscious self is an illusion. As with the ocular blindspot, the mind fills the gaps between memories, sensory input and subconscious decision-making to give the illusion of self.

However, the possibility of free will being an illusion makes less difference to one's life than its seeming profundity implies. After all, it begs the question "If we have no free will, then are we not free to live differently than we have, that is; as if we have free will? - the primary (albeit glib) paradox.

THE SERIOUS PARADOX

The serious philosopher, determined to live by reason alone, has two options; either she frees herself of the illusion that she is free and in so doing so concedes that she is not free, or she frees herself from the illusion in such a way that she transcends determinism itself. Both options leave her no way to understand the infinitely complex process of determinism and therefore no way to understand the behaviour of herself and others. So, she returns to first principles and rediscovers the patterns that first lead her to believe she had free will. So, she learns, once more, to live as if she and those around her have it.

DEEPITIES

The question of free will, as with many paradoxes can be seen as what Daniel Dennett has coined a "Deepity"; a fact about the world that can be interpreted two ways, one profound and untrue, the other true and trivial. This can be extended to understand that seemingly profound changes in understanding do not carry with them the implications one might expect.

A DEPARTURE ON PARADIGM SHIFTS

PROFOUND TRUTHS MAKE LITTLE DIFFERENCE

What profound truths do is change the way in which we interpret observed patterns in nature, resulting in a paradigm shift. It does not change the observations themselves, and much of our mundane action in the world is in response to observation, not paradigms. A paradigm shift often changes the perspective of everything, so much so that, practically speaking, changes in different areas can in fact cancel each other out and return many of the mundane operations of humans back to “normal”.

GALILEO DIDN'T CHANGE THE WORLD

When Galileo demonstrated that the earth was spherical he was not claiming that people should behave differently to when they believed the world was flat, the concepts of “up” and “down” were profoundly changed and yet on the ground none of the rules changed. We did not fall off the earth, the fact that we were spinning at 1,670 kilometres per hour did not put us at risk of crashing into one another. In the same way Quantum mechanics do not (contrary to the thesis of the terrible documentary “What The Bleep Do We Know?”) allow interference with phenomena in the meso-sopic (middle-sized) world in which we live. Even in terms of patterns of human behaviour, the departure from belief in God has not lead to the abandonment of certain moral values (those that are relevant to societal well-being).

While in terms of the mundane activities of everyday life, these profound changes make little difference, because there is no world where a paradigm could be completely at odds with the everyday experience of all people.

FROM SPIRITS TO GERMS

From a modern perspective the germ theory of disease seems a perfect counter-example of a profound truth that made a tremendous difference to everyday people; the imperative to wash one’s hands has itself saved billions of lives. However, even this theory when it was proposed by Girolamo Fracastoro in 1546 failed to make a splash, partly because pseudoscientific theories had lucked upon some practices that were effective. The prevailing Miasma (or “Bad Air”) Theory at the time, at least, warned people away from rotting food and flesh, despite having no sound scientific explanation why they should.

Even the paradigm of spiritual possession and witchcraft had developed some practices that informed behaviour consistent with the germ theory; the idea of quarantine, animistic gods providing treatment via plant leaves and concepts of impurity. This does not mean to say there was any merit to these beliefs, they are better viewed as rationalisations to justify instincts born of evolutionary utility. But over time, practices evolved in a way such that germaphobic tendencies were in full swing before the germ theory of disease was finally accepted in the late 19th Century.

CONSCIOUS IGNORANCE

In the same way, our almost complete ignorance of the mechanics of consciousness does not render us impotent to make use of it. As we pick up clues to consciousness we might learn better how to get the most out of it, but we will still be equally conscious.

THE LONG GAME

Long term the spherical earth model would be necessary for explorers and eventually the space program. Our current understanding of Quantum mechanics is vital for, GPS, MRI machines, lasers, telecommunications, atomic clocks and the modern semi-conductors in computers and smart phones. It could one day revolutionise computing with the much promised Quantum Computer! Long term, these technologies will help us to gain a greater understanding of consciousness which might help us produce more ethical societies.

A PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

Returning to the idea that Free Will is an illusion and yet living as if we and others have free will may be a useful heuristic, acknowledging that this is a fiction allows us to look at particular cases anew. There may be particular cases where an emphasis on predictive outcomes rather than individual responsibility could reveal more effective control of outcomes.

WHY MEMORIES LEAD TO PUNISHMENT

Humans seem to have an inbuilt instinct to vengeance - to see criminals punished, there is something visceral and satisfying about the experience of seeing someone get their just-deserts. This may be the case, but I would like to add that there is an understandable (albeit bad) reason for seeking to punish. If memories are the only parts of the decision making process we are consciously aware of then we may feel they are exclusively responsible for our decisions.

THE HARD GUARD

Wilson is a prison guard, he is generally a nice bloke, he has a loving family, gives to charity, never pirates movies online. As he marches along the rows of cells he looks at the inmates and thinks about what differentiates him from those on the other side of the bars. He remembers numerous times he was “disciplined” as a child, when once his teacher fractured his pinky finger when wracking his knuckles with a ruler, and thinks “my law abiding nature was shaped by those experiences”. He forgets hundreds of small gestures of trust he was given throughout his life which subtly communicated a sense of responsibility in him, or the security he felt as the son of a father who picked up litter off the street as he walked him home from school. Instead the guard rattles his truncheon against the bars implying to the inmates that he is ready to deliver them a “formative experience” if they choose to step out of line.

FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

Significant memories, potentially visceral, emotional experiences that changed us in a moment are likely going to feature more readily than the mundane stream of habits that really shape our behavioural patterns. If we then mistakenly assume that significant, visceral memories are the only important part of decision-making, it makes sense to create such a visceral experience for the person who’s mind you are attempting to change.

PARENTING WITHIN THE ILLUSION OF FREE WILL

For a long time parents have taken this approach with children, and seen the short term efficacy of it. Thankfully we now recognise the long term results are detrimental to society and there are much better, more peaceful methods of disciplining children in a way that improves their decision-making process rather than filling their heads with traumatic memories in the hope that that will make them more rational and loving people.

REHAB GETS A GOOD RAP

There can be a tendency with the retributive justice cohort to look at punishment as justice, and rehab as assistance. But this is to give rehab far too rosy a reading. Rehab is extraordinarily difficult, and very few people would opt for it unless they were forced. You, as someone who is lacking in any sense of self-control are put in an environment with other problematic people, and are forced to control yourself under very trying circumstances. You are forced to do things with your mind that are highly uncomfortable, and essentially deny who you are until you completely change who you are. Prison on the other hand requires no change and presents no challenge to your identity.

REVERSION TO THE MEAN

“Reversion to the mean” is an explanatory theory for why people infer that punishment is more effective than praise. If someone performs worse than usual and is punished, when they simply return to normal they appear to have improved as a result of punishment - and visa versa - when someone performs better than usual they appear to get worse when they return to their average after praise. Praise and punishment have nothing to do with it, people naturally oscillate in their behaviour around a mean, giving the illusion of punishment being effective, and praise ineffective.

FATALISM

Conceding that Free Will in some respects is illusory does not mean to say that reality is a farce and you can throw up our hands and sit on the couch. First of all fatalism is undermined by randomness, in that randomness makes the future unpredictable, so your fate is not written. Secondly, as I understand it, while much of what we perceive as our unified self is illusory, our conscious decision-making process is not irrelevant. Whether your evaluation of the brain’s prediction errors influence your future decisions by shaping your neurophysiology or whether you have determined that to reach a goal you need to alter your state of mind by taking a shower, your identification with these processes is not redundant. Abdicating your responsibility to take part in this process will not result in the same outcome as taking part - it will end in disaster for you and those around you, and this consequence will not be simply academic. It is why evolution has programmed us to act as we do.

EVOLUTIONARY PURPOSE

What is our evolutionary purpose and should we adopt this purpose as our own?

The drive to do something is programmed into us by evolution; those who did not ask “What next?” perished. It is for that same reason that we experience chronic dissatisfaction; those who were satisfied perished (in the face of others who continually strived). Evolutionary purpose is simple - reproduce, as much and as sustainably as possible. But is continual strife the only option? Is this our purpose? Or does it serve a different master?

GENES

In Richard Dawkins’ “The Selfish Gene” he presents a gene-centric evolutionary model, where non-selfish behaviour in animals can be explained by self-serving genes, because animals share genes and genes are what is transmitted from parent to child.

THE STORY OF GEON AND GEANE

Let's take for a minute the perspective of Geon and Geane; two genes who have no minds, but they have phenotypic effects on the animals they inhabit. Geon has the effect of making its animal hungrier than most, Geane has the effect of making its animal generous to those around it. Geon's animal is highly motivated to find food, Geon's animal therefore avoids starving to death, meanwhile Geon's animal reproduces and has 2 surviving offspring, one of the offspring contains Geon! Long live Geon.

Geane's animal has very difficult life, through a period of drought food is scarce. Geane's Animal lives on the verge of starvation, despite this Geane's animal gives an even share of food to every member of family and friends, many of whom contain Geane. Geane's animal dies from an illness, but 4 other animals that contain Geane survive the drought due to the even distribution of food. The 4 animals each have 2 surviving offspring. Geane lives on in half of the offspring, so although our Geane's animal has died, 4 Geanes live on. Long live Geane.

Geane and Geon do not care if they replicated by their own animal or another animal. So, in many cases altruistic behaviour by a gene's animal can result in the perpetual transmission of those genes.

MEMES

Richard Dawkins also proposed the idea of memes - cultural ideas that replicate in a similar way to genes. Social constructs such as money, laws and science and language itself are "meme factories" that spread ideas because they are true, or otherwise consistent and useful. Other meme factories are akin to mind viruses in which the idea spreads not due to its truthfulness or usefulness but because of the internal structure of the idea that exploits some loophole in human psychology to reproduce for its own sake rather than for the advantage of its host.

THE 3RD ALIGNMENT PROBLEM: GENES VS MEMES

The classic alignment problem concerns artificial intelligence and a misalignment of values, or implementation of them. This is a subject for another sprawling essay, it is useful to place it on the emergence continuum, to help us make sense of our place in all this. For the purposes of this essay the AGI singularity would constitute the 3rd alignment problem; a future dilemma, rather than the second alignment problem that we will come to shortly, that is the crux of what we need to deal with in the present.

In "The Red Queen" evolutionary psychologist Matt Ridley proposes...

"If man has evolved the ability to override his evolutionary imperatives, then there must have been an advantage to his genes in doing so. Therefore, even the emancipation from evolution that we so fondly imagine we have achieved must itself have evolved because it suited the replication of genes."

Ridley dismisses humanity's sense that we have overridden evolution. I would suggest that he misses a vital point; that the sense that we can "override" evolutionary processes is actually the result of memes competing for dominance. While memes have no doubt benefitted genes substantially in the case of humans, this may not be a sustainable "strategy" on the part of the genes. Memes may turn out to be a more powerful replicator than biological evolution. Currently genes are still necessary to build brains to create memes, but this may not always be the case.

TEMES

Susan Blackmore extended the idea of Genes and Memes to propose a "third replicator". Temes are meme factories that operate outside of humans, these include computer programs, particularly emergent systems. Whereas animals and humans were the medium for the first two replicators; Genes and Memes, Temes take over the job of replicator vehicle for Memes. In this sense it is not entirely correct to call them a replicator, if after all they are a replicator vehicle or *secondary* replicator (like humans). If we concede the primacy of replicators in the process of evolution then Temes could solidify a divergence we see between evolution and humanity putting us at odds with one another.

DATAISM

Big data, is.. big right now. Steve Lohr's book "Data-ism" looks at how big data is transforming society. Yuval Noah Harari used the term to point to what he sees as an emerging religion that appreciates data flow as a central driving force in the world. While this is an interesting lens through which to view history and think about the future, the mechanism of temes does a similar job, but with a greater sense of continuity with an emergent universe through successive replicators.

INFINITE ARMS RACE

If we were to extend evolution from natural selection to a broader technological evolution, we might say that our evolutionary purpose is to create better replicators, in any medium. Perhaps those replicators could even be as ethereal as data, in which case, our *purpose* in all this would be to create greater and greater processors of data (the Artificial General Intelligence singularity). But we know that this emergent game is an infinite one, and should we want to simply be the vessel for an infinite arms race?

THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY

We are not one and the same as evolution, intact we are not even a central part of it - we are a byproduct that effectively replicates genes, and now memes. After all, evolution frequently seeks that which we do not, at the extreme, it requires us to die, but programmes us to want to live.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

The overarching law of emergence is a form of cosmic evolution that selects for processes that bring about new emergent properties that imbue matter with greater levels of order. Genetic evolution by natural selection is one of these processes, it is highly prolific and inventive, but comes at a cost. For evolution to serve the purpose for which it was selected; to continue the march of emergence, we, its vessel must die.

WHY WE DIE

Death is essential for natural selection for two reasons.

1. Death is one of two natural selection vectors, the other is reproduction. Without death from unfitness, natural selection can't take place.
2. Secondly, without death from old age, population growth becomes unsustainable along with a raft of bizarre side effects...

HOMO IMMORTALIS

Imagine an ancient Hominid species "Homo Immortalis" who never die from old age. Gruk, a 347 year old chieftain culminated to his peak fitness and sexual maturity at 25 and has remained that way. His tribe has expanded continuously, filling the available local niche, exhausting the resources and putting them in contact with dangerous predators. In order to protect his tribe from the ravages of overpopulation, Gruk outlaws sexual intercourse except in the case of a member's premature death. In order to maintain the population Gruk proposes that he be the sole bearer of male sexual duties. Where in some Lion's pride a younger male might challenge an ageing alpha, Gruk never weakens and so stems genetic adaptation by repeatedly introducing the same set of genes into the gene pool.

100,000 years pass and the peaceful and perfectly ordered tribe of Homo Immortalis, who's brains are all the same volume as Gruk's, run into Homo Sapiens, who's brains have been through a brutal and messy process of natural selection, ballooning to twice the size. Gruk, who has become accustomed to the unquestioning devotion of his people attempts to force his will on the new population, they refuse, a battle ensues and, owing to the superior brain power of the Homo Sapiens tribe, Homo Immortalis is undone in one stroke.

SENESCENCE - WHY WE GET OLD

Bearing in mind that dying is a necessity of evolution, evolutionary biologist Eric Weinstein explains that natural selection favours genes that are useful early in life regardless of whether they come with consequences for later life.

CIVILISATION'S SENECESE

We can see the process of senescence playing out in cultural evolution also, where short term gains give certain processes more power and are self-confirming even when we know logically they are unsustainable. Death of civilisations may be as inevitable as death of the organism...

FERMI PARADOX

What makes any existential threat seem that much more likely is the fact that, while we have established that the starting conditions for life are present throughout much of the universe. And yet we have not met another intelligence out there. If there are numerous other intelligent lifeforms out there, it is very unlikely that we are the most intelligent or developed - therefore we should expect to have been contacted by now. The fact that we haven't suggests that there may be some stumbling block that drives an advanced civilisation not just to fall, but attaining globally destructive technology, will go completely extinct along with all other life.

THE 2ND ALIGNMENT PROBLEM: CONSCIOUSNESS VS EVOLUTION

Humanity is now in a position where we cannot rely on our instincts and intuitions to overcome a predictable and sorry fate. Just because we are programmed by evolution with many useful adaptations, does not necessarily mean we must, or even **should** follow their lead. However, we must acknowledge our programming in developing new objectives.

VALUE

What should we value if we are but an unintended byproduct of a process with which we are at odds?

UGHT FROM IS

My use of the word “Should” and “Must” brings to mind David Hume’s maxim that you cannot derive an ought from an is, or in other words a value from a fact about nature. And furthermore we’ve discovered evolution’s goals are not necessarily aligned with ours anyway. So, we shouldn’t necessarily take on evolutionary imperatives. But, evolutionary purpose is not an imperative handed to us by a deity, it is built into us; disregarding it is not as simple as ignoring it.

INESCAPABLY VALUE-LADEN EXPERIENCES

Our evolutionary hardwiring is not easily decoded, it is embedded in myriad mechanisms and behaviour modifiers. At the core of these are sensation and its poles pleasure and pain. Pain tells us to avoid the behaviour, pleasure to seek it - these experiences are inescapably value-laden. They are nature’s way of creating a should from a fact of biology. I would posit that all our values are derived from the spectrum of these inescapably value-laden experiences.

THE UNIT OF VALUE

We must appreciate that subjective experience is the unit of value in this equation. Without subjective experience there is no qualitative value, thus no point to ethics. Furthermore, while there is a range of experience amongst different human beings and animals, we must acknowledge that we share some degree of commonality in our experience as human animals. Without such a commonality of experience, no value system could be developed that was practicable.

SUBJECTIVITY

I am using the word subjective in its primary sense, that being relating to conscious experience and not its casual usage to imply “different to everyone”.

MIND THE GAP

If we understand that our inescapably value-laden experiences do not necessarily serve the unit of value (conscious experience) then the barriers to conscious well-being can only be tackled by understanding the gap between evolutionary purpose and conscious experience. We touched on death, for instance, if we could deny death we might, and this would be departing from our evolutionary purpose. Of course our evolutionary drives still fulfil many useful functions in life, they stop us from unknowingly burning our hand on a stove top element, or forgetting to eat and dying of starvation. But we are all aware that we are mal-adapted to modern day. Another of our conflicting instincts is our overactive fear response which remains poised for mortal danger regardless how peaceful our surroundings.

DANGER AS DEFAULT

Seeing danger at every possible turn has aided our evolutionary survival and preserved genes that manifest in a number of vestigial behaviours that can lead us astray, giving an inaccurate view of danger.

THE TIGER IN THE GRASS

The animal who scares easily from a rustle in the bushes, will live its life on edge, and will run away from a great many phantoms. But on the one occasion when the rustle in the bushes is a tiger, it may just survive, whereas its more relaxed companions may not, and so our inherited genes dictate that we live on edge, even today, where the threat of tigers is no more.

Now, where mortal danger is almost eradicated, this default to fear leads to many deleterious behaviours; fear of public speaking, fear of others, fear of the dark, fear of trying new things.

ASSUMING (MALICIOUS) AGENCY

Because we are wired to sense danger wherever possible, and much of the time our greatest threat is other animals, we also have evolved to sense agency, and particularly malice wherever it could be. This leads to anthropomorphism of nature and all manner of magical thinking; from superstition to religion. It also leaves us with an undue suspicion of others which manifests as everything from social anxiety to xenophobia.

GOD’S FAULT

It seems strange to think of religious belief as stemming from the assumption of “Malicious” agency, because religions all claim to revere goodness and kindness as the highest qualities of their figurehead. However, that is marketing - over thousands of years, religions who have survived have emphasised perfection, whereas gods were often to blame for the miseries or “punishments” that we now understand as natural disasters. If you have no scientific explanation for thunderstorms, famine or disease and you hard-wired to assume malicious agency, then it is no wonder the gods of old were malicious and punitive. Humanity needed someone to blame for the maladies of existence... the fact that the need to blame is so powerful as to create gods should give us pause when we feel our proclivity to blame others.

OUR FIRST AND WORST ATTEMPT

Christopher Hitchens described religion as “our first and worst attempt” at the truth, philosophy and morality. Religion has tried to codify values, but due to the pre-scientific / pre-Darwinian worldview in which they were framed, imperatives were rationalised anthropomorphically - an error at the very heart of the venture that produced bizarre results with limited utility. The same error was inferred from the “laws” of nature (which are actually just descriptions of patterns in nature).

WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD

Through many conversations with many people I have concluded that there are three ways in which people come to believe in God

1. They have an experience of what they perceive as God
2. They are forgiven for or shown kindness despite a flaw in themselves they could not otherwise have overcome
3. They are born into it and have shaped their life around it.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

When asked “Why is it important to believe in God?” almost all religious people I’ve spoken to, rather than claiming the truth of supernatural events, will claim that without God as a foundation for morality the world would fall into chaos. At this point it is tempting to protest that an atheist doesn’t need religion to be good, but this misses the point. Better to ask...

WHAT IS WRONG WITH CHAOS?

In attempting to answer this question the person must confront the underlying motivation for their position; that chaos will create great suffering. So the a-priori moral position is that suffering is the unit of moral value. This motivation precedes any belief and is the very same motivation the secularist has to act in a way that avoids the same dreaded chaos and suffering. When seen in this context, the recourse to God as a moral middle-man becomes redundant.

WHO ARE YOU TO SAY THAT SUFFERING IS BAD?

While the assumption has already been made by the religious apologist that chaos and therefore suffering is bad, they may protest that there is no objective way to claim that suffering is bad, except in the case of a religious story in which suffering is a punishment for our fallen nature (in the case of Christianity). To this, I would have to appeal to their intellectual honesty and claim that suffering is inescapably value-laden, and that, though suffering is a subjective experience that does not mean to say that it is different for everyone, we share the vast majority of our physiology, and while some sorts of suffering are associated for some with pleasure, unless someone tells you otherwise it’s safe to say that they will not appreciate you inflicting pain on them. Of course there is room of delayed gratification in this, for instance, there is no moral value in telling someone not to go for a jog because they may suffer some minor muscle aches. The pain of voluntarily putting yourself through physical and mental hardship in order to build strength is simply investing in future pleasure.

UNLEARNING

The fact that instincts are hard-wired does not mean we cannot reverse them. This also does not mean we must deny our instincts and feelings. Denial would be contrary to our well-being, because our instincts and feelings are part of who we are and what we value. As touched on in the section of free will however, there are ways for people to be better aware of what is in their own best interests and how competing desires and physiological necessities can find harmony. The thing about correcting your perspective is that it only takes open experience, real world testing - we’re not trying to be optimistic, or positive - we are presently hard-wired for pessimism and are simply trying to form a view based on reality.

THE ROCK CLIMBER

Like the rock-climber can get comfortable with heights once she learns to trust her ropes, we can, through repetition, overcome our instincts against public speaking, the dark, trying new things and opening our sphere of moral concern.

ORIGINATING ETHICS EX-NATURA

Once we acknowledge that value is laden in experience then a consequentialist ethics, which places primacy on the results of actions and the balance of consequential experiences appears to make the most sense.

ETHICS

Having separated evolutionary imperatives from their mechanisms, can we can originate a value system that operates within the inescapably value-laden experiences and yet sets new objectives?

UTILITARIANISM

Utilitarianism poses an ethical calculus that best reflects what I would call the language of ethics. However, critics of Utilitarianism will claim that its calculus is not practicable in short time frames with complex problems.

VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics holds more to heuristics that have greater inbuilt redundancy, but lack the specificity of the Utilitarian Calculus.

THE HOSPITAL

A common criticism of Utilitarianism is that when looking at issues in isolation, it can lead to absurd results. Take the scenario of a busy hospital that has 5 people on death's door, each urgently needing a different organ transplant. They are all of the blood type A. A healthy young woman walks into the hospital to visit her friend who has just had a baby. She approaches the reception desk and before she has a chance to ask where the maternity ward is, the reception asks "Excuse me miss, do you know your blood type?" ... "A... why do you ask?"

In that moment the receptionist, given a very different set of medical ethics, could make the decision to order hospital security to detain and murder the visitor, and have a surgeon deliver the necessary organs to the 5 people who were, until that time, waiting to die.

DEONTOLOGY

There is a moral system we are all aware of and that is the law, this is based on deontology; duty ethics. This is of course an important part of the social order, but because it is rule-based it has more to do with describing ethics than with originating them. The hospital example would never be possible because of the laws we have, but it does not give an account of how we come to decide on those laws in the first place. So, while it is a practical reality in the world, it has little to offer to a first principles analysis of ethics.

A BALANCE

The utilitarian, given enough time, would also conclude the consequences of murdering hospital visitors would be far worse than the fate of 5 patients. So, I would contest that Utilitarianism is the best way to evaluate ethical decisions, but it can also be used to develop robust virtue ethics systems, which may prove more useful in the moment. With time to contemplate, I favour John Stuart Mill's Preference Utilitarianism, which goes some way to addressing the diversity of preferred experiences as extended from the simplistic pleasure / pain spectrum.

VICES ARE VIRTUES MISALIGNED

A final point on virtues is that in our utilitarian calculus we can avail ourselves of evolutionary psychology that bares out Nietzsche's position that...

"Once you only had passions and called them evil. But now you have only virtues; they grew out of your passions".²

If we acknowledge where our darker desires had utility (in our evolutionary past) we might be able to find new utility for them, or at least forgive ourselves for them while we deny them light.

THE GRADIENTS OF MORALITY

Basically moral agents are those capable of moral choices, and moral concerns are the inescapable value-laden experiences of beings, regardless of those beings' capacities for choice. Moral concerns extend to include all conscious creatures.

But it's more complex than that. First of all there are, as always, gradients of capacity, so even a dog might qualify as a moral agent given that its behaviour can be modified to produce more or less pain. At the same time a human, who has suffered great trauma might be severely diminished in their capacity to act with compassion, similarly with a psychopath. So, the gradient is not smooth, but dithered.

This all seems to ignore our earlier concession that choice is not free, and so it is important to add to this the power structures in the world which can amplify or alleviate much greater amounts of pain across the world, this is a separate spectrum which goes all the way down to the privilege of those who can cast a single vote.

So, there are 3 gradients of moral significance

1. Moral concerns (beings that can suffer)
2. Moral agents (beings that can choose to affect suffering or pleasure)
3. Moral privilege (power structures that can amplify suffering or pleasure en masse)

² "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" Friedrich Nietzsche

WHAT IS THE GOOD?

With the acknowledgment of inescapably value-laden experience we might be tempted to say that good is pleasure and bad is pain. To a large extent this philosophically controversial view is actually quite accurate, in as much as it is accurate, it is also trivial (a deepity without the depth).

What people mean when they speak about a good person is actually an altruistic person, someone who is unwilling to compromise the wellbeing of others in seeking their own goals and / or someone who spreads happiness, bad people are the contrary. So, good is rooted in inescapably value-laden experiences but is relative to others; a moral agent's behaviour towards moral concerns. All this was enough to give us nature red in tooth and claw in the wild, it is not enough of a foundation on which to build a moral society.

Moral privilege brings a big solution and myriad new problems. Structures such as laws and currency are power structures whereby trust can be garnered, amplifying benefits. But we are faced with many problematic aspects of moral privilege that grow as our social spheres expand and compound.

- We can eat meat we didn't kill
- We can fight anonymously online
- We can send drones to fight wars
- We can vote without judgment
- We can give or not give to charity without transparency
- We can benefit from our ancestor's spoils
- We can live happily while others make our clothes in sweatshops

Today, due to a lack of moral transparency, the biggest moral questions are those related to moral privilege; how we can best exercise our own and how we can augment power structures to benefit everyone.

THE QUESTION OF SUICIDE

Albert Camus starts his philosophy by proposing that if we are to find enough value in our own life so as not to commit suicide on the spot - then we have found a foundational value. In "The Myth Of Sisyphus" he states...

"There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that"

THE GULF

Some might take this reasoning that compassion for anyone who chooses not to end their own life is redundant - claiming they must be happy, as they have chosen life. I would propose that there is a gulf of misery which Camus did not account for where life is simply less fearsome than death - we have not evolved to needlessly end our lives. So, while we might derive, in some sense, life's inherent value to humans from the fact that most of us choose life over death - we cannot induce that we are therefore all content, there may be many people living in the gulf of misery.

DO WE WANT TO BENEFIT EVERYONE?

Once you take Camus' position that if it is better to go on living than to kill oneself, you commit yourself to value life, you are obligated to adhere to the law of non-contradiction that underpins all logic and transfer that value to any conscious life. In a pure sense it is simply logically incoherent to value one's own life and experiences and yet not appreciate value in the lives and experiences of others, once we concede some commonality of experience.

The choice then comes to be, how much value are you willing to give to others at cost to yourself? Game Theory plays with these ideas

THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

In the zero-sum game of the [Prisoner's Dilemma](#), your most self-interested choice becomes betrayal. However, add any level of complexity (like multiple games, multiple players, communication, agreements, a world outside the experiment etc) to the dilemma and self-interest leads one to contemplate forms of cooperation; the extension of value to the other.

ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

At base enlightened self-interest can justify a range of social contracts and cooperative agreements that are mutually beneficial and mutually low cost. Many supposed altruistic acts can be reduced to this metric and in fact people who are seen to be acting against their own interest are often derided as "Martyrs" and are seen to have some hidden and perhaps perverse motive or are seen to be mentally impaired.

NON-ZERO SUM GAMES

A zero-sum game is one in which the benefit to one party in an interaction with another is inversely proportionate to the benefit of the other. So, if one party wins the other must lose by an equal amount, leaving a sum total of zero benefit overall. A *non-zero-sum* game is one where an interaction can be mutually beneficial, and so value can actually grow.

WIN-WIN ECONOMICS

I'd like to throw in some valid kudos for capitalism in this respect. Capitalism, as it was conceived by Adam Smith is, in many respects, a non-zero-sum game. Ideally people compete better in the a capitalist economy if they can offer a win-win situation. I have a lot of cash, you have a lot of couches, if I exchange my cash for your couch, it's a win-win. Because you are a couch specialist, you can produce a couch much more cheaply than I could make the equivalent couch for, you can charge me more than it cost to make and it will still be less that it would have cost me to make it myself.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

There are many products where the pricing is worked out simply by supply and demand. The price will rise if the demand is higher than the supply, resulting in an incentive to produce that high-value product, resulting in more producers and a lowering of prices until the system reaches a balance. This is what Adam Smith called the invisible hand of the market. Seeing how magical the capitalist paradigm can be, many would like to leave *all* of the world's issues up to the market, however not all products are profitable, some a liabilities; those liabilities are called humans, and capitalism does not provide for their needs. So, this human needs require a different approach, but can still play into a non-zero sum equation.

A RISING TIDE

There are many situations where a rising tide lifts all boats, and by this I don't mean to reference the trickle down economics of letting the market rule, but rather the betterment of everyone, be it through healthcare, education or security. The benefits of social support policies range from lower death rates, and lower birth rates, lower crime rates, lower drug abuse rates, on a larger scale less war and terrorism. Even for the rich, it means cleaner streets, greater security, and a higher level of conversation.

OTHERS

There is also the issue of other people. If one chooses to live purely selfishly, at the expense of others, then the amount of secrecy and therefore dishonesty one needs to employ in hiding their actions from the judgment of others will be immense. One ends up with a situation that may be completely selfish, and yet yield no real pleasure for oneself. In a sense we can actually achieve a negative-sum game; the non-zero-sum game's evil twin.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

We also have to live with ourselves, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror, and seek to resolve our inner lives. After all, evolution has also discovered some of these non-zero sum games, and has accordingly built into us empathy, which is central to our intelligence and is as inescapably value-laden as pleasure and pain. So, to deny this instinct, and to live with the logical double standard of valuing your own life at the expense of others, is also bad for your brain, a state of cognitive and emotional dissonance is not healthy.

HUMAN POTENTIAL

To look at the opportunity for a moment, as opportunities have been opened to a wider population the results have almost always been positive. Every great thinker in the past 200 years has benefitted from access to public goods that increased opportunities from the printing press, to the public school system. When we see the numbers of people starving, oppressed and uneducated around the world, that is lost potential for humanity. [Neil deGrasse Tyson put it this way](#)

"If everyone had the luxury of expressing their unique combination of talents in this world, our society would be transformed overnight".

While Jeff Hammerbacher, a tech wiz from Silicon Valley and an early Facebook programmer [laments the position of even the most privileged minds](#).

"The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people play ads."

And let's remember, humanity doesn't have all the answers yet, we need our best people working on it, and to find those people we need create a platform for everyone to reach their potential.

TUPO PAMOJA

In Tanzania there is a Swahili phrase "Tupo Pamoja" which translates to "We are together" and is used widely to express "everything is okay", "We've got your back" or "I forgive you" and is even made part of their elaborate greetings which often go back and forth for several minutes. The phrase reminds everyone of their responsibility to each other. Each of us is

grappling with difficult decisions, and each of us is affected by the other's decisions. The cliché that we are all in this boat together is made more real if you realise we are building this ship as we sail.

So, I hope I've made the case that this is about everyone.

OUR WORLD

If our actions are to take into account the world, what are the pressing issues of today and the future? What are the problems we face, what is the future we want?

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Now that we have separated our common inescapably value-laden experiences from their evolutionary imperative, it is possible to think about worlds that fulfil our desires as ends in themselves and to add new ends that we define.

So, what are our desires - let's go crazy...

UTOPIA 1: YOU WANT FOR NOTHING

Each person has whatever they want, whenever they want it, including power over other people. An Epicurean paradise. This world is possible in simulation, where others are part of a solipsistic existence.

UTOPIA 2: YOU WANT NOTHING

The elimination of desire in such a way as to feel peace continuously, Nirvana. This world has been created in microcosm through individual meditative practices and in macrocosm through philosophies such as Christianity that praise the meek, and affirm a person's value with a promise riches in the afterlife.

UTOPIA 3: WORKLESS WORLD

Automation takes care of all mundane work, and wealth is distributed, leaving us to pursue creative and spiritual development. The world continues to progress but through peaceful and deliberate action from human agents working together.

UTOPIA 4: THE INFINITE GAME

We work towards the evolutionary goal of ever-increasing replicators through technological enlightenment, leading to a flourishing of intelligence and consciousness throughout the universe, effectively overcoming universal entropy by creating an infinitely changing living omniscience, a sort of universal perpetual motion machine.

UTOPIA 5: THE GAME

A world where challenges are embellished to suit our unique talents and interests and stretch our abilities in myriad ways without ever overcoming us. A gamified world that fulfils our need to be challenged without damaging us physically or mentally. (Possible in simulation, or in a like-minded population)

UTOPIA 6: EGALITARIAN VARIETY

Where you live as a different person every day, giving you insight into the vast array of experiences humans have, while also incentivising those in power to make life better for those without power. (Probably impossible to implement as a utopia, even in simulation as it requires true fear and death).

UTOPIA 7: YOUR BEST SELF

Where AI helps you to discover your potential, by analysing your biases and talents, training you and providing you with guidance towards a fulfilling life, work, family etc.

WHAT DO UTOPIAS TELL US ABOUT WHAT WE WANT?

These utopias are all extreme versions about attaining pleasure, ambitions and overcoming challenges, not dying or suffering great injury. They all require that wealth is distributed (without this they become dystopias), and that conscious experience is primary. But it also seems that many situations are only really possible in simulation, as they require a double standard, or some level of subjugation over other beings, be it AI or simulated humans. For many, the reality of a situation is important, so simulations don't count.

THE TROUBLE WITH UTOPIAS

Bret Weinstein says that the problem of pursuing Utopia is that, in order to reach perfection in some area, you have to focus on one metric to the detriment of others. George Orwell expresses a similar sentiment.

“Nearly all creators of utopia have resembled the man who has a toothache and therefore thinks that happiness consists of in not having a tooth ache”

This is not just a problem of choosing what is the primary metric, because there is also an issue that a primary metric is highly inefficient due to the law of diminishing returns.

LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

The Law of Diminishing Returns reflects the reduced value per unit of input, whether it be effort or capital, as the input increases. This is true in almost all systems. For instance, if we want to live longer and be healthy we might conclude that diet is more effective than exercise. As we maximise our dietary health, we will reach a point where we cannot get any healthier through diet, and the only way to get healthier is through exercise. A world where healthy eating was the only metric for measuring health would therefore not result in as great health outcomes as one that balanced diet and exercise.

BALANCING ACT

Whatever our conception of the ideal future, if we want our experiences to be real (in relation to other moral agents) we are going to have to conceptualise a world that balances multiple interests - even for our own cognitive health. So, is there a general world that can be imagined that is a “real” utopia for all.

THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

In creating any system that considers the interests of all moral agents, a useful filter to run through is John Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance, in which one must create the system not knowing what role they will play in that system. This system also forces people to acknowledge the contingent nature of their position in society, and hopefully helps them assess inequality more objectively.

DIMINISHING RETURNS ON HAPPINESS

An important measure of well-being is happiness. But why should that happiness be equally distributed? In addition to adhering to a consistent standard, studies about happiness show that under a certain degree of wealth, happiness dramatically drops, and above a certain degree of wealth, the happiness returns drop off dramatically. So, by a simple Utilitarian calculus, it would stand to reason that there is an optimal range of wealth distribution that tends towards keeping people within a wealth range that yields the greatest total happiness.

REALTOPIA

I would propose that realistic hopes for a brighter future should include:

Greater fairness and fulfilment of human potential

- because we’re in this together

The extension of healthy lives

- because evolution has determined we die, and we don’t like it much

Collectively gaining greater control over unhelpful inescapably value-laden experiences

- because we have them, and they’re not always in our best interests

A wider empathy and harmony between moral agents

- because the unit of value is conscious experience

A focus on preventative healthcare, including mental health to proactively address criminal justice

- because free will isn’t all it’s cracked up to be

The question of how to achieve these goals, is one of politics, cultural narratives and the individual, and these will frame argument from here.

A SHORT NOTE ON HORSESHIT

At the turn of the Century, New York was facing a plague of horseshit, it was a major issue for health and commerce, and many town meetings were *bogged down* in addressing the problem. Of course none of the proposed solutions came to fruition because the problem was solved by the arrival of cars.

WHAT ABOUT THE TECHTOPIA?

The existence of *Horseshit Problems*; those that are overcome indirectly by the development of technology, have given some technophiles hope that better technology will solve all our problems. However, horseshit in New York was a very isolated, practical issue, where as issues of politics, cultural narratives and the individual are more perennial. So, while I plan to explore the effect of future technology in another essay, it is fair to worry that if we cannot sort out our perennial issues they will only pollute our technology as well.

POLITICS

We agree that we have many issues facing us as a species. Why can't we agree on solutions?

POLITICAL PENDULUM

Part of the problem with democracy is the polarisation of interests, focussing on what divides rather than what unites. This creates a nature of debate that is at odds with reason.

REALITY IS COUNTER-INTUITIVE

The political pendulum creates an environment where argument is based on allegiance rather than data. It is therefore important to cast away inherited "wisdom" in the face of data about the world of economics and societal health. A key feature of the next section will be recurring examples of intuitions, that many, including myself, have had, that are simply at odds with the facts.

BEING RIGHT

In the spirit of intellectual honesty in the face of logic and evidence Sam Harris has a great line in his blog post "[The Pleasure of Changing my Mind](#)"

"I don't want to be wrong for a moment longer than I have to be."

This is the attitude with which I am approaching the remainder of the essay, and I challenge readers to do the same.

NAIVE POLITICS

Another acknowledgment that it is important to make at the outset of political exploration, is that any system of politics that requires people to be better behaved or more altruistic than they currently are is naive and doomed to failure. The attitude that "people just need to be better" is completely unproductive, an honest acknowledgment of human flaws is vital to a robust system, and one that can make a positive out of a vice is stronger for it. Capitalism and its reverence for competition is strong in this respect self-balancing in many respects while requiring nothing but selfishness from its adherents - but at times it fails to acknowledge human flaws, namely that competition is good if everyone is honest, but humans are not all honest and loopholes will be capitalised on.

WE ARE HERE

First I intend to flag some of the hot-button topics of the day and then explore the motivations for these positions. As that history of political and economic philosophy comes into conflict with current evidence and the values system we're developing, we can start to look toward solutions.

NATIONALISM

Yuval Noah Harari has a clever-sounding point about the threat of Nationalism...

"Contrary to common wisdom, nationalism is not a natural and eternal part of the human psyche... it is hardly natural for humans to be loyal to millions of utter strangers"³

While, on the surface of it, this might give one pause about how they look at human progress, it is an example of a deepity, in that it seems to say more than it does. In terms of what nationalism represents in today's global community, it is a regressive nationalism, rather than the progressive nationalism that Harari references, and so it is very much a manifestation of tribalism. Reframing the issue as Harari does fails to alleviate the threat that regressive nationalism poses. To avoid any confusion however, where I can I will refer directly to *localism* rather than the loaded terms of nationalism or tribalism.

GLOBALISTS VS LOCALISTS

Heralds crying that the politics of left and right is over may be eating their words as the partisan nature of politics really comes to a head in America and Europe. However, there is something to be said for a shifting towards an argument between Globalists and Localists. You will find proponents of these on both sides of the traditional left and right divide; Donald Trump in the localist camp, Obama and Bush in the globalist camp. Russell Brand and Alex Jones in the localist camp, Sam Harris and Ben Shapiro in the globalist camp.

GLOBALISATION

25 years ago when Nike and Reebok became pariahs for moving their factories to sweat-shops in China and India, this was seen as an act of colonial greed, exploiting the disadvantaged. And in a case by case basis it was, but it turned out to be

³ "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" Yuval Noah Harari (Page 110)

an equalising force in economics around the world, lifting third world countries out of poverty, elevating them to real players in the world economy. The victims, ironically were the western workers who lost their jobs. Let's not feel too sorry for the entitled western job market though. Western workers lost their jobs because they were accustomed to a higher income and standard of living.

Many on the left, who may have been heartened to hear about the benefits that globalisation brought to the less fortunate overseas, have remained ignorant of this fact. Meanwhile the guilt of the images of sweat-shop workers left them with an impression of globalisation as a wholly negative project. Meanwhile working-class people on the right became aware of the detrimental effect it had on their livelihood. This forged an unlikely alliance of ignorant leftists and entitled working class conservatives against the blight of globalisation.

THE HORSESHOE OF POLITICS

The localists represent the meeting of the ends of the horseshoe. And it is no surprise that this has tended to shift toward the traditional right, after all people incapable of appreciating nuance and availing themselves of evidence tend toward smaller answers, safer, more conservative positions, exclusionary views and protectionism. Whereas the Globalists are interventionist (world police), pro-free trade, globalisation - and have usually left the country they were born in, at least once.

IDENTITY POLITICS

While there is a confusing fracture of the left and right into globalist vs localist, other microcosms of protectionism have arisen across the spectrum. Identity politics is the adoption of political views based on group allegiance rather than reason. There is a popular centrist intellectual position, highlighted often by some members of the [Intellectual Dark Web](#) that identity politics on the right manifests in very visible white nationalism while on the left it appears as more pernicious social justice warriors on university campuses.

WHO STARTED IT?

While we can definitely see mirror-images in the white nationalists and Antifa for example, it is important to ask the school-ground question "Who started it?". While all of these groups will claim they are reacting to some form of victimhood, some have a more solid footing in this regard. Movements started by minority groups who have been historically oppressed - Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ pronoun advocates, equal-pay feminists etc are in a reactionary position with history and make a fair assessment that equality is not where it could be in a free society. White nationalists are only a reaction *to the reaction* of civil rights activists and in many cases are simply using that as a way to position themselves as reactionary, when actually there are clear through lines back to the very groups who "Started it". So, the claim that these are mirror images of one another is a false equivocation.

EQUIVOCATION

The formal definition of the fallacy of equivocation is simply "calling two different things by the same name". Ironically, I am about to technically commit the crime of equivocation by using it to refer also to false analogies and the fallacy of inconsistency; where two arguments or views are claimed to be akin. The reason for this is that it is useful to be able to say "You want to say these two things are the same, but they aren't" and it's not helpful to switch between three different terms to refer to essentially the same idea!

Identity politics is itself a product of equivocation in that a multifaceted political identity is often aligned along one vector - so that those who hold a certain view, or share a characteristic are automatically assumed to hold other views that are not technically related. Equivocations are also made when two sides of an argument are interpreted as mirror images of one another, which leads to an agnostic position, that may not be correct. This is the case in the equivocations between the political activism of the left and right and, as we will see, IQ and prejudice.

HIGH / LOW CHOICE PREJUDICE

There is a related claim that comes from a [study](#) cited in a [Big Think article](#) about cognitive ability and prejudice - that high IQ and low IQ individuals are both prejudiced, just towards different groups; people with low IQ are prejudiced against low-choice groups; homosexuals, infidels, classes, women, trans, often racial groups, whereas people with high IQ are prejudiced against high choice groups such as; Christian fundamentalists, big business, the Tea Party, and the military.

PRE-JUDICE

But to equivocate between these targets of prejudice, is to misrepresent what prejudice means. To pre-judge someone is to judge them without any knowledge of who they are as a person, which holds true for racial, sexual, class, non-belief judgment, because knowing those aspects of someone tells you nothing about them as a person. In the case of Christian fundamentalists, big business, the Tea Party, and the military; membership in these high-choice groups can tell you a lot about the person's own prejudices, their motivations, and their likely actions - in fact many of these groups don't just describe the group but prescribe their actions in the world. So, this is not purely prejudice, but fairly defensible judgement.

ANTI-IDENTITY POLITICS IDENTITY POLITICS

Equivocation often takes the form of a “Gotcha” argument where you accuse your opponent of doing exactly what they’re criticising. But in the case of the Intellectual Dark Web, it seems undeniably ironic that a group so against identity politics has found themselves united as *victims of anti-free speech*. This identity then also falls victim to attempts by members such as Dave Rubin to draw lines of allegiance to the Libertarian camp - exactly as the definition goes of identity politics goes; we all believe this, therefore we should all believe this other thing.

At the same time, there *are* logical connections between different political categories that *can* explain much of what appears like simple identity politics.

A FAIR EQUIVOCATION

I have always found the assumption that because I believe one thing, I therefore believe another unrelated thing, to be a barrier to independent thinking. However, I think it is important to acknowledge that some equivocations are fairer than others. For instance, I claimed the issue of low-choice high-choice prejudice in relation to IQ was a “related issue” to that of right wing activism in relation left wing activism. The relatedness is due to a common factor, and that is IQ. As [Satoshi Kanazawa demonstrates](#); mean IQ level correlates with political alignment.

“respondents who identify themselves as ‘very conservative’ in their early adulthood have a mean adolescent IQ of 94.82, whereas those who identify themselves as “very liberal” have a mean adolescent IQ of 106.42.”

The reason intelligence is a meaningful vector to focus on, is because we understand that intelligence is literally what we use to form our political views. It seems that those who have more intelligence to spare are able to appreciate possibilities outside the familiar. For others they might cling to guns, lower taxes, tribal affiliations, coal mining jobs, border walls and other views under the general umbrella of conservatism. In the same way, those with greater cognitive ability are more likely to make fair judgements about people based on those people’s choices, rather than adhering to ingrained prejudice.

WRITING OFF THE RIGHT?

Demonstrating that conservative views are correlated with lower IQ doesn’t discount conservative philosophy. It is completely possible that a group with a higher average intelligence may underestimate the danger of political experimentation, because they assume everyone is as open-minded and educated as they are. Or they simply might be more divergent thinkers who get bored too easily for their own good. And it’s clear that having a higher mean intelligence has not helped them win any more elections.

THE LIBERAL IN THE CONSERVATIVE

Where the “conservative” right traditionally ventures into liberal thinking is in the realm of free market economics. This could be seen as an outgrowth of conservatively motivated lower taxes, but has spawned a philosophy of individual autonomy over regulation. While economics is a key feature of the political divide, it is useful to further unpack the personal motivations and philosophies that underpin this split over the economy.

RESPONSIBILITY PERSONALITIES

Personal responsibility is the bedrock on which the the strange bedfellows of self-help and conservative politics rest. This core value is most clearly articulated and championed by Jordan Peterson who identifies as a classical liberal. In his own self-help book “12 Rules For Life” he states...

“To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept the terrible responsibility of life, with eyes wide open.”⁴

While this view may be empowering on an individual level, the centrality of personal responsibility, while not explicitly right-wing, when applied to politics, is often used to justify conservative policies. In this respect *responsibility personalities* seem to assume we are agents with free will living in a meritocracy. Where they acknowledge unequal opportunity they reference “privation” as “character building” - Friedrich Nietzsche would have agreed.

WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU

When Nietzsche claimed “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger” he was unaware that he himself would be slowly weakened over a number of years by debilitating strokes, paralysis and mental illness before eventually succumbing to pneumonia. And the metaphor also remains incomplete in life. While there are challenges that build character, and struggles that spur us on to greater things, there is always the flip side, the psychologically debilitating experiences, trauma, chronic self-doubt, self-flagellation and hatred, addiction and simple bad luck.

⁴ “12 Rules for Life” Jordan Peterson (page 27)

BOOTSTRAPS

Without some strong and consistent force in someone's life against which they can shape struggles into character, people can simply become a victim of their experiences. The stories of great underdog successes, often miss out or underplay the actual fulcrum of their self-building; their trust fund (Clint Eastwood), their family history or name (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson), their parents' expectations, their privilege, their safety net (Elon Musk), even their one loving family member - Some people who have none of those things and others don't have the right combination.

SPURS

There are two types of spur. The spur on the rider's boot that stings the horse's side, and the heel spur; a calcium growth on the underside of your foot. Both are nasty business but only one has any utility, for there is a subtle difference between them. In the case of the riding spur, relief is gained through action, whereas relief from the heel spur is gained through *inaction*. While, the challenge of climbing a mountain, or suffering defeat in a football game may be a riding spur, and good advice for the spoiled rich kid, the sort of chronic poverty that crushes family units and leads to crime, violence and drug abuse is a heel spur.

So, when we speak of hardship, struggle and competition "spurring" action we have to ask, in the particular case, what type of spur are we talking about?

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream Report, a study of the Economic Mobility Project, found that Americans surveyed were more likely than citizens of other countries to agree with statements like: "People get rewarded for intelligence and skill" and "People get rewarded for their efforts"

and less likely to agree with statements like "Coming from a wealthy family is 'essential' or 'very important' to getting ahead," "Income differences in my country are too large" or "It is the responsibility of government to reduce differences in income."

WE DON'T LIVE IN A MERITOCRACY

People living in the capitalist centres of the UK and USA may believe that their societies promote freedom of opportunity for their citizens. A lower tax rate than other European developed countries is supposed to spur innovation and empower people to make something of themselves. However social mobility statistics in those countries do not bear this out; with 50% of social advantage being passed on from generation to generation, as opposed to 20% in Denmark. As Joseph Stiglitz states...

"If Americans want to live the American dream, they should move to Denmark".

This is also reflected (understandably) in inequality within countries, with Denmark's being the lowest, and the US up there with Chile, Peru and Argentina - dictatorships that US capitalists would describe as victims of socialism. Since the post-war tax hikes (up to 94%) which doubled social mobility for about a decade, lowering taxes has been proportional to the lowering of social mobility in the states. So how do we remedy this?

EQUALITY OF OUTCOME

This term is an attempt to shift perspectives in the equality debate. Jordan Peterson lampoons the desired goal of *Equality of Outcome* or "Equity" as a world where "every single organisation has 50% women and 50% men, doesn't matter if the men and women differ in their intrinsic preferences, which, by the way, they do". The ideal is that these men are being paid equally, where their governing leadership is directly representative of the demographic distribution in the population, and where educational outcomes are homogenous across all ethnic groups. Peterson claims "Post-modernists" advocate that any discrepancy in outcome is due solely to systemic prejudice; for them "there's no hierarchy that's not based on power".

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Having set this straw-man Peterson claims this Utopian goal is a futile endeavour, due to demographic differences in IQ, and sex differences in subject interest and suitability, and that the role of systemic prejudice is overblown. Far from being against equality he is simply behind promoting *equality of opportunity*. Peterson suggests that government should not busy itself with Affirmative Action programmes but instead simply base university entrance, salary and workplace demographics on "Just Hierarchies of Competence". Why? Because Peterson believes Affirmative Action programs don't work, he demonstrates this, ironically, by appealing to their underwhelming *outcomes*.

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

Peterson fails to appreciate that Affirmative Action is about levelling the playing field, not fixing the score. It is not solely about outcomes, it *is* about opportunity. Of course we shouldn't be justifying policies based purely on outcomes, and that is not what is happening. Such policies are never implemented without the acknowledgement of the well-documented

disadvantages that particular demographics face. These disadvantages are manifold and difficult to quantify and reversing them is doubly fraught.

In the words of Frederick Douglass in 1855 “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men”.

BUILDING STRONG CHILDREN

Something to be learned from Peterson is that a greater focus on the well-documented evidence of disadvantage and discrimination, rather than outcomes might help promote more efficient, earlier intervention programs, so that resources are not wasted simply repairing damage. This needs to include a much more costly preventative approach. Outcomes might then be useful as a *relative* (to other measures, not other demographics) measure of effectiveness. But currently the playing field is so unbalanced that outcomes can't hope to be measured fairly.

AN ANTICIPATED OBJECTION: THE SOFT BIGOTRY OF LOW EXPECTATIONS

In taking to the defence of a group from a different demographic it is always important to ask the question “Am I giving these people enough credit?”. George.H.W.Bush coined the term “The soft bigotry of low expectations” to describe the liberal tendency to hold minority groups to a lower standard than middle class “whites”. I appreciate this concern and I find myself suspecting this tendency in my fellow liberals, especially those who have spent little time with people from the other side of the fence. It is important to hold people to the same standard, out of fairness and out of respect. But those expectations need to be measured in relation to an objective measure of the playing field on which we are all playing. So, let's look at some facts.

THE PLAYING FIELD

First of all let's look at financial inequality. It is a fact that in 2007 the median net worth of a white American was 15 times that of a black or hispanic American. How could anyone assume that that level of inequality can be successfully remedied by preferential selection to universities and financial aid at the age of 18? Not to say that that's not a valid approach, only that it is woefully inadequate to bridge the gap. To judge success on outcomes compared to the outcomes of a population who have enjoyed a childhood of abundance is naive.

In the US, 21 percent of Bachelor of Engineering degrees go to women and only 11 percent of practicing engineers are women. While there is a possibility that Peterson is correct about “intrinsic preferences” between genders, there is no way to know what part they play in software engineering until other well-documented contributory factors have been eliminated. For instance, when 20-50% of women report sexual harassment in higher education, it makes it difficult to make definitive claims about the role of gender differences. And this is not as simple as looking at both perspectives here, because it is precisely the perspective that women don't have suitable “intrinsic preferences” with regards to software engineering that is a key “justification” for the bro-culture, toxic cyber-bullying and university and workplace sexual harassment that are known to drive women away from such careers.

RACIAL SUPERIORITY

In his 1994 book “The Bell Curve” Charles Murray presented research that claimed IQ differences between different racial groups. Aside from the obvious objection that this sort of research has a dark history, there are two other good objections that can be levelled at Murray. First of all researchers cannot possibly account for other contributory factors, and secondly even if the research was correct, the political stance of Murray and many that cite his research - which is invariably against social support, is at odds with the conclusion.

OTHER FACTORS

The contributory factors with regards to populations facing historical baggage, poverty, high rates of crime, single parent households and a host of other societal ills are simply not quantifiable. Any researcher who claims they have definitively ruled out all other causal factors is not being intellectually honest. Chiefly, when correcting for other contributory factors in such research you are only able to correct with respect to *known* findings.

POOR PEOPLE HAVE LOWER IQ (AS LONG AS THEY STAY POOR)

One such finding which was unknown to Murray at the time of The Bell Curve, was made by researchers in 2013. It showed that in a population of sugar cane farmers who experienced a seasonal boom-bust annual wealth cycle, IQ scores dropped by 13% in the lean months.

As Rutger Bregman bluntly states “*Poverty isn't a lack of character, it's a lack of cash*”.

Furthermore, when there is a 15-1 ratio of net worth between African Americans and European Americans, why would one not assume that the feeling of scarcity extends beyond family? It also extends through time, in that messages passed down reflect the experience of the previous generations - perpetuating the ever present threat of scarcity.

THE FLYNN EFFECT

The Flynn Effect presents the plastic nature of IQ through different societal changes and messages in upbringing from the surrounding society through time. This may also have implications for the effect of demographic-wide cultural messages, influenced by historical baggage, societal prejudice and group identification. And so it is possible, but not necessarily quantifiable, that being born as part of a disadvantaged demographic today, might have the same effect on IQ as being born into a society from 40 years ago would.

“Poverty annihilates the future” George Orwell

AN OBJECTION

Why will I concede the correlation with IQ when it comes to political alignment, but not regarding race or sex?

The difference is that in the case of the correlation between IQ and political alignment, we know for a fact that intelligence affects decision making, so drawing a causal relationship is a given. Whereas in the case of The Bell Curve’s correlation between race and IQ, the burden of proof is on the person who wants to claim that IQ differences are a result of genetic differences between racial groups rather than myriad other causes.

WHAT IF THERE ARE REAL GENDER AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES?

The other objection to Murray comes even if you grant that his research is correct, but that the logic doesn’t actually follow.

Herrnstein and Murray, argue that due to increasing returns to cognitive ability, a cognitive elite is being formed in America. This elite is getting richer and progressively more segregated from the rest of society. And yet Charles Murray and Jordan Peterson both have a long history of opposing affirmative action. They take the approach that society should provide less support to those less well off. Why? One would think that people who are cognitively disadvantaged should receive greater support from society, to mitigate that disadvantage. But Murray and his followers seem have the opposite intuition. In fact Stephan Molyneux directly claims that intellectual inferiority is the reason that African immigrants seek asylum in European nations with social welfare. So, the concerns about the dark side of this inquiry are not unfounded.

SO, WHY OPPORTUNITIES IF THERE IS NO OUTCOME?

While the basic form of affirmative action, that being a blanket non-discrimination policy across employment and education emerging in the Kennedy and LBJ administrations, has had clearly positive outcomes, further developments in *positive* discrimination and quotas have had mixed success and have come under much criticism.

THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY

However, regardless of their success, in the same way as the gene pool benefits from diversity, so too do robust institutions. Diversity injects new ideas into monolithic industries and allows them to adapt. Diverse hospital staff, educators, and facilitators, with different languages, experiences and cultural skills create an environment of inclusiveness for their clientele, who may have withdrawn from participation otherwise.

THE BECHDEL TEST

And on a personal note, I have to thank Pixar and Disney, for finally putting their films through The Bechdel Test; where two women must talk with each other about something other than a male character. Hollywood has begun to employ a healthy weighting towards strong female characters rather than limiting stereotypes that still pervade day-to-day life with a young daughter.

THE MYTH OF SMALL GOVERNMENT

The prevalence of diversity measures in hiring and representation across *private* businesses and universities takes the wind out of the sails of many Libertarian and right wing critics who want to claim that these measures are indicative of a big government “nanny state”. Ironically it is precisely the invisible hand of the market through the demand of consumers that drives such efforts.

We find that big government is a slur that refers only to governments that provide services and protection for those worst off in society. When it comes to protecting freedom of speech for baby-boomers or defence spending, or border walls, suddenly the size of the government is no longer an issue. When the likes of Jordan Peterson or Dave Rubin claim that their freedom of speech is being curtailed, to whom are they appealing? Who after all protects their rights? If their politics are to be consistent, shouldn’t the market just sort this out? Shouldn’t the respect for their views simply reflect their merit?

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

It is important to level some proportionate criticism of the anti-free speech culture arising in some universities and companies who would otherwise think of themselves as “liberal”. If we do not trust that, given all the facts, people will come to the correct conclusions, then we undermine the basis of argument and self-questioning. For this reason, an axiom

of freedom of speech for all seems appropriate and it is disappointing that students in universities shout down even moderate speakers, and that government officials in NZ feel the need to ban controversial speakers like Stephan Molyneux and Lauren Southern from venues. All this does is takes a person with a bad argument and gives them one point in their favour (that their freedom of speech is being attacked) which strengthens their own platform.

MORAL OUTRAGE

Outrage is often used as a tool to bully others into adopting a view, in the place of reasoned argumentation, and so it usually tends to undermine the validity of the case being made. At the same time there is room for moral outrage. We have to appreciate that words are not purely academic, they communicate sometimes insulting and dangerous messages. Communication to a person that something is not just incorrect, but also morally wrong is something that might be best communicated by revealing the emotional response you have, after all, subjective experience is moral currency.

THREADING THE NEEDLE

But is it all just differences in personality? Are there no rational decisions to be made to justify one's views? Can we thread the needle and "capitalise" on the benefits of socialism and capitalism? There have certainly been benefits from the welfare state and the capitalist free market, that can be used to support both cases. Capitalism has created efficient economic systems that serve to distribute *some* goods and services to people at a fair price. Also various forms of taxation have helped to provide services that capitalism doesn't do so well. However, while we have seen the terrible repercussions of authoritarian communism and have said "never again", we are heading towards the opposite, an out of control capitalism, with unsustainable inequality and lack of social mobility. Why is this? I would posit that it is because we are yet to see the terrible end point and learn from it. We forget that we have seen the runaway inequality of landed gentry in the centuries before modern history began; with two World Wars.

ECONOMIC ALCHEMY

The idea of "Trickle Down Economics" is very popular amongst the very wealthy and is strongly indoctrinated in the entrepreneurial "job creation" class. It is often adopted as the "reason" for being right wing or Libertarian. But this is a lie that has never been realised. While global capitalism has brought low cost goods - those goods are a-moral, there is no rule that says they must benefit society, and we see many examples of "goods" that are very popular that come at a great societal cost: cigarettes, alcohol, sugar, prostitution. In relation to the really important issues of human well-being the free market is simply impotent.

BUT WE WON?

Sure capitalism won out against Soviet Russia, but it did not do so just because of the difference between government wealth redistribution and free market capitalism. It did so largely because of the difference between a corrupt and oppressive government and a free and democratic society. While the soviets were stamping out democracy, the US was busily expanding the scope of human rights and actually borrowing from socialism many of the good parts; social services and high taxation - throughout the 50s and 60s the US had some of the highest taxes ever.

CAPITALISM

Full disclosure I am a "capitalist" of sorts, in that I believe in the right of people to be rewarded for effort and wise investments. However I believe that can be achieved in a non-zero-sum game where inequality is curtailed through fair redistribution, and the system continues perpetually in balance. The Capitalism of Adam Smith is a beautiful thing; modern society's original non-zero-sum game, a counter-intuition that freedom of trade and competition can benefit a society as a whole. But this is a naive economy of businesses happily selling goods and services and employing people. Adam Smith never envisioned multinational companies based in the US, and paying taxes in Bermuda or a labyrinthian financial industry profiting from economic obfuscation. It was never a panacea, Adam Smith never claimed that this capitalism would take care of unprofitable enterprises like paying your medical bills, or feeding the homeless. So, while I am a capitalist of sorts, the "Capitalists" I refer to are those at the upper end of an increasingly out of balance system, who are seeking to perpetuate this power imbalance; leading to a zero sum game of a few winners and many losers.

THE CHARITY / TAXATION CORRELATION

Ayn Rand would say the answer lies in charity, people will be compelled by self-interest to give to the wretched poor who are essentially ruining the view. There is also a common misconception - propounded by libertarians that if you decrease taxes - charitable giving will fill the gaps. This is contrary to statistics which show that higher taxes actually increase charitable giving. I would propose that this is not just because of the incentive of tax write-offs for donations, but also, a higher tax rate communicates a greater responsibility to and awareness of those less fortunate than oneself - making charity part of our social expectations.

A TAX ON KINDNESS

The expectation that charity is responsible for supporting the unfortunate is akin to a tax on kindness. It actually penalises people who are generous, and rewards greed. It is understandable that philanthropists like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett

state they “don’t need tax cuts”, because it is they who are footing the bill (via charity), while other billionaires like the late Steve Jobs and the richest man in the world Jeff Bezos give next to nothing, while avoiding as much tax as possible. So, while charity is a force for good in the world, it is not the answer to effective and fair wealth redistribution. The only proven way is boring old taxes.

ZERO-SUM-ASSUMPTION

There is, even for many secularists, a sense of divine justice, karma, just desserts, the calm before the storm, comeuppance, that you can’t have your cake and eat it too. These assumptions are responsible for a great many abdications of effort, and are a result of a zero-sum assumption that you can’t get something without giving something else up. To a certain extent this is correct, often sacrifice is necessary to achieve something, but that doesn’t mean that we should equivocate. To assume that capitalism will always balance because of some notion of Karma, is equally flawed, it is possible for a system to live in a perpetual state of dominance and servitude, and that the meek may never inherit the earth. Why though? How is the imbalance perpetuated?

R > G

Much of my understanding of our current economic predicament comes from editing a [documentary](#) about french economist Thomas Piketty’s book “Capital in the 21st Century”. If you take away anything from this book it will be the formula $R > G$; that the rate of return on investment is greater than the growth rate of the economy. Now, because $R > G$ it is better for a capitalist to put their capital into static assets that historically appreciate at 4.5% as opposed to investing in industries; the working economy, innovation etc which grows at an average of 1.5%. This tends toward inequality. Because money is being held out of the working economy, it is not creating innovation, and new industries that benefit humanity, and it’s not creating jobs. It’s simply multiplying wealth, for those who already have it.

THE TRICKLE UP ECONOMY

Since Reagan and Thatcher drastically cut taxes in the 80s, capitalism has lead to greater and greater inequality. While it won out over communism, it largely did so because of the strength the US had gained post-war in the high tax environment of the 50s and 60s. Until the 1980s hourly compensation rose at the same rate as productivity. From the Reagan administration onwards these lines diverged, with productivity consistently rising, while compensation levelled out almost completely. [The profits accrued through gains in productivity started going elsewhere.](#)

THE HIDDEN THREAT

While capitalists have been benefiting from growing inequality, society’s unrest has been curtailed by a number of benefits brought to it mainly by democracy and globalisation - however much capitalism would like to take the credit. Women’s rights made people feel more progressive through the 80s, but at the same time as women moved into the workplace, somehow family incomes continued to drop to where now it is almost impossible to support even a small family with one income. What was celebrated as a civil rights conquest was actually fulfilling a capitalist imperative - more cheap labour. Meanwhile as wages stagnated we were placated by the production of cheap goods produced by globalisation.

BAND AIDS

When availability of credit was loosened in the 90s, it further made people feel wealthy as they were in fact getting poorer. Meanwhile the financial system was developing more and more complicated systems for repackaging debt, resulting in the crash of 2008. A big band-aid was then applied which for the first time [decoupled median house-hold income from its correlation with the stock market](#). The Stock market soared as a result of the bailouts while median household income continued to fall (7% in the 5 years after the crash).

POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Post 2008 you saw a financial system wielding democratic power and being able to threaten the safety of the global economy, through a problem they created, effectively holding the world to ransom. Bailouts were rolled out in such a panic that the vast majority of capitalists were able to come away unscathed (and through buying when the price was low actually make more money) at the expense of the taxpayer. Which might have been well and good if they had been paying tax themselves.

WE ARE LIVING IN THE END GAME

Once inequality reaches a critical point, the power of capitalists to influence power becomes dangerous, this has been going on since the 90s and has reached a sort of argument ad absurdum with the election of the most vile capitalist alive to the most powerful office in the world. What could better reflect the influence of capital on democracy.

ATTACKING DEMOCRACY

At the same time there is a targeted attack on democracy mainly originating from Russia which you can clearly see in the reporting of their curated propaganda channel RT. This channel and the hordes of bots and hackers who sought to affect Brexit and the 2016 US election systematically criticise democracy itself, and take their own work; Brexit and Trump as

examples of democracy failing. Again this, as with much else that is driven by trickery and political tactics drives the political needle to the right.

THE BAD GUYS

It's hard to ignore that all of the artificial political drives undermining democracy are almost invariably at the hands of those on the right. I don't think it is a coincidence that the policies of the right, don't actually benefit the majority of those that vote right, but benefit a small percentage at the top who can employ tactics of mass persuasion and political influence, where it would be impossible to convince people with a bare examination of the facts. Meanwhile the high-minded politicians of the left rightly denigrate this dirty game, meanwhile their constituents, only recognising the currency of righteousness, are hyper-critical of their own candidates, and they pay the price in the poles.

A CHANGE OF HEART

I have had a strong feeling that we are faced with a spectrum of people, who divide quite neatly in the middle into people who care about the well being of others and people who are selfish. But through studying this I've discovered it is more complex *and yet* more soluble. I now find myself holding the position that there is a spectrum, but it goes from people who are more or less suggestible through fear, and those divide neatly in the middle. Meanwhile the divide between caring people and selfish people is actually more asymmetrical in favour of caring people. But it only takes a very small group of people who are strategically selfish to manipulate those who are prone to suggestion through fear.

THE DEVIL INSIDE

In the recent Wonder Woman film, the evil Ares influences the weak souls of Europe, playing them off against one another and orchestrating World War II. It plays out the notion of people doing "The Devil's work". This notion can be seen as an early biblical insight, that very rarely is one person openly responsible for any great evil and that rather it is the interplay of many agents, none of whom are omniscient, who are simply seeking to increase their own power in a the short term. We've all seen the knowing smirk of a friend who knows they are transgressing some moral principle.

THAT KNOWING SMIRK

Two officers agree to make each other look good by sending thousands of soldiers to their deaths. It is a small action, that alone has devastating effects, and yet for the two officers they get not only career advancement, but importantly, with that knowing smirk, each feels a sense of validation from their fellow officer.

This need for validation is a human need, part of our condition, but it is especially so for maladapted old men.

The officers do this indirectly, because this has become their mode of communication. In a practical sense it gives them plausible deniability, but also, because they have grown up unable feel safe showing vulnerability around other men, they can only validate one another indirectly. In the same way that Cockney Slang is designed to evade police interference, the indirect mode of communication is designed to preclude questioning and responsibility. And so it takes on a life of its own, a will to do the deceitful thing.

THE SAFE SOLUTION

The solution appears to be to alleviate fear, and create an environment where vulnerability is not a threat, allowing people to make more rational decisions that are at least in their own best interests. Numerous scientific findings show that conservative views are driven by fear. So, interestingly for the left to compete with the right's fear-mongering game, those on the left need to actually take the opposite approach and focus political messages towards how diversity, fairness and wealth distribution have made the world safer. When you eliminate fear-based campaigning, political influence, and create a culture that accepts vulnerability as a valued feature of the human condition, we will see a more inclusive and liberal political climate. It will, relative to today, tend left

ONE PERSON ONE VOTE.

Another way in which we see better democracy tending left is the discrepancy of the popular vote vs the electoral college in the US. Take for instance that, the last time the democratic party were taken out of office on the back of a republican popular vote win was in 1980 when Reagan won the popular vote with 50.7%. While in office republican candidates have won the popular vote (acknowledging that presidents generally do better in their 2nd term than their first) G.W.Bush and Trump both lost the popular vote to take office for their first terms. Could it be that, had the US been a truly democratic country we might have seen 25 years of democrats? At least we might have seen a less polarising Republican party.

REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

I have to admit here I am suggesting to the US to adopt a democratic system like the one we have in New Zealand, which has perfect individual representation through a "Party Vote" which allocates the percentage of seats in parliament across the parties and a "local candidate vote" that selects for your local MP. The government is often made up of a coalition of

parties that represent a wider range of interests, which mitigates some of the issues around identity politics, because minority views can find a place, regardless of which major party forms the government.

BETTER DEMOCRACY = BETTER PROGRESS (-IVENESS)

Better campaigning, less political influence and more fair and democratic representation will result in a shift left. But unlike the political pendulum, this will not result in an unmanageable swing to the left, that will inevitably swing back. As long as the conditions remain healthy the centre will shift sustainably to a new point of balance across individual autonomy, economic growth, wealth distribution, diversity and social mobility. This will be a system freer from asymmetrical interests, and we will see greater non-zero-sum gains.

TAX DIFFERENT

Increasingly, capital is being hoarded in non-productive assets, such as real estate and the financial industry⁵. Meanwhile the traditional role of capital investment in job creation is being undermined by automation, take for example Amazon's increasingly automated workforce coupled with its displacement of small retail businesses.

This trend drives inequality and undermines democracy, but it is a solvable problem. The problem with tax is that there are different rules for the big players. Tax Havens are in a race to the bottom (literally to 0% in Bermuda and the Bahamas). And capitalists, including the darlings of silicon valley set up "offices" in these havens, and through offshore accounts and financial trickery are able to avoid tax on billions of dollars in profit. Meanwhile the bulk of tax is paid on income tax within countries, by you and me, and worse still, paid on GST, which targets all the sorts of purchases that everyday people use. What they don't target are large asset sales (the mainstay of capitalist investment) and other capital exchanges, stocks etc. So, the people who are affected are people in the middle and bottom.

While there are plenty of taxes on low-middle income earners, and loopholes for corporate taxes for the biggest global companies, there are also currently no taxes on capital, so it is understandable that capital is becoming concentrated.

Taxes that will make a difference to income distribution and will lower the tax burden on middle-low income earners are

TAX 1. Capital gains tax - will balance the advantage of investing in static assets

TAX 2. Inheritance tax - stems the flow of wealth to brats who have already benefitted from coming from wealth

TAX 3. Capital tax - erodes large fortunes deterring the hoarding of wealth and encouraging investment in innovation

TAX 4. Customer-Country-based corporate tax - companies are taxed depending on where their customers are.

A customer-country based tax effectively eradicates tax havens. It is not the same as a consumption tax, in fact consumption taxes such as GST and VAT actually affect the people on the lower end much more than those on the top, and I would advise cutting those altogether. Although the tax is based on where consumption takes place its structure is different. First of all, this is (like with present corporate tax) a tax on profits only where as GST is incurred by the consumer on every purchase.

This does mean that goods may be different prices in different countries, but there will no longer be an incentive to drop tax rates by governments unless they are doing so to actually attract tourism through supplying cheaper goods. This will be possible and is a fair compromise any country is free to make, but it will no longer be possible for them to provide tax avoidance services on billions of dollars every year.

NATURE'S ELASTICATED WAISTBAND

Other concerns stem from some of our less helpful evolutionary imperatives. From the agricultural revolution onward, we have seen societies develop life-changing intellectual and mechanical technology only to spend the spoils on population growth, rather than sustainable increases in quality of life. Now that we inhabit a global environment and create global environmental changes in a finite system (earth), what was a missed opportunity becomes an existential threat. Combating this will not come naturally.

CLIMATE CHANGE

In order to tackle this existential threat we will need to employ both the power of government policing and of capitalist innovation. Curbing economic hoarding (through the previous taxes) will encourage capital to fuel new renewable resources, which have economic benefits outside of environmental concerns (they have greater growth potential to reach a cheaper price eventually) and tends towards energy independence, not just for nations but for individuals breaking down centuries old fuel monopolies, be they middle eastern states, national governments, or power companies.

⁵ "Capital in the 21st Century" This idea is described in the documentary adaptation of Thomas Piketty's book of the same title, Directed by Justin Pemberton. During my time involved in editing this film this idea formed a consensus across many of the economists and commentators interviewed.

But capitalism will only work in service of a greater product and the environment is not currently a paying customer. With climate change accelerating, we need to give this issue its due and pay for it, not in the form of government controls, but by adding a monetary value to the environment, so that it factors as a cost in the balance sheet of any company that exploits it. So, some more taxes.

TAX 5. Pollution / Carbon taxes

NON-ZERO-SUM SOFT BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

While we're at it, why not go one step further and put a value on as many invisible costs as possible. While we're talking about taxes, we could create a system where taxes actually encourage healthier behaviour, in the same way as smoking is taxed, and the proceeds of that tax actually overcome the cost of smoking related problems for the health system. So too could we tax all matter of proven deleterious foodstuffs and other consumables (like alcohol, soft drinks, petroleum products, plastics etc), with the result of encouraging healthier living, less pollution and greater government capital for expenditure on greater services. All this without having to introduce any rules inhibiting behaviour. So, one more...

TAX 6. Health tax

THE TAX MAN

This tax regime would likely lower the total tax paid in income tax. It would not only encourage healthier habits and save the environment, but it would do so in a way that didn't impinge on any freedoms - in fact it could be an effective enough deterrent that it could be used to loosen laws around drug use, resulting in less laws, less crime and more funds for services. There are more taxes to come though...

As Rutger Bregman says the answer is "Taxes, taxes, taxes".

So, what is this system called? There are some pre-existing candidates.

SOCIALISM?

This is far too loaded a term, which means entirely different things depending on who you speak to, and doesn't accurately describe a true partnership between capitalism and socialism.

STATE CAPITALISM?

This is a term used by Noam Chomsky to describe the system in the US as it stands at present, but could also be used to describe China's economic system (so, again, quite broad). A capitalist system controlled and regulated by the state. This particular blend of socialism and capitalism is responsible for the rising inequality we see today. It is the best system we have, but it often ends up misallocating roles - privatising public goods like healthcare, while taxes are used to prop up industries like car manufacturing in order to maintain employment. So, in some respects we get the worst of government inefficiency and the worst of capitalist exploitation.

SOCIO-CAPITALISM

A system in which the primary unit of value is human well-being where capitalism is regulated in such a way as to reflect these values. Essentially it would use capitalism for what it's good for and socialism for what it's good for. As with the taxes above, social values are given appropriate financial value and so are no longer at odds with capitalism, they can live in a frictionless partnership. If the unit of value could be quantified then new niches of opportunity would open up every time someone was in need.

DIGITAL-SOCIO-CAPITALISM

We see systems that value positive contribution arise in online help forums where people will spend time helping others for nothing other than kudos - perhaps these people are simply suckers, but there is something to be said for the consistent presence of the ideas of prestige that come from giving of one's self. Digital networks lend themselves to building these hierarchies of contribution, and could hold the answers to creating a political system that values contribution towards human well-being over profit.

BENIGN COERCION

Placing monetary value on social goods feels a little Orwellian for many people's tastes. For one, who determines the "social good"? I would contend that given the system as it stands, we already vote for what are the social goods, and we already capitulate to rules that determine our behaviour, and we are better for it. If I could be coerced to eat healthier and live longer with no additional effort myself, would I chose to? Yes. Given a democratic say in what we are incentivised to do, I personally don't see a problem with a system that seeks to use coercion for my own good. The alternative is what we have at present, where we are coerced by a market for which profit is the primary motive. This motive is not just a-moral

but might actually be at odds with our welfare. Having some say in how we are coerced, through ascribing financial value to social goods, might be the most empowering political move ever made.

AI

Harnessing technology will help us build a robust system, and acknowledging the changing face of technology will be essential. Looking to the future, the greatest challenge to the structure of our civilisation is the emergence of a automation revolution and eventually a new form of intelligence that will compete with us, merge with us, change us and challenge our conceptions of what it is to be a human society. It will question our moral sphere, our significance and potentially our existence.

AUTOMATION

The relationship between labour and capital has been a tumultuous one - but throughout the centuries a workable balance of power has been maintained. This relationship is about to change dramatically, as automation takes over higher and higher skilled jobs, leaving only highly skilled and creative jobs available to humans. Unlike industrial revolutions of the past, far from requiring less of their worker's skill level, these changes will ratchet up the skills required, leaving the young grasping for the final scraps and the old unable to adapt. Eventually this could result in what Yuval Noah Harari coined the "Useless Class" who have nothing to leverage in order to protect their rights.

WE DON'T LIVE TO WORK or WHY I STOPPED WORRYING AND LEARNED TO LOVE MILLENNIALS

People attach a lot of their self-worth to their work, and one of the pet-hates of gen-Xers around millennials is that they do this the "wrong" way around. Gen-Xers worked at the job in which they found themselves and learned to "love the one you're with". Millennials hesitate to step into a job that doesn't align with them as a person. I would posit that this attitude is going to serve them well in a future, where they are likely to be unemployed, where mundane tasks are automated and a person's originality becomes their product. If we manage to build a system of benign coercion with values that reflect conscious experience as the unit of value, we will do well to focus on priorities that benefit conscious well-being; the environment, unity, charity.

NO FREE LUNCH

Hold on a minute. I can see where this is heading. Of course a world with high unemployment, requires a social safety net and it has become popular across the spectrum to consider a universal basic income. There is of course an argument that a free lunch will be abused. The wealthy worry about a welfare state that results in the poor (and obviously lazy, in their opinion) confusing the safety net with a hammock.

TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

The concept of the tragedy of the commons originated in an essay by British economist William Forster Lloyd, who used a hypothetical example of the effects of unregulated grazing of livestock on common land. It was assumed that people would abuse the finite resource, however since then many such commons have become sustainable in actuality. Suggesting that people may not abuse a finite resource when given open access to it.

THE OPEN ACCESS PROBLEM

A wider issue is better termed "the open access problem" in which finite environmental resources can be mined or damaged openly - in this case it is multinational corporates who bear responsibility for abusing this loop-hole.

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

In 1974, the city of Dauphin, Canada guaranteed basic income. The program ran successfully for 4 years until the government changed and abolished it. 25 years later researcher Evelyn Forget found those who participated were richer, smarter and healthier, school performance improved substantially, hospitalisation decreased by 8.5%, domestic violence stats went down, as did mental health complaints. The only people who worked a little less were new mothers and students who stayed in school longer. Other experiments from the US to India have confirmed these results. [Rutger Bregman explains](#) that the costs associated with child poverty are 500 billion and yet it would cost 175 billion to fund UBI.

TANGIBLE STIGMA-LESSNESS

There are two reasons UBI could succeed:

1. It is primarily about something tangible; free money, rather than taxes for services where you pay tangible money for intangible, taken-for-granted services.
2. It is ostensibly fair, it is harder to argue against something everyone receives.

LABELLING THEORY

If unemployment is going to increase for a large portion of society, eliminating the stigma is going to become increasingly important. Stigma does something psychological to people and labelling theory might go as far as to say that it is the stigma of social welfare that perpetuates dependence on it.

“UNIVERSAL”

As Harari points out, for UBI to be effective it needs to be truly universal, everyone will be affected, especially those in third world countries who's economies have managed to capitalise on globalisation (and hard work) who will be the first to lose those jobs to machines. We have to start looking at this as a global body, not on a country by country basis.

THE GLOBAL BODY

How to create better globalisation?

NATIONS AREN'T SEPARATE

Globalisation has revealed a loophole in the assumption of nationhood. When a nation can exploit the labour (and the exploitative labour practices) of another country, without providing support, we create a hypocritical economy. If we appreciate that people are equal and are products largely of their circumstances, then we should protect the rights of and help improve the situation of those in other countries. The localist camp may have a knee jerk reaction to this, and it is important to hear objections.

OVER-POPULATION

Opponents to global support networks, protections and immigration might have a point when it comes to overpopulation. If we judge states on the current rates of population growth then funding and mixing with developing nations will result in overpopulation and in foreign cultural practices (that we're not comfortable with in the west) spreading. It's simply a matter of math.

THE BIRTH / DEATH RATE CORRELATION

However, high birthrates are tied to the infant mortality. Statistics show that after infant mortality drops, there is a period of population growth, but this is followed by a dramatic drop in the birthrate. Research has shown that the causal relationship in this correlation is that infant mortality and the factors that lead to high infant mortality drives the birth rate. So, if we want to stem overpopulation in the developing world, we actually need to accelerate the developments and protections that will lead to lower infant mortality.

DEPOPULATION IS NOT GENOCIDE

Humanity has failed to flourish proportionately with our increasing technology because of humanity's "elastic waistband", our propensity to overpopulation. Every time we have found a way to improve our lot, we have filled that "lot" with more people. It seems obvious to most that depopulation, through lowering the birthrate, is necessary, and should not be seen as some evil plot equivalent to killing the population (but this is bizarrely an objection I've come across). Succeeding in this venture could possibly improve the well-being of the entirety of humanity in a way we have never seen in history.

WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Depopulation does not require a direct policy like China's one child policy. The greatest tool in stemming over-population is women's education. Mixing of cultures across borders through globalisation and travel will reveal the benefits of women's education for all cultures, and this superior value will become ubiquitous. This is an absolute non-zero game in which everyone benefits. This also makes overpopulation a sort of horse-shit problem, that is solved by solving the primary problem of equal opportunities.

XENOPHOBIA

When it comes to migration, people fear, not only racial differences, but also the erosion of cultural values we hold dear. Why? Because there is a tendency in the west to believe that because our values have resulted in greater wealth and in many cases greater safety and well being, therefore our values must be superior. And yet many in the west don't hold the corresponding confidence that these "superior" values will hold their ground.

So, there are two flawed assumptions here:

1. That a wealthier society has nothing to learn from a poorer society.
2. That inferior values will win when pitted against superior values.

Anyone who has traveled to developing nations will have noticed regressive aspects of the culture that are clearly holding back progress, but at the same time, there are truly unexpected and sublime aspects of other cultures that you would want

to take “back home” with you. I would suggest that there is much that we can learn from others, about how happy people can be with less, how welcoming people can be and how present you can feel in an environment. We also need to trust that better systems and better aspects of culture will rise to the top when put in a fair competition with others. Migrant cultures contribute to society in many positive ways, and we see this contribution bear out in tax statistics where migrants and even second generation refugees contribute more to society than local populations. As long as there is an open sharing of values, on both sides, the best elements of society should flourish.

SOCIETAL COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

There is an allegory to the cognitive dissonance we have already dealt with and that is the natural extension of rights and liberties across the globe. How can we, as a society, claim to have superior values that we want to “protect” if we are at the same time happy to abuse those rights in people outside the sphere of the nation or the “1st world” when we buy cheap goods from countries that don’t extend the same rights to their workforce?

WORLD TAX

Charity and development funds have been the only recourse for developing nations. Both come with special interests, those of religious groups or those of governments aiming to leverage influence over smaller countries. Part of a universal income would require a tax that is devoid of this special interest relationship.

TAX 7. World welfare tax - that contributes to global initiatives to provide UBI for 3rd world countries.

Also, in order to police other taxes such as the customer-country-based tax, and to close loop-holes for tax avoidance a global tax authority will be necessary.

WORLD GOVERNMENT

There is no denying that the globalist end game is world government. It’s a scary idea, yes, and we should approach this piecemeal, learning from the lessons gained from the successes and failures of the democratic processes in the nations over the past centuries

But is world government even possible with the impotence of the UN? Is there a way to create cooperation without a central authority? I don’t, by any means, want to suggest doing away with national autonomy. Diversity is important to the robustness of a system so that the fate of the parts are not tied to the fate of the system. Ideally, a world government would emerge from an opt-in agreement where nations benefit from their allegiance. However, observing the examples of the Brexit, recent climate accords and even the UN, do not suggest an easy road to union. But at least, where cooperation has not been achieved this has been seen as failure, suggesting that there is a general consensus that achieving greater levels of global cooperation would be perceived as success.

WHAT FUTURES DO WE RISK?

The major risks we face are to do with regression. Currently we are flirting with many regressive ideas, coal, tariffs, nationalism, racial superiority, nuclear conflict and anti-science rhetoric. Some of the worst results could be...

An unequal world ruled by elites with an autonomous workforce and military - against an expendable “useless class”
Annihilation or subjugation by AI
A climate catastrophe
Nuclear war - not something that seemed like a viable threat a few years ago..
A tyrannical World Government...

A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

Beginning with the *Realtopia* ambitions...

Greater fairness and fulfilment of human potential
- *because we’re in this together*
The extension of healthy lives
- *because evolution has determined we die, and we don’t like it much*
Collectively gaining greater control over unhelpful inescapably value-laden experiences
- *because we have them, and they’re not always in our best interests*
A wider empathy and harmony between moral agents
- *because the unit of value is conscious experience*
A focus on preventative healthcare, including mental health care to proactively address criminal justice
- *because free will isn’t all it’s cracked up to be*

we should add...

Building strong children

- to create a meritocracy by a more proactive, preventative expansion of affirmative action, addressing disadvantage, rather than outcomes.

Freedom of Speech

- because we must trust that the best ideas will win in a fair competition

Measured Moral Outrage

- because sometimes arguments aren't just academic, conscious experience is primary

Overcoming the dichotomy of bad vs good

- because we are not dealing with a 50-50 split of bad and good intentions, only fearful vs liberal

Adopting a communication style that is reassuring

- because fear-based communication drives fearful people to conservative and isolationist positions

Representative democracy

- because it's fair and invests everyone in the social contract

Behaviour modification through taxation

- to place an economic value on social benefits

Socio-Capitalism

- because we can retain the benefits of capitalism without it dictating social values, by attributing economic value to social goods

A millennial perspective about purpose in work

- because we have left the period where your labour determines your worth - worth should be derived from your social contribution

Women's education

- because equality is an end in itself, and makes overpopulation a horse-shit problem

Some form of UBI

- because automation will drive the means of production away from labour towards capital, concentrating wealth requiring redistribution

and those taxes...

TAX 1. Capital gains tax - will balance the advantage of investing in static assets

TAX 2. Inheritance tax - stems the flow of wealth to brats who have already benefitted from coming from wealth

TAX 3. Capital tax - erodes large fortunes deterring the hoarding of wealth and encouraging investment in innovation

TAX 4. Customer-Country-based corporate tax - companies are taxed depending on where their customers are.

TAX 5. Pollution / Carbon taxes

TAX 6. Health tax

TAX 7. Global welfare tax

and finally...

World Government to enforce fair taxation

- global initiatives like UBI and new taxes will require global enforcement to eliminate tax avoidance.

CULTURAL NARRATIVES

How will we get there? How do we change a cultural narrative that is tied to partisan politics?

THE SOCIAL STORY

The central story, although it is not written down specifically in one place is the social contract, the democratically-evolved set of measures, laws, norms and axioms that hold sway in society. And it is this story that must change if anything is to truly change.

A GRAND VISION

In "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" Yuval Noah Harari writes about how the 20th century was dominated by grand visions; Communism, Dictatorship, Democracy, Capitalism, The Motherland, The FatherLand, the Ubermensch, the Proletariat, the Enemy of the People, Terrorism, the War on Drugs. This Century we are faced with the reality of a diverse and nuanced global village, with global issues of climate change, overpopulation, inequality, war and displacement that can no longer be solved with such blunt instruments. Grand narratives, by their nature focus on the extremes, and lack the subtlety we need today - in fact, arguably, they didn't serve the 20th Century all that well either.

PIECEMEAL

In "The Open Society and Its Enemies" Karl Popper advocated for "Piecemeal social engineering" rather than wholesale revolution; or "Utopian social engineering". He describes this as...

“... the difference between the only method of improving matters which has so far been really successful, at any time, and in any place, and a method which, wherever it has been tried, has led only to the use of violence in place of reason...”

Unfortunately, now as then, populist stories motivate action better than rational discourse and because fear drives people towards conservatism, this benefits the right. In addition, when radicalised, leftists find themselves incapable of siding with a centre left-leaning government that would provide a steady path toward progress. Many left radicals neglect to vote and right wing governments are elected, reversing progress.

GLIECH ALLES ZUSAMMEN

In addition to the subtlety of Popper’s piecemeal progress, there is a compounding problem which is illustrated by Mozart in his description of how he imagines music

*“I do not hear in my imagination the parts successively, but I hear them at the same time all together - *gleich alles zusammen*”*

Global concerns must be dealt with multilaterally, cooperatively. So, not only must we proceed slowly, but together, all at the same time. This is going to require great patience, and as we are threading the needle, it doesn’t feel like a very clear direction or narrative. So, how do you communicate complex, nuanced positions to a wide audience?

By telling better stories.

PRIMACY OF STORY

Jordan Peterson and Yuval Noah Harari distill the literary utility of religions in different ways. Peterson celebrates them as part of religion’s benefits, and wants to call them a form of “truth”. Harari, on the other hand, includes them in a continuum of fictions that have served to coordinate large groups of people. Harari sees religion as just the beginning of social fictions that have grown and evolved to those we live with today like human rights, money and limited liability companies. Peterson fails to see the continuum and so clings to his religious predilections in calling them truth, and rationalising their continued persistence. Both however understand that stories are vital to social change.

STORIES ARE MEME-PLEXES

Stories are, as far as we know, the best way to transmit information in a way that engages people’s attention and opens their minds to attach new concepts to old neural structures. Science and reason has always relied on evidence and logic - and it is often successful in cases where it is immediately demonstrable. However, humans are not purely rational beings and science and reason is in a competitive meme-space with competing stories that have no need for evidence or logic. When it comes to shaping a world that flourishes, it is important to communicate the truths of science and reason with the “truths” of narrative fictions.

FEYNMAN TECHNIQUE

There is a method used to do this formulated by Richard Feynman, when he stated that to understand a concept completely, one must be able to explain it to a lay person. This is not only an excellent individual litmus test, but should be a benchmark for all of the products of science and reason.

POVERTY OF LANGUAGE

The reason this is so important is because we must communicate complex ideas via a low bandwidth medium; language, this is a form of compression on our ideas. It is no surprise that we consume stories for pleasure on Netflix, or in a book, it’s no surprise that religions survive past their capacity to answer scientific questions. Stories are part of who we are, this restriction of bandwidth is part of what shapes our humanity, our identities. We have looked at human populations, voter behaviour and systems, but to use nuanced stories effectively we are going to have to appreciate the individuals who will consume them and to do that we have to explore what resonates with us all as individuals.

THE PEASANTS ARE REVOLTING

What is at stake here is the fact that change is unavoidable, but can happen in two ways. It can either come as a piecemeal process, or as wholesale revolution. There are many examples of revolutions that have led to progress; the French revolution (eventually), the American (eventually), and many that have led to regression; the communist and fascistic revolutions of the early 20th century. Revolutions are sometimes fruitful, but always destructive. Piecemeal processes however are often the unsung heroes of progress; the civil rights movement, in its adoption of peaceful protest, was more evolutionary than revolutionary - the change is slow, but consistent. This is important in all systems, including the individual, which is a system in itself, and to change individual minds, we need to appreciate how that system works.

THE INDIVIDUAL

It was a long detour but we have now returned from the eternal question to the now. What decisions will you make now and how will you make them?

BONSAI

The bonsai tree, for me symbolises the emphasis on intentional living in Japan. It celebrates contemplation, aesthetics and nurturing. A lesson for how we can live more intentional lives.

Imagine your life as a tree, your branches take paths based on decisions you make. In every season what is seen by the outside world is the plumage of our tree. Plumage brings pleasure to an audience and yet obscures the branching paths we have taken. When we dream of our future, we see it as others do, with the branches hidden. The following section is not a self-help guide, but a guide to developing individual behaviours that benefit conscious experience, ours and others'.

THE PARADOX OF SELF HELP

There is an industry of gurus out there claiming to have the answers to all life's problems, how to grow those branches to your desired riches, relationships and accolades. But one problem I always have with these gurus is, by and large, the vehicle by which they themselves have overcome self-doubt and narcissism and gained riches in their own lives, is by becoming self-help gurus. In other words, by expressing themselves to adoring crowds and capitalising on the sea of self-doubt and narcissism in the general population. The structure is one of a spiritual Ponzi scheme.

ROCK BOTTOM

Self-help stories often take the form of an internal revolution, in which a person hits "rock bottom" and builds themselves up from scratch. And like political revolutions, they are problematic. George Bush is an example of someone who hit rock bottom through alcoholism and then built himself up through becoming a born again Christian. These internal revolutions do happen sometimes, and when they do the results are not always good for the people surrounding the individual in question... What's more, these redemption stories are exceptional and obscure the fact that many people who hit rock bottom simply stay there and drag others down with them.

THE EXCEPTIONAL STORY PROVES THE RULE

Motivational material is awash with stories of heroes who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. These stories are impressive and indeed do motivate an individual looking for self-improvement. However, when looked at objectively, the very fact that it is a newsworthy "story" when someone bucks a trend should only serve to confirm the existence of the trend. It is precisely because they are rare, that they make interesting stories. Unfortunately, as I have mentioned, instead what happens is these stories serve to reinforce narratives around individual pursuits and personal responsibility that are so often used by fortunate inheritors of wealth to justify their own good luck - and claim it as a sign of their own story of individual pursuit and personal responsibility.

Self-help, is therefore exactly that; motivational for individuals but not suitable for being applied as a norm to society.

THE DEMON DOGS

First of all, what is the problem we're trying to solve here? Sure self-help has grown into a booming economy by giving bottled solutions to a world with unrealistic expectations, one might say, but why are solutions necessary to begin with? In much of the world we're not having trouble surviving anymore, and we certainly don't need to reproduce any more than we are currently, so why has evolution programmed us to have so much anxiety in this situation? The unfortunate reality is that missed opportunities and unanticipated risks were a matter of life or death in our evolutionary past, which has hardwired restlessness. We are programmed to ask "What next?" regardless of our past achievements.

SYSIPHUS AND SCHOPENHAUER

Schopenhauer lamented this aspect of the human condition; that upon completing one objective one is compelled to strive for another, taking little or no time to enjoy the satisfaction of achievement. This was best illustrated by the Greek mythical character Sisyphus who is condemned to repeat the task of pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have the boulder roll back down as he reaches the top.

CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION

There are 2 ways people cope with this aspect of the human condition. People often either submit to the imperative, seeking whatever external sources of validation are available, or they deny their desires and seek to overcome their need for validation through drugs or spiritual practices. As I see it, the acknowledgement of the source of this unassailable fact of the human condition goes some way to helping us to discern between personally beneficial desires and those that don't serve us. It also gives us a reason to do so non-judgmentally. It doesn't, however tell us what to focus on.

STOICISM

The ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism, propounded by the slave Epictetus, the philosopher Seneca and the emperor Marcus Aurelius, has gained great popularity amongst self-help gurus, most notably Tim Ferris of late. Could it hold the answer to well-being in this world of unrealistic expectations?

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

First of all, its worth exploring Stoicism a little, which focuses on 4 cardinal virtues

Wisdom: Using your intelligence to decide what is the best action

Temperance: Finding balance in your focus

Courage: In everyday life, at every moment

Justice: To strive for fairness even for those with whom you disagree

This all sounds very admirable.

DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL

Stoicism holds that things are either within or outside our control, and we should only focus on what is within our control.

IN OUR CONTROL

While appreciating that we are not the sole authors of our fate stoicism empowers us by encouraging us to focus on that which we can control - and gives an imperative to use that power for the benefit of humanity.

OUT OF CONTROL

The recognition that much of the world is outside your control helps a person not to beat themselves up about their failings and not to be too proud of their achievements. This fits with our current conceptions about free will and responsibility.

There is a lot to be taken from stoicism, and reading the works of Marcus Aurelius can certainly challenge a person to be a better human. There is a great value in the ability to focus on achievable goals, and to not fret over things that are outside our control. I'm not satisfied though that it has the transformative power to build a better world. First of all, how do we really know what is in and out of our control, even within our own minds?

A BETTER EQUATION

The dichotomy of control might be made more useful and flexible if we look at the equation VxA ; The Value of the Outcome x My ability to Achieve the Outcome, this is the VA value. In this way we could see the dichotomy of control having this relationship but with a threshold value of one $1x1$ is worth doing $1x0$ is not and $0x1$ is not. However VxA makes the vital distinction between a high value / low probability option; $200 x 0.4$ and a low value / high probability; $3 x 1.1$. The dichotomy of control would class the first as "Out of control" and the second as "In control" VA makes the value of the first 80 and the value of the second 3.3 making the first the far more desirable option.

This has the value of allowing you to focus on worthy goals at the exclusion of others, without missing out on difficult yet fruitful endeavours. But the lack of nuance is not the only thing wrong with stoicism.

I AM AURELIUS

Throughout Marcus Aurelius's "Meditations" he pleads powerlessness to change many things that one might think a king *could* change. This is largely because Aurelius believes that God has a plan, leading him to make the naturalistic fallacy that "what will be will be", or "everything happens for a reason". This perspective lets the-most-powerful-man-on-earth off the hook with regards to many ills in his society. And it's important to question the idea of powerlessness, because we now live in a world where we are all availed the power of Marcus Aurelius. Every day we have the opportunity to subjugate millions through buying global goods produced inhumanly, and equally we have the opportunity to save lives for "just a dollar a day". Perhaps a stoic philosophy that pleads too much about what is out of our control is not the best approach to take, when we actually have great power.

OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND

Today we in the west live in a society who can easily close our eyes to the means of production behind our consumption. And those marketing the goods have a vested interest in this opaque process - they don't want us to see how the sausage is made, even more than we don't, and they certainly don't want to allow us to make eye contact with the dollar a day indentured sweat-shop worker. We balk at the idea of keeping slaves as an anathema to modern civil rights, but how often do people buy T-shirts for \$8.99 and not question how did this get here so cheaply?

A NECESSARY GOOD

We have already looked at charity and its relationship to taxation; that they correlate positively, higher taxes correspond to greater charity, establishing that charity will not fill a gap left by lower taxation. And we have examined the idea of charity as a tax on kindness and, given both of these ideas, concluded that taxes are a far preferable answer to wealth redistribution. Having concluded this, there is still a growing inequality that taxation is not addressing, and so in lieu of greater, more effective and fair taxes, charity is necessary at present to help plug the gap.

CHARITY MOGUL

Some people have a strange suspicion of charities, as if, because they don't feel charitable themselves, they cannot quite trust the motivations of those who do. An argument I heard from a friend was that they didn't want to give to an NGO because of how much they spend on advertising. I wish I had thought to say "Well, have you researched NGOs that don't advertise? Because you'll have to, in order to find one... because they don't advertise". Since this conversation, I've heard the same message repeated - almost to the point of a conspiracy theory that assumes NGOs are simply wolf-like corporations in sheep's clothing. So, I looked into the stats, and was surprised to find just how little high-profile charities spend on advertising. Oxfam, for example, spends 83% of their donations on humanitarian development.

A TEST OF EFFICIENCY

How inefficient is Oxfam? Let's say I'm a middle-aged, middle class worker in Auckland, I earn NZ\$50/hr. Each month, I give \$50 to Oxfam and once a year I also take one and a half days off work to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Both the donations and the volunteering cost me 1.5 days income; \$600. The volunteering I do, gives me a great feeling of self-worth and I make some positive relationships and feed some people who otherwise would have been hungry. This creates some good will in my community. The \$600 over the year for Oxfam equates to about \$500 of actual humanitarian aid. According to The Life You Can Save website this donation will either provide school meal programs to 17 children for an entire year, build 12 latrines to protect the health of families displaced by natural disasters and conflict or provide 6 households with seeds and tools for farming.

Which day and a half is better spent, the donation to Oxfam or the day and a half at the soup kitchen? Let's take those 17 otherwise starving children, every day for a year, that's 6205 days worth of meals - quite a day at the soup kitchen! For reference chef Bian Tagal states on the forum Quora that a very basic cooking set up in a student housing cooperative that he managed in Austin Texas took an average of 3 staff cooking and cleaning full time to serve 100 tenants their daily meals. Assuming that a soup kitchen runs at the same efficiency, then a volunteer is providing meals for an average of 33 people a day.

Over 1.5 days that's 50 day's worth of meals, not including the cost of the food actually being served. Now compare that to Oxfam's 6205 day's worth of meals, or put differently 50 people fed for a day as opposed to Oxfam's 6205 people fed for a day. In conclusion, if you want to contribute as much as possible, you should spend their time earning money and giving it to a charity.

So, perhaps efficiency is not a fair argument to use against global charities. And let's not forget, that giving to global charities also creates good will, it connects people to an international community in a very positive way. There is still the personal feedback that one gets from being there in a community giving back and there are positives about this feeling of connectedness that might sustain one's feeling of responsibility to people around them. However science suggests there is a flip-side to this "humbling" feeling of giving directly.

MORAL LICENSING

Researchers at Stanford University have surveyed a vast range of studies that demonstrate that "When under threat that their next action might be (or appear to be) morally dubious, individuals can derive confidence from their past moral behaviour". In one study by Sachdeva, Illiev and Medin, participants were asked to write a self-relevant story containing words referring to either positive or negative traits, and then were prompted to make a donation. Participants who wrote a story referring to the positive traits donated one fifth as much as those who wrote a story referring to the negative traits. This experiment was combined with a number of others confirming that a morally positive self-image leads people to feel licensed to act immorally and visa versa.

It is important to be as accurate as possible in our Utilitarian Calculus, because humans have an innate sense of fairness; in evolutionary psychology this is our instinct for reciprocal altruism which is common in many social species. If someone feels they have contributed more than their fair share they are likely to skimp or cheat in other areas. This might be all well and good as long as the calculus is correct, at worst it would result in a neutral outcome. But what happens when someone is mistaken and perceives an action to have been a great contribution when it was actually a detriment to society? Then society is double cheated because it is wronged by the virtue and then by the vice.

MISGUIDED VIRTUE

Take for instance tithing to a particular church that preaches opposition to equal rights for women, homosexuals or infidels, and spends the tithings on real estate to spread its anti-social message. Or a business owner producing a useless product who buys into the creed that greed is good, and goes about automating her workforce and avoiding tax out of loyalty to shareholders who also avoid tax, resulting in no tax revenue and no employment. Yet because the business owner believes a story about contributing to the economy, they give themselves licence to commit crimes against the environment in the production of their product.

PROXIMITY BIAS

Evolution has also given us senses that are biased to proximity, genetic and geographic; goods deeds and wrongs done to those close to you will weigh more heavily when we judge our moral position in the world. So, for instance in the Soup Kitchen vs Oxfam example, both actions are virtuous and yet the least effective action (volunteering at the soup kitchen) feels the most rewarding because it's closer to us, and the results are more immediately evident. Therefore the moral licensing we afford ourselves in this situation is much greater. This means that we will be more likely to undo the good we've done in other areas, resulting in a neutral or even negative outcome. This sounds a bit hopeless, but there is a solution.

AUTOMATIC CHARITY

Automating our charitable giving is one potential way to get around our own tendency to moral licensing by becoming blind to our own virtuousness. It is easy to set and forget a donation, and forgetting our monthly giving reduces our propensity to moral licensing. Also, because the recipients are on the other side of the world we get no reverence from them and no affirmation of our own righteousness. This might leave us with enough compassion to give to the next homeless person we pass by on the street, or to vote for governments that provide services to those less fortunate than ourselves. This would be a way of consistently pushing the needle towards good, rather than living with an internal moral pendulum, making us truly good people. I would hope that we had also evolved a way to sense this quality in others, so that our accumulative good actions in the world have some affect on how we are perceived and trusted by others.

MANA MISINTERPRETED

I have searched for a word to describe the *vibe* you get from someone with profound integrity, I had for some time thought that the Maori concept of mana filled this purpose, disappointingly this turns out to be just another form of inherited or granted prestige in the same fashion of royalty. However, people I've spoken to who use the word also share my interpretation. The sense of this concept I'm seeking is as Marcus Aurelius describes

A man should habituate himself to such a way of thinking that if suddenly asked, "What is in your mind at this minute?" he could respond frankly and without hesitation; thus proving that all his thoughts were simple and kindly.

My sense is that humans have evolved a sense of how to detect this genuine integrity (that being a union of the inside and outside) and that some people, when you meet them simply have this brand of authentic charisma. This public charisma reflects a private habitual effort, and this public value reflects a private generosity. Aurelius reflects this intuition when he states.

How hollow and insincere it sounds when someone says, "I am determined to be perfectly straightforward with you." Why, man, what is all this? The thing needs no prologue, it will declare itself. It should be written on your forehead, it should echo in the tones of your voice, it should shine out in a moment from your eyes, just as a single glance from the beloved tells all to the lover. Sincerity and goodness ought to have their own unmistakable odour, so that one who encounters this becomes straightway aware of it despite himself. A candour affected is a dagger concealed. The feigned friendship of the wolf is the most contemptible of all, and to be shunned beyond everything. A man who is truly good and sincere and well-meaning will show it by his look, and no one can fail to see it.⁶

HEROES

They say you should never meet your heroes, others warn against having heroes, but the inclination to admire and mimic is innate in us, at least in me, so how do we square this? When I see someone who has the "unmistakeable odour" of greatness or authenticity, I cannot help but try to emulate it. This rarely sustains however, 5 minutes after I've strutted out of the movie theatre as Jason Bourne, I'm buying an ice cream and heading home to sleep and forgetting all about tomorrow's special agent training regime.

Now, I have, in this essay, criticised self-help, but I'd like to indulge one idea that has stuck for me.

⁶ "Meditations" Marcus Aurelius (page 145)

YOUR OWN HERO

Writer James Clear in “Atomic Habits” has pulled together a wide variety of research to put forward a strong case that a person’s qualities are a reflection of their habits. So, if we want to foster traits we admire in others, for instance, an ability to tell good stories or an athletic physique, we are not going to be able to fake that by copying them in the moment, that will also be weird. Copying someone’s behavioural traits is like strutting around with your chest puffed out to look like you go to the gym. If we want to be more engaging, we need to find out what engaging people pay attention to, what their habits are. This is the only way to understand what causes the quality that we perceive in their behaviour, and allows us to authentically make it our own. A step further is understanding our own motivations and ambitions and squaring those with our rituals.

THE PARADOX OF PLAYING BY YOUR OWN RULES

Life is easy if we play by our own rules. This seems true enough, but we still must create rules, and live by them, to create a rule that changes on a whim is no rule at all. Another aspect of self-help that I have found fruitful is the celebration of self-discipline. The reason this is important is that it helps to avoid the pitfalls of decision fatigue and moral licensing - sticking to your own rule is making a decision once and not having to do it over and over, and not having to find the moral rectitude to do-the-right-thing every time. This leaves mental and moral energy free to be spent in the moment. But why? Why do we have to impose artificial rules on ourselves?

AFFLUENZA

We have to watch what we eat today because high-calorie food is so abundant in the developed world. We all know this is because the environment now no longer places restrictions on our diet for us. This now extends to other areas too, information for instance, which we have to think more critically about than ever, because it is so abundant. We also have to think about how to best spend our resources and money because, if we are honest with ourselves they are also hugely abundant. However, like with diet, in economics evolution drives us to a scarcity mentality which leads us to cling to tax cuts rather than generosity. This mandate for self-discipline might lead some to envy people in the developing world that might face greater external restrictions; rather than face an array of physical and cognitive diets we could simply live out the adventure we were evolved for.

A WALK ON PART IN A WAR FOR A LEAD ROLE IN A CAGE

In Pink Floyd’s “Wish you were here” when I first heard the lyrics “Did you exchange a walk on part in a war for a lead role in a cage?” I interpreted the lyric as referring to the Vietnam war, questioning a conscientious objector. While this was a misinterpretation, it made me think about the trade off we make in the developed world for security. We are all familiar with the imbalance in reporting in favour of western victims in international conflicts or tragedies at “home”. Those in the west are just assumed to value western lives more than those of *other* people. No doubt there is truth to this and it corresponds with what we’ve already explored about proximity bias. But there might also be something to the fact that those in the developed world, have been given the choice between security and adventure, and have chosen security.

ABNEGATION OF ADVENTURE

Could there be a compounding tragedy in dying despite choosing the path of security, the boring path, a life of quiet desperation. For some, adventure is thrust upon them and to die in these circumstances could be seen as heroic. Might suburban westerners feel a sense of jealousy if they meet the same fate as someone who has lived 100 of their lives by means of forced adventure? This is the height of first-world problems, when the great equaliser of death is treated unequally, but it might point us to a lack that needs to be addressed, a lack of struggle.

OPTIMISING STRUGGLE

In the same way as wealth yields high returns (in happiness) at the bottom and diminishing returns as wealth increases, there is a similar relationship with life’s struggles and the development of character, indeed they are related. Let me try to explain. In the case of struggle vs character, granting the traditional understanding that struggle builds character, if someone faces no struggle in their life they develop no character and as struggle slowly increases, so too does character. Then as struggle continues to increase there are diminishing returns, until you reach a threshold where the spur to innovation becomes the heel spur, discouraging action and improvement. So, not only do the returns diminish, they regress leading to anti-social behaviour. At both ends you end up with people who are commonly referred to as assholes... or might be better understood as the horseshoe of blue-collar and white-collar crime. As with happiness and wealth, there is a sweet spot in this curve, an optimal range of struggle.

CREATIVE PROGRESS

On an individual level we naturally find struggle through progress. This is why many people get satisfaction from their jobs, because good jobs generally have, built into them, a sustainable progress model, either by design or evolution. The mind builds habits and routines that become automatic and reassigns conscious awareness to new creative problems, not having this results in boredom, having too much results in overload. Creative pursuits can also fill this purpose, or

education - the model of practice, mastery and extension can keep the brain at the sweet spot of progress, which James Clear in "Atomic Habits" says is at about 104%, slightly outside what we can do automatically.

These however are an extension of effort that is only fulfilling a personal need. Is there a way to shape society in a way that creates a non-zero-sum situation that uses this effort in a way that fulfils us and at the same time contributes something to society? As with happiness and wealth there is again the option of increase taxation on wealth - in particular those who inherit wealth (increasing struggle for those who have the least struggle) and using that to alleviate regressive struggle at the bottom end. As with happiness, this will put people within an optimal range of character building experience, and may even help people feel they are living a life of more purpose, with a more heroic narrative. It's a win win, but what would it look like.

RELATIVISM

To think about this it's important to look at the idea of relativism; the position that everything is relative. And before addressing Relativism it is important to put aside *Absolute* Relativism; the position that, because everything is relative, no absolute truths can be attained. This has a major flaw that it is so clearly demonstrated by the steady progress of science and reason. Absolute Relativism holds that science only makes illusory progress and ceases to be true outside of its relationship with individual human minds. However, this is a wholly self-defeating position because the logic used to come to this conclusion must also fall under this radical skepticism. In its purest form Absolute Relativism undermines any attempt at discussion and to my mind therefore disqualifies it from comment on philosophy or science. So, why am I bringing up relativism?

ACTUAL GROWTH

Evolution has primed us to use relative measures of worth. In the situation of running away from a lion, or attracting a mate, it only matters whether you are better than the next person. The joke is as follows; Two men are faced with a lion, one turns to the other and asks "Why are you putting your sneakers on? You can't outrun a lion" the other says "I don't need to outrun the lion, I only need to outrun you".

We seek environments where we have advantage, rather than environments where we are at a disadvantage. This can mean we avoid unfamiliar environments or environments where we are relatively inferior, because they make us feel inadequate. In reality, in entering the challenging environment we are exactly as we were. And yet we are no longer in the jungle, many of our fearful instincts and feelings of inadequacy are unjustified. On a purely selfish level, this is actually an opportunity to game your own system in order to attain personal growth. A situation where your peers are stronger than you will trigger your natural relative measures and make improvement much more likely. For instance, I rock climb at a gym where everyone is excellent, it makes me feel inadequate but objectively I improve faster.

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

Humans' propensity to perceive the world relativistically sustains divisions in the world because of our avoidance of the unfamiliar. One method for people to increase struggle and adventure would be to share experiences with people of different walks of life, which has the added benefit of building a more objective perspective of what is truly significant. The benefits of are three-fold. First of all, it introduces a level of struggle and adventure, humbling you by making you aware of some actual deficiencies you only noticed once you ventured out of your element, which builds character. Secondly it breaks down barriers to extending wealth, rights and dignity to people in a wider circle of moral concern. Finally there is also something to be said for the relativistic sentiment that to appreciate the positive we must experience the negative; one gives shape to the other. Some of the most enduring lessons I've learned have been from negative experiences, my own and witnessing those of others. So, experiencing how the other half lives also helps people to appreciate what they have, rather than constantly striving to keep up with the Joneses.

THE ABSURD MAN

Acknowledging the flaws in our perception, such as relativism, proximity bias, the impact of fear on moral positions, our questionable free will and the exceptionalism of our stories can tempt us towards absurd and even nihilistic inclinations. Camus, for instance, saw the Myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the actions of the absurd man, holding that human activity, in lieu of divine or natural value, is absurd. However, if we acknowledge a consciousness-centric view we can escape this conclusion.

BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE

Because, as we have explored, experience is *inescapably* value-laden, it is as solid a foundation as nature or God. The centre of the meaning is only seen as absurd or arbitrary if we imagine that it was once designed, when we understand that it was never such we understand that we begin the story of meaning in the middle rather than at the prime move. Because causality moves in one direction does not mean that meaning must. Take for example a deadline, the actions you perform in order to hit a deadline are given meaning and purpose by something in the future, the cause moves in one direction through time, the meaning moves where it pleases.

MESO-CENTRISM

We are inescapably meso-scopic beings and are inescapably meso-centric in our outlook. We can observe the microscopic and macroscopic world only by scaling them to the meso-scopic scale. In the same way, we cannot interpret the past or the future without bringing it to the present. To find meaning we must acknowledge that it is our conscious experience that is the scale at which we recognise meaning and that in order to find meaning we must do so in terms of conscious experience. This does not preclude objectivity because, although we are constrained in our perspective we can and do triangulate on objectivity by means of our binocular vision, our temporal awareness, consensus, logic and the scientific method. Can we effectively turn this lens on ourselves?

THE AUTHENTIC SELF

As we are implored to do by philosophy, is there such a thing as knowing yourself? Can we be truly authentic?

AUTHENTICITY

There might be something to be said for the illusive notion of authenticity. With regards to the 2016 US election, Wassermann was acting outside of authenticity when she conspired to favour Hillary over Bernie, at least in the sense of her honesty. Trump on the other hand was able to relate to an authentically dishonest, vindictive and misogynist streak that clearly runs strong in his constituency. What is authenticity?

CONTROLLED FALLING

My understanding of Heidegger's conception of authenticity was living in profound anxiety, as if falling into the void. Anxiety becomes a bridge between a being's role in the world and the authentic self - aware of its infinitesimal significance. It works both ways in that a logical or philosophical epiphany of one's lack of control, significance and purpose evokes a profound anxiety, but also that it is in moments of extreme anxiety that we connect with our authentic self. Anxiety is after all synonymous with self-consciousness.

There is a fleeting sense of falling in this state, and that for Heidegger is authenticity. Existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre explain the human condition as always escaping the fall by means of fixing on an internal fictional role (a winner, loser, optimist) or externally enforced role (presenter, team member, parent, leader, surgeon, butcher, baker, candlestick maker) that allows the da-sein (that which does the being) to go back to "being" in the world.

THE GURU'S GOTCHA PARADOX

There is a certain way in which many perspectives of the self feel paradoxical. And indeed confusing their disciples with such mind-bending gotchas appears to be a primary source of amusement for gurus of eastern (particularly zen) philosophy. In the same way as the universe is in your mind and you are in the universe seems paradoxical, having to exit the mitwelt to become aware of the da-sein and be "authentic" seems deliberately impossible.

MITWELT

Heidegger saw humans as "thrown" into a world and that consciousness was contingent on a mitwelt (with-world) that we are conscious of. Our thrown nature gives us a trajectory that limits the scope of our experiences gives us something to push off of. You can look at hunger as one of these trajectories; we are born in a body that needs food progressively as it burns energy and that motivates us to take action.

THE ANTI-NIHILISM MECHANISM

It sounds like evolution might have something to answer for here. We are always on some mission to satisfy some combinations of these trajectories. To abdicate this responsibility is in many ways simply suicide and evolution has selected to make abdication of the missions painful, but has it also made even thinking about it painful in the form of anxiety? Is the falling feeling in your brain telling you "If you stop doing your job I'm going to throw you off a cliff"?

AN ANALOG TO HUNGER

In terms of physical needs there are points at which our body gives us inescapably value-laden experiences that tell us - "You need to eat now", "You need to run away now", "You need to stop embarrassing yourself on stage now", "You need to punch that guy". As intelligent human beings those feelings might be contradicted by our intuitions and experience, our idea of the future we want, or perhaps even by consciously deciding. But also what we find in those situations is that the sensations are not permanent or worse; inflationary.

FASTING

In the case of hunger, we do not experience a level of hunger that directly maps our remaining calories. Imagine the sort of panic one would feel in the wild if, as they got hungry they became incapacitated with pain. That doesn't sound very advantageous. What we in fact experience are waves of hunger, and when fasting you'll notice that there are times, hours into the fast, that the hunger fades, you may even feel you have more energy. People who fast regularly find even their

periods of hunger are less associated with negative feelings of “hanger” or fear or pain because they understand that it will subside.

Could it be the same with realising da-sein? Rather than escaping the authentic self by enrolling in a new internal fiction, could we ride out the wave of anxiety to reach something on the other side? After all, what is the consequence? Taking your eye off the ball for an hour could have meant your death in the wild, but we can go on 6 week meditation retreats now - the consequences of taking some time to know thyself are much less pressing even than with fasting.

BUT WHAT WOULD BE THE POINT?

Well, first the greatest philosophers throughout history have all converged on the primary importance of “Knowing thyself”. But further to that, the notion that evolution has set us up to avoid such navel gazing in the face of the immediate perils of the wild, makes us aware that this is an aspect of ourselves we avoid for no good reason in the incredibly safe modern society in which we now find ourselves. So, in the same way as we benefit in the external world by overcoming irrational fears and inhibitions, perhaps we might find the same on the inside. The meditator seeks to sit at the centre of this neuronal hurricane and see it for what it is without being blown around by it.

But what if this loop is not just academic, but involuntary, is it necessary that facing profound anxiety is the only authentic way to live, and by implication the right way to live?

HEIDEGGER WAS WRONG

While he may have been on to something to describe this realisation as authenticity, and to associate that with a feeling of profound anxiety - it is not necessarily right to say that profoundly anxious is what we are at our core. After all the evolutionary reason for the anxiety has nothing to do with the truth or meaning of the realisation of our authentic self it is simply a reflex that tells us “Get out of this state lest you get lost in it”. Not getting lost in ourselves is an evolutionary imperative, arguably self-reflection may not be an evolutionary advantage, regardless of whether it increases our own well being as conscious agents.

NEURAL CYCLES

Neuroscience bears out the fact that neuronal networks can physically produce cycles due to the directional nature of a neuron (from dendrite to axon). These take the form of 2 or more neurons connected in an actual loop, it can even work within one neuron called an autapse which is a synapse that connects a neuron to itself; these have been modelled demonstrating oscillatory behaviour in the neuron. However science is yet to confirm the experiential correlates of neural cycles or autapses, leaving me free to speculate...

MENTAL LOOPS

The realisation of the recursive nature of consciousness is a sort of mental loop; “I am inside the universe - but the conscious experience of the universe is inside me - I am inside the universe” creates a loop in the same way in which falling creates a loop “I am falling - prepare to land - I have not landed yet - I am falling”. Perhaps then the feeling of anxiety is related to the looping structure of the thought - the sense of bottomlessness - after all, a loop has no bottom. Where the realisation of insignificance can philosophically give someone a physical sensation of falling from a purely academic exercise, for many people a feeling of insignificance can lead people to think that that sensation of falling is inescapable.

People who experience depressive and suicidal thoughts often speak about a downwards spiral or being swallowed up and symptoms include rumination; another loop formation. And of course depression and suicide are associated with a profound sense of anxiety.

RECURSIVE ANXIETY

A pathological loop is where the anxiety itself becomes part of the loop. “I am worthless - my feeling of anxiety confirms this - I am worthless” the bottomless nature of a loop of such a kind which is physiologically reinforced could leave someone thinking that the feeling will never end.

Providing that Heidegger was wrong to suggest that anxiety is the authentic self. If the feeling of anxiety is simply associated with perceiving recursive concepts, be they self-destructive loops, gurus’ gotchas, the actual experience of falling or the understanding of the infinite regress of consciousness - is there a way to escape this loop without denying it?

ONE WAY NEURAL PATHS OUT OF DEPRESSION

Given that neural paths are directional, it may be possible to find meaningful paths out of depressive cycles in a way that remains authentic. A neuron that is part of a neuronal cycle can have more than one synapse and so developing an association with one of the negative cycling neurons toward a strong belief that carries you to positive thoughts, could help break the cycle.

WE ARE ALL HUMAN

The most effective exit from such downward spirals is to appreciate that “I’m a human and lots of humans have this experience”. And this is not just a trick of the mind, a fiction as Sartre would have it. To look at the two claims here, the negative feelings associated with the downward spiral are indeed because you are human, they have evolved to make this state of mind extremely uncomfortable. Knowing this fact might help someone develop some objectivity around this experience. But the second claim that “lots of humans have this experience” is empirical and without evidence that others feel the same way it might be difficult to believe, and here one must rely on others.

THE ZE FRANK MAXIM

Internet philosopher and comedian Ze Frank has a beautiful maxim that encapsulates this situation “The things that make us feel most alone have the greatest power to connect us”. Ze Frank playfully experiments with this maxim with his online followers creating art out of people’s confessions and insecurities as a sort of communal catharsis. As a sort of scientist of internet virality, he emphasises the value of being open about your own vulnerabilities as the best way to engage with people. It’s a non-zero-sum game; it can be cathartic for you and could tell someone out there they are not alone, in turn their response might tell you that you are not alone.

#METOO

Even before Ze Frank broadcast his maxim, in 2006 Tarana Burke used the philosophy of strength through shared experiences to create a small grass-roots movement to reach sexual assault survivors in underprivileged communities, their catch phrase was “me too”. 10 years later when Alyssa Milano tweeted “me too” the viral appeal of this message was confirmed. Women across the world discovered a powerful application of the principle that our insecurities can connect us when they began to tell stories of the chronic embarrassment and silent abuses they had experienced through their lives.

SO, ON AUTHENTICITY

There are two aspects of authenticity that are important to understand. First of all, anxiety is a natural part of the internal realisation of self but anxiety is irrational (meaning you don’t need to let it worry you) and being prepared to face this discomfort may result in personal benefits. Secondly, being open about your personal struggles and anxiety might help others escape pathological loops, it may hold the secret not only for catharsis for yourself and others, but might be also be an effective way of spreading positive ideas more effectively, even virally, making paradigm shifts based on empathy and connection.

THE INDIVIDUAL, THE COLLECTIVE and THE UNIVERSE

In the same way as Karl Popper advocated piecemeal progress in political systems, we can appreciate that our own body and mind is a system, a democracy of sorts that is pulled at different times by different and flawed forces. In “Atomic Habits”, James Clear advocates a similar approach, a piecemeal approach to behaviour change. Being kind to yourself. As with society we cannot expect to change wholesale by pure brute force, we have to expect no more from ourselves than we have experienced prior, and grow by small increments. This is consistent with our original position of the principle of emergence. Setting up habits, and habitats that allow for the emergence of sustainable gains. The same principle dictates the universe, the society and the individual.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE CHANGE

How do you change a collective perspective? It seems as though there are two options, by changing individuals or changing the masses by force or coercion by a central authority, but virality might be a third way. Viruses are able to be defined at both an individual and a collective perspective. Religion is a good example, where despite borders and laws or individual arguments, a strong religion with enough effective mechanisms for self-propagation can spread. Religion spread through stories passed down, and by imperatives built in to the stories to propagate them further.

HOW PARADIGMS CAN SHIFT

The #MeToo movement combined a viral technology (hash-tagging) with a viral imperative to “tell your story” that effectively crowd-sourced the most tried and true method of spreading ideas; stories. There is a lesson to be learned here about how to shift political opinion, it’s about creating a structure that promotes stories that reinforce a message. And this doesn’t need to be done cynically, as with the #MeToo movement, the message needed to heard, the stories were genuine and the world has changed.

The reason the west thrived over the last millennium and most acutely in the 20th Century is not just because freedom is more enjoyable than subjugation, but because, as Yuval Noah Harari describes, it had developed “*values, myths, judicial apparatus and sociopolitical structures*” over centuries⁷ that could not be simply copied, they had to evolve piecemeal. This is analogous to developing sustainable habits as an individual. So, instead of trying to change the system, perhaps we should start enriching the culture with the stories and values of a better more progressive world - this has always been set in motion by philosophers and creators of entertainment long before the populous catch up. Now, with social media, virality

⁷ “Sapiens” Yuval Noah Harari (page 314)

has opened new opportunities for everyone to shape these narratives, which is a blessing and a curse. This highlights the need for philosophers to remain active and lead, and for content creators to become more philosophical in their outlook.

FREEDOM VS PURPOSE

We have known of the dichotomy of freedom vs purpose for millennia, religions gave some purpose while others pursued *free*-thinking. Clear political world-views arose in the C20th towards liberalism and communism pitting individual autonomy against communal determination. We know it in our lives, when we determine to follow through on something purposefully, we only do so by limiting our freedom to pursue distractions.

HOW PARADIGMS REALLY SHIFT

In our early exploration of replicators we established that there is a sort of emergent plan playing out and we are the first species we know about to question this plan. We see that paradigm shifts happen when a replicator becomes the substrate for a higher complexity replicator; entropy is the substrate for emergence, quanta are the substrate for atoms, gravitational atoms are the substrate for galaxies, planets are the substrate for terrestrial chemical systems... > simple life > evolution (genes) > human brains > ideas (memes) > technology > AI (memes) > ?

A CHOICE

So, in a world where they may be a *higher purpose*, not handed down to us by a god but emergent in the process of higher complexity replicators - it appears we have an existential choice, if indeed we have any power to “choose” at all. We can play our part in the emergent plan, and become a cell in a larger body that can achieve greater things than we could imagine and in so doing lose all autonomy, or we become the free-radical or the cancer in the system and maintain our autonomy at all costs. Neither option seems appealing. On the one hand by pursuing progress we could be, once again, stretching humanity’s elasticated waistband and failing to enjoy what we could have, right now. On the other hand, in the same way a free-radical is a pest in a unified system, or a cancer cell is immortal but at the expense of the host, we might find ourselves, and even consciousness itself, being ultimately rejected by the process of emergence. This is the 3rd alignment problem; between conscious life and relentless emergence.

A THIRD WAY

This is a difficult choice, but as with many seeming dichotomies, it is important to ask “Is there a third way?”. Initially we squared the paradox of entropy with a theory of emergence, overcame David Hume’s “no ought from is” with the concept of inescapably value laden experiences, squared the illusion of free will with determined randomness, and we found a way of threading the needle with Socio-Capitalism which involved piecemeal change towards curbing extremes of struggle and optimising happiness and character. In regards to the individual, we replaced Stoicism’s dichotomy of control with a more nuanced equation. We overcame the zero-sum nature of charity vs moral licensing by automating charity. We bridged the gap between the expert and the lay person with the Feynman technique. We overcame the dichotomy of religious dogma vs absurdity by exploring the validity of our consciousness-centric perspective. We pointed to sharing our vulnerability as a way to overcome the personal struggle for authenticity with the *loopy* anxiety that accompanies it. We pointed to genuine virality as a way to overcome the dichotomy of individual vs authoritarian change. We pointed to ways to capitalise on the twin urges for progress and against disadvantageous environments to benefit ourselves and others. But what do we make of the dichotomy between emergence and consciousness?

“What is our plan as a species?” asks Silicon Valley venture capitalist Bryan Johnson. He answers himself “... we don’t have one”.⁸

A PLAN

We have established that conscious experience is the unit of value, it may be an illusion as with many aspects of free will, and there may be other objectively valuable things in the universe, but the only value we know of exists in conscious experience. So, the issue of preserving conscious experience, and perhaps some of our better human values along with it, is the existential goal. But as with the piecemeal progress of our individual and societal systems, we should be looking to sustainable adaptation rather than a plan written in stone. It is not known yet if consciousness can transcend the wetware of animal minds, and this is the topic for another essay, but I would hazard a guess, given all that we’ve explored in this essay, that slow incremental change is the best way forward. We may or may not be “*summoning the demon*” as Elon Musk puts it, but we are definitely giving birth to something new with autonomous technologies. Getting our own house order, solving the displacement caused by automation, addressing the current problems of redistribution in our political and economic world and looking inward at what we really value is the only hope for sustaining conscious experience.

HOW I HAVE CHANGED

While the essay begins with some bombastic conclusions (no piece of media is complete these days without some click-bait) I did seek to learn and change my views through writing this. And I have.

⁸ “We need to talk about AI” is an upcoming film Directed by Leanne Pooley (I was involved in editing and the quote is from interview and may or may not be in the final film)

First of all I have learned that I need to be kinder to others and myself. People are products of a highly complex mix of environment, genes, fears, irrationality and of course rationality, courage, choices and hopes. I am one of these people too, and it is important, to set up societal systems and our own individual systems to make the most of our potential. This means working with irrationality, laziness and fear in ourselves and others, rather than only tolerating the virtuous aspects of people. This will not only be more effective in the moment, but will actually help ourselves and others overcome those flaws. Part of this is the discovery of the effectiveness of habit driven achievement over goal driven achievement, and that this analogy maps nicely on to society also. This in turn has given me a greater appreciation for the utility of virtue ethics, which I had often discounted as insufficient to really drive change. I would have said I was a fairly puritanical Utilitarian before, and while I still think the utilitarian calculus is important, virtue ethics aligns better with habit driven and piecemeal change.

Every section of this essay has shaped and developed my views, and through this process I have noticed myself becoming a clearer thinker, decision maker and communicator in general. If you too are lost in your ideas, I recommend writing them down.