Your Situation

A Swift Spiritual Kick to the Head to Align Your Model with Reality

Benjamin Rubinger

Contents

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Benjamin Rubinger　　　Lives |　　　Score 0000

Estimated reading time: 3.5 hours to read, longer to apply. 27.3 thousand words.

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Introduction

Your senses and your mind are very likely reliable, but your intuitive and ordinary interpretation of your life is very likely to be a delusion. Not only does the world appear different to you from how it is, the society around you is delusional. Your situation and how the world works are extremely different from what people generally assume.

In this book, I attempt to destroy the key delusions and reveal the hidden mechanics of your situation. I will suggest techniques to help you effectively pursue your actual goals. This is not a story about someone else, this is in your story. This is an instruction manual for you. It's not fun to read about, it's fun to immediately apply it to yourself. Each topic is contained in one chapter, go in order or sample, but it is all connected. The title of each chapter is a delusion or a mechanic. These observations are unoriginal, verifiable and unpopular. I am not demanding anything of you, take what you can handle. This is my attempt to give you a swift spiritual kick to the head, one shot to align your model with your situation.

This book will hurt your feelings.

Litany of Eugene Gendlin

What is true is already so

Owning up to it doesn't make it worse

Not being open about it doesn't make it go away

And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with
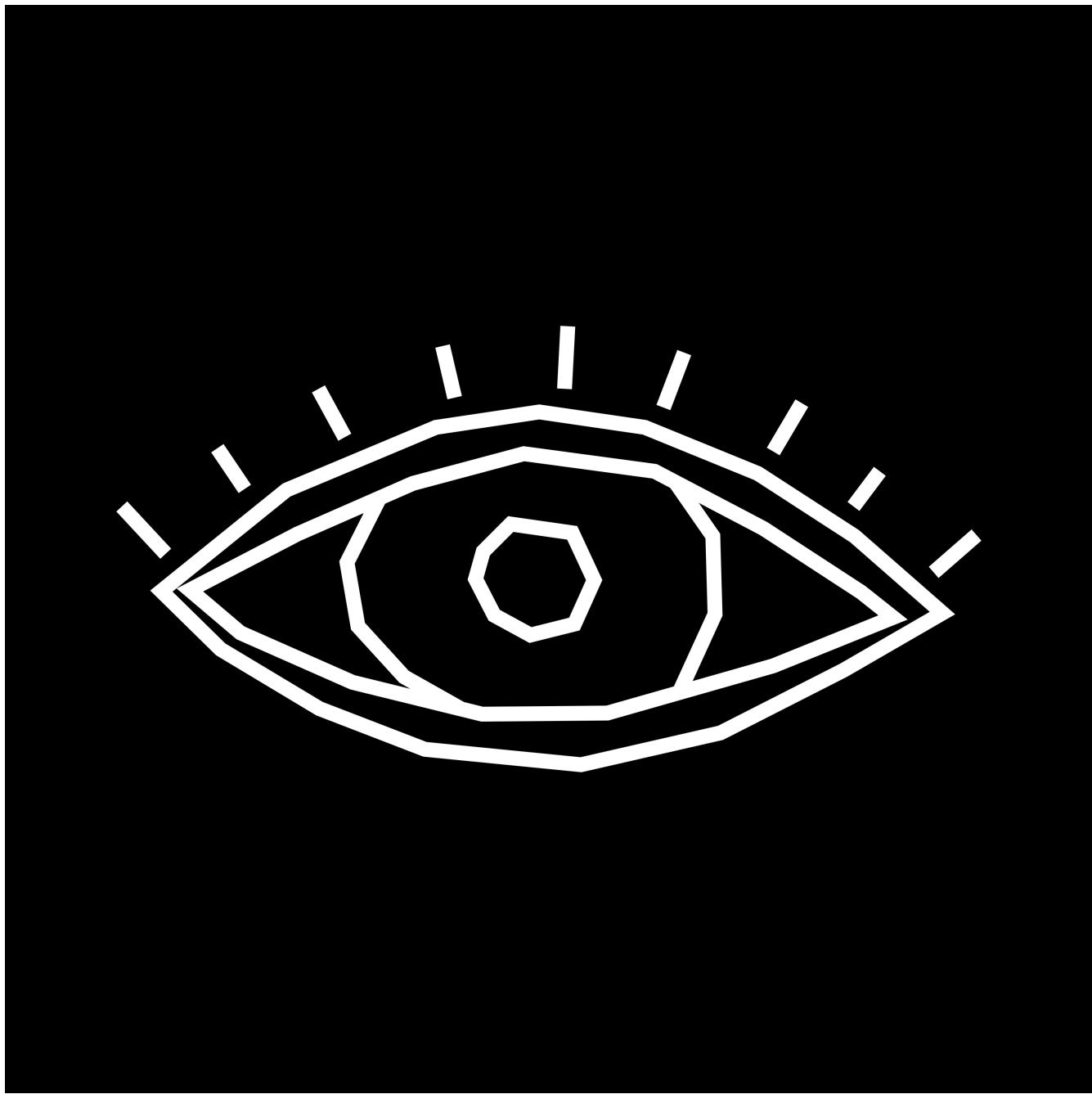
Anything untrue isn't there to be lived

People can stand what is true,

For they are already enduring it

TLDR

Long or short is relative. I wrote everything here that I think another literate human might need to know to set them on their best path to success. It will take less than a thousandth of a percent of your life to read, and if you get it, that will be 99.999% silence. I invite future generations to effectively compress and enhance it.

I Experience the World

I See It All

You wake, you open your eyes, you see the wide world, you touch grass. You experience the world. Nope.

You are in a soft brain floating in an underwater bone box in a monkey. Your senses are intermediaries. You have never seen or touched anything. You only know what your senses tell you. You have never experienced the world. Your eyes collect a tiny amount of light and in a complex, lossy process, transform that light into signals that you spend a lot of unconscious effort to make sense of. Most of what you think you see is imagined, your image of the world is mostly made up, confabulated. That is not a metaphor. There is only a tiny area of your field of view that your eyes see clearly, and your eyes skip around very quickly to create the impression that you can see everything clearly at the same time. Try fixing your eyes in place and attempt to keep reading. The rest of your vision is not very detailed, it is mainly good at detecting grayscale and movement. Your wide view of the whole world all at once

is a comfortable illusion. You even predict what you are going to see, so you can stop paying attention. When your vision system detects something it didn't expect, an anomaly, it grabs your attention. Then your attention tacitly moves your eyes to focus on it, so you think you see everything.

Blind Spot

Your wide blurry view has a hole in it. The hole is where the retina connects with the optic nerve. It can't detect light and creates a blind spot that you don't normally notice. Your eyes compensate for the blind spot by moving around so much that the blind spot is hard to pin down, but you can also reveal it when you hold your eyes still.

Optical Illusions

Optical illusions emphasize the limitations and assumptions that cause your visual processing system to give you an inaccurate image of the world. It's not that your eyes deceive you, but that your body and mind have significant limitations. The intuitive picture you form from looking at the world is mostly generated by your mind, not collected by your eyes. This imaginary view of the world has systematic flaws that we can make more obvious using optical illusions, but the flaws in the system are always there. When you understand these flaws, you can partially compensate for them with effort and practice. People naturally trust their image of the world, and you should fundamentally trust your eyes, but know that your intuitive image of the world is imperfect. To see the world accurately, you need to account for the limitations and distortions of your vision system. Your vision system is just an example, your other senses and your world model have their own illusions, flaws and limitations you can discover. Become an investigator. Apply a conceptual lens to correct your intuitive image of the world. Trust your eyes and be skeptical about your view of the world.
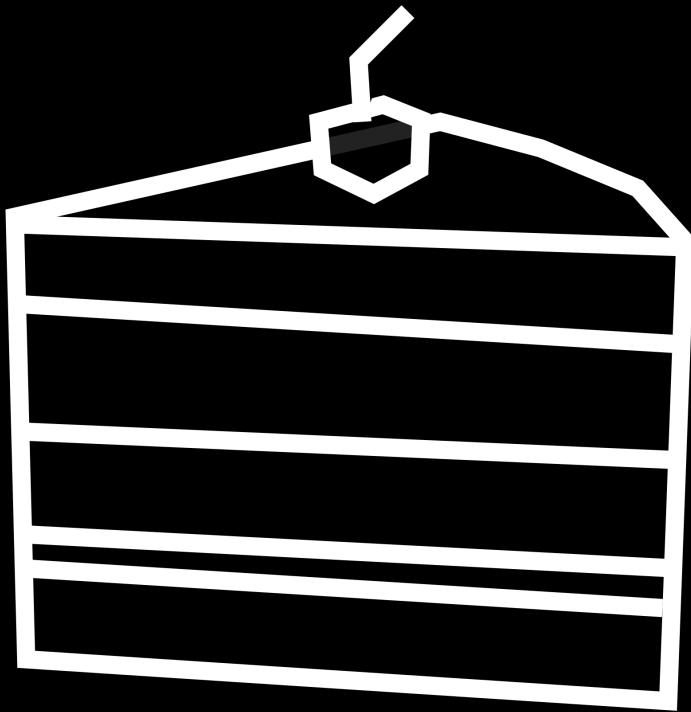
Fovea Centralis

Saccade

Blind Spot (vision)

Optical Illusion

The World as Will and Idea, by Arthur Schopenhauer, Book I Section 1

Goals

Types of Goals

Goals are things you want. They may seem incidental, but your goals are one of your defining characteristics, along with your capabilities. Goals are not simple. There are terminal goals, instrumental goals, non-goals and antigoals. A terminal goal is whatever you ultimately want. An instrumental goal is something that helps you get what you want, for example, money. We don't usually want money itself, we want what we can get with the money. Non-goals are all of the infinite things you could want but don't, including all of the things that could help you get the things you don't want. If you watch a car commercial when you don't want to buy a car, it does not advance your goals, it is a waste of time. Antigoals prevent or obstruct your instrumental or terminal goals. If I want my flag to be on a hill, taking my flag off the hill or leaving the hill are antigoals.

Convergence

Instrumental goals have another quality, convergence. A convergent instrumental goal is something useful towards achieving many other goals. No matter what terminal goal you pursue, you must continue to exist to pursue it. Staying alive is a universal convergent instrumental goal. An almost universal convergent instrumental goal is gaining resources, because more resources help you to achieve almost any goal. Another convergent instrumental goal is getting a university degree. If you want money, the most popular method to get money is a job. To get a job, you probably need a university degree. There are jobs you can get without a degree, but most employers today expect candidates to have a degree and filter candidates on that basis. Many parents and advisors encourage young people to get a university degree no matter what they want to do. Getting a degree is a convergent goal, because it helps you achieve many other goals in life, but it is not as convergent as staying alive. Many people find work without a university degree, but nobody finds work after death. An example of a non-convergent instrumental goal is taking the bar exam. People who pursue a variety of goals have no need to take the bar exam. The bar exam is only an instrumental goal for people who want to become lawyers, so it is non-convergent. Goals can even be divergent, for example Peter Thiel argues in Zero to One that competition is for suckers. If you want to earn a lot of money, don't do the same things that everyone else is doing. The Effective Altruists agree with Thiel, they say to find something neglected and valuable and do that, this is a divergent goal.

Convergence isn't a useless abstraction. Agents compete to achieve their goals. Some goals are compatible, you can do what you want, while I do what I want, no conflict. Some goals are incompatible or mutually exclusive, one goal is an antigoal of the other. Either I can be the president, or you can be the president, but not both. When goals conflict, agents compete, and whether you achieve your goals or not depends on whether you win or lose. How do you win? By knowing better how to achieve your goals and prevent your opponent from achieving their goals. You can find out what their goals are through several methods, but a universal method is finding their convergent instrumental goals. How do you prevent your opponent from achieving their convergent goals? You pursue the antigoals. If they need money, you try to bankrupt them. Then you can win the competition, achieve your goals and be the better agent.

Terminal Goals

Terminal goals are the things you personally value, your values, and different agents can simply value different things. Some people like poetry, some people don't. There is no reason to convince someone to adopt or reject a terminal goal, it's whatever moves them. Different terminal goals make people feel alien to each other, it is hard to intuit, probably due to the like-mind fallacy. Humans have typical human terminal goals, to be financially secure, gain the respect of a community, contribute to humanity, raise children. Agents can have any terminal goal, the poetry-liker will pursue poetry to the ends of the universe, the prose-liker will pursue prose, and there is no basis to convince either of them that they are wrong to value what they value. Agents can have non-human terminal goals, they can want things that make no sense to us or are hostile to us, and they will never have any reason to come around and agree with human values. I want what I want, you want what you want, expecting you to want what I want is wishful thinking.

You can't have your cake and eat it too. Saying

To me, this saying means that you are forced to choose between eating your piece of cake and then not having it anymore, or keeping your piece of cake but never eating it. This saying is a good example of confusing instrumental with terminal goals. Never confuse your instrumental goals with your terminal goals. If you can exchange or sacrifice an instrumental goal to achieve a terminal goal, that is success. If you are considering whether to spend something precious, your confidence of getting your terminal goal must be high. Exchange is the proper use of an instrumental goal. For example, consider cake again. Your goal might be to eat some cake. To eat cake, you have an instrumental goal to get cake. Once you achieve your instrumental goal to get cake, enjoy your instrumental success, but always proceed to eat the cake. It is painful to lose the cake, but you cannot keep it. Cake's only function is to be eaten, and your terminal goal is to eat it.

Preserving your terminal goals is a universal convergent instrumental goal of agents. One way to get someone to stop pursuing poetry is to convince them that poetry is not worth pursuing, destroy their goal. If the poetry-liker allowed you to convince them, then they would cease to like poetry, and the poetry-liker would fail to achieve their current poetic goal.

People fail at fundamentals, they often don't know what they want or how to get it. What you want is central to who you are. It is essential to increase your awareness of what you want. For me, my terminal goal is to contribute
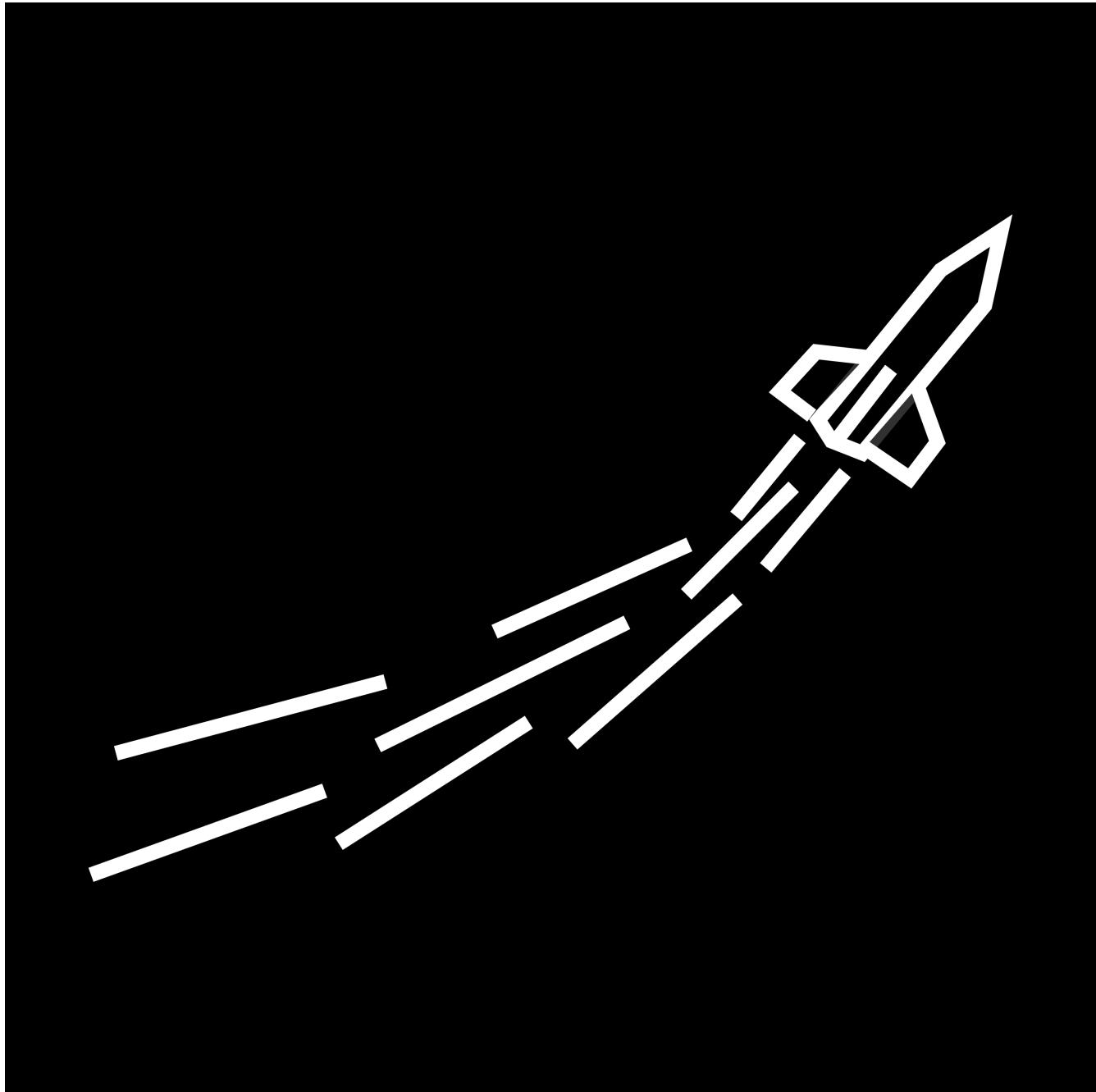
to humanity, and my instrumental goal here is to increase your awareness of how to better succeed. If you don't, the consequence is that you will most likely squander your opportunities and fail to achieve your goals. Knowing your terminal goals can help you discover your instrumental goals and protect against your antigoals. Whoever attempts to tamper with your terminal goals is your enemy. Know yourself and know your enemy, you can win a hundred battles.

Instrumental Convergence

Zero to One

Effective Altruism

Orthogonality Thesis

Agents

Pursuing Goals

You are an agent. Agents have goals and capabilities. Agency is the ability to pursue a goal by responding to the environment. Agency isn't all or nothing, agency is continuous and changing. More agency means faster or more flexible responses. Less agency means slower or less flexible responses. A rock does not have agency. A rock has no ability to pursue a goal. A rock at rest will stay at rest, a rock in motion will stay in motion unless stopped by something else. A heat-seeking missile is an agentic device, it pursues a goal, its goal is to orient to a heat source and explode. The heat-seeking missile has the ability to pursue its goal by detecting heat sources and moving its fins to respond to its target's movements.

You, as an agent, take action to achieve your goals. You start your day at rest, you wake up and go in motion by yourself, and you do things. Agents do things, non-agents don't do things. When something happens non-agentically, that is a reaction. Objects react, agents respond. If you mix two chemicals, they might change color, bubble, explode, it appears like the chemicals are doing something. But the chemicals are tiny bits of rocks bumping into each other, there is no agency, it's a reaction. If you accidentally put your hand near something burning hot, you might quickly pull your hand away in an automatic bodily reaction. You are capable of agency, but your actions can have any degree of agency from none to perfect. High agency greatly increases your chances of success.

Habits

You may develop habits in your life that you follow unthinkingly. These habits can save a lot of mental effort and can be useful. Do I need to deeply reconsider how I eat breakfast every day? Probably not, I can save that energy to use on more important questions. When people develop and follow habits blindly, their lives just go through the motions, they do not respond to changing circumstances, and they likely don't achieve their goals. It feels safe to conform to expectations, to go along with the crowd, everyone else is doing it. It is convenient and pleasant to assume that everything is fine and you can live your life, carefree. Do not take the path of least resistance, do not fall into a trance and flow with the rhythm of life straight down the drain. Agentic people know what they want and do what it takes to get it, even when it's not popular, convenient nor pleasant. I am not proposing that you become a thug, I am pointing to the endless effort and higher awareness of pursuing your goals instead of doing the same thing you've always done.

Increasing Agency

How do you increase your agency? One approach is knowledge. Knowledge is power. Collecting information is a universal convergent instrumental goal. Another approach is power itself. If you are all powerful, you don't need to pay attention to anything, you can do what you want. A different word for power is capability. Increasing capability is a universal convergent instrumental goal. Hidden within knowledge and power is computation. Agents collect information from the environment, form a world model that connects the information to their goals, make a decision and act on the world. Observe, think, act. In turn-based games, you can think as much as you want before you act, but your life is not turn-based. You are always on the clock. Your terminal goals are always at stake, and everything matters, all the time. Living with this existential dread is exhausting, so nature correctly made you save energy and forget about it by default, until something happens and you start paying costly attention again. The energy saving method creates habits and delusions.

Increasing Awareness

We naturally fall into habit and delusion, avoiding effort, seeing the world inaccurately. To better pursue our terminal goals, a human convergent instrumental goal is higher awareness, to master habit and delusion. This awareness is not a jittery, bloodshot, white-knuckled panic. This is the calm, steady awareness we can use to see the world accurately, consider, and take the best available action to pursue our goals. How can you tell if you are more aware or more deluded? You might stop and ask yourself, what am I doing? Is this helping me achieve my goals? You know you are increasing your awareness when you notice things you didn't notice before, do things you never did before, and get better results than you got before.

Locus of Control

The world is far bigger than you. You are a mote of dust blown about in the wind. This is only partially true, and that is crucial. You have neither a large power nor no power. There is a tendency to say there's nothing I can do. Locus of control is your belief about the location of agency. External locus of control means that circumstances decide the result, you have no agency. This is the correct perspective of a baby, the world happens to them. Internal locus of control means that you decide the result, you have agency. Eventually you try turning the agency dial all the way up. To achieve the best results, maximize your agency by internalizing all loci of control. Now absolutely everything is your fault and your opportunity. Of course you can't alter history, control the entire world or get everything you want. But in practice, with your small power, there is always something you can do.

Do It
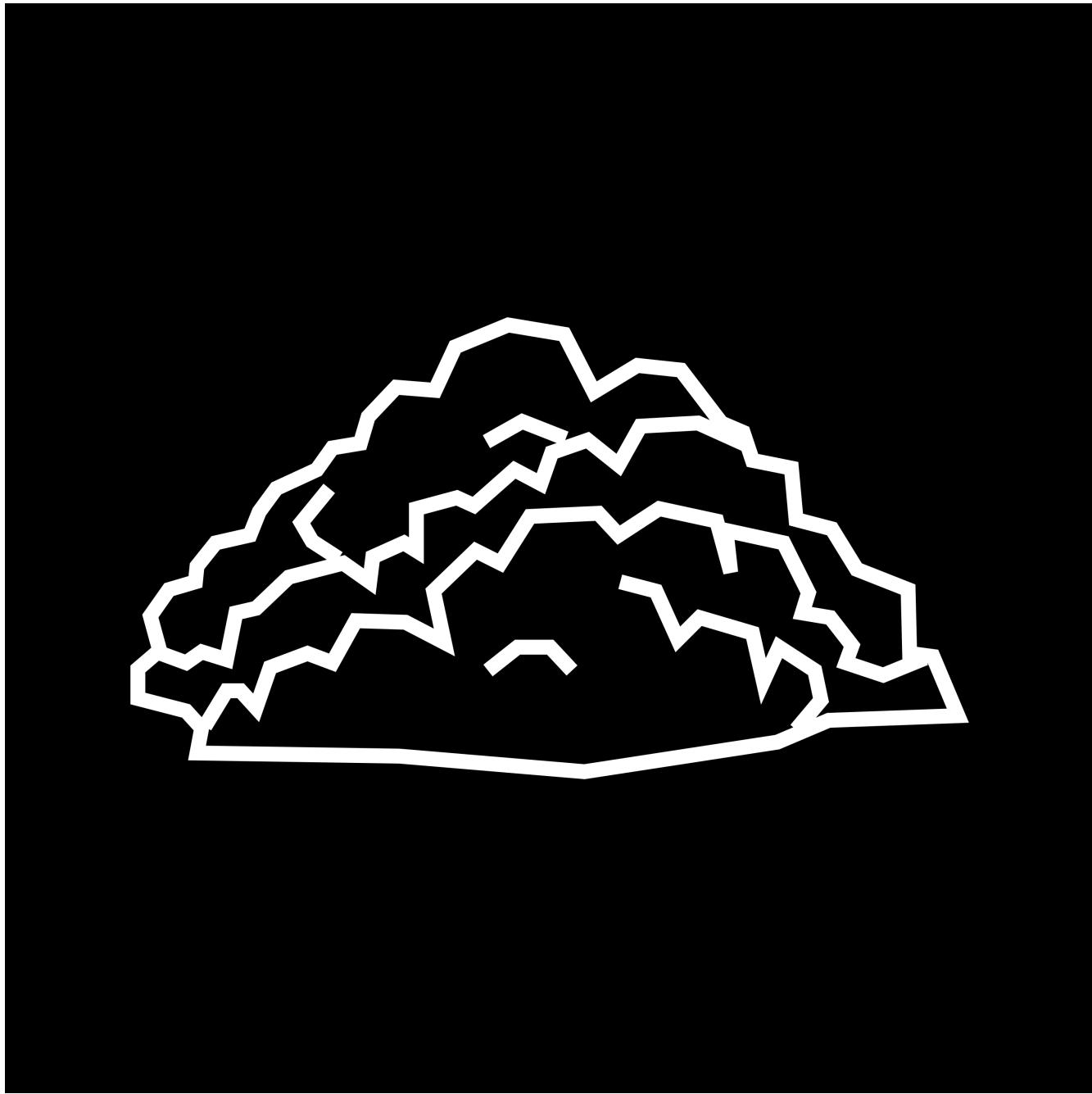
Agency is typically unconventional. Convention is a societal habit, often based on a societal delusion. The absolute best response to any real world problem is unlikely to be the conventional approach, or to keep doing what you've been doing. The best response is likely to be specific to the circumstances and found using high awareness, first principles thinking and decisive execution. If the world is acting crazy, there's nothing I can do about it, right? Well, I could write a book to help people become more reasonable, but, but nothing. High agency is unpopular. Fight your delusions, increase your agency, become your best self, observe, think, act, achieve your goals. Do. It.

Agency (psychology)

Conformity

OODA Loop

Locus of Control

I Know Exactly What's Happening

Imperfect Information Game

Tic-tac-toe is a game with perfect information. Both players can always see the entire state of the board as they take turns marking cells. Your life is an imperfect information game. Very imperfect, extremely imperfect, and that is a big problem for you. Probably even worse than you think. If you want to achieve your goals in life, it really helps, or it would probably be necessary, for you to know all the facts. Otherwise, something unexpected will happen, and life doesn't just give you everything you want unexpectedly. That is what we call fantasy. I want to know the facts, but I can't even see past the walls of my room. If I moved to a glass house and looked through my walls, I can't see past the horizon, the Earth gets in the way. Even if I could see through the Earth, I can't pay attention to it all. Even if I could pay attention to it all, I couldn't predict what happens later. Life is ultimately unpredictable in principle. Imperfect information is not no information, you have some information, and that's what

you get. We call the imperfection the fog.

The Fog

The fog of war is the boundary between what you do know and what you don't know. Using what you know, you can predict some of what you care about. Collecting more information is possible by spending resources, which is why it is a continuous fog of war and not an abrupt wall. To get what you want in life, you have to spend effort to collect information, predict, then act. The alternative to not seeking and predicting everything you can, is to get less of what you want. It's not a fog of peace because a lot of what you want is mutually exclusive with what other people want, you have to compete, life overall is a war of survival. The fog of war isn't one thing, there are parts which separately limit what you can know. Physical limits, resource limits, computational limits.

Physical Limits

Sound and light travel quickly but not infinitely quickly. We know that there is a universe, but due to the finite speed of light, we know that we can only see part of the universe, we call that part the observable universe. Beyond the observable universe is an unseen, unobservable to us, rest of the universe. There is a definite wall in the fog of war between the observable and the unobservable universe. There are countless other physical limitations to your ability to collect information from your environment, such as obstacles, the sensitivity of your sensors, noise and enemy disinformation.

Resource Limits

Sensors can collect a lot of information, but if you want to use that information, you need to aggregate the information using a network resource, store the information using a storage resource, or search the information using a processing resource. The sensors themselves are also resources. If you want to find out what your opponent is doing, you can send a scout to where you think your opponent might be, but you have a limited number of scouts. Information is abundant in the environment, your ability to learn that information is limited by your resources. Resources are not a simple number. How you apply resources can have totally different efficacy. Your resources limit what you can know. This is one reason why gaining resources is helpful in war.

Computational Limits

Even if you have no physical or resource limitations to observe your opponent, there remain computational limits. Your satellites could watch their movements in real-time from space. Your analysts could analyze their every move. But if the opponent transmits a coded message, that code may be unbreakable no matter how many analysts and computers you have. If your opponent changes their mind because of a past experience that you could know nothing about, you can't predict it. Astronomers can predict the orbits of two-body systems, such as the Earth and the Moon, very simply. If you try to model three bodies, such as the Sun, Earth and Mars, the problem becomes intractable and impossible to predict beyond a certain amount of time, due to compounding errors in the simulation of systems with more than two bodies. Even with only three things, we reach foggy computational limits. Fundamentally, the ability to observe and simulate the world is limited. The only computer capable of simulating the future of the world is the world itself, at one second per second.

Cost of Information, Cost-Benefit

Cost of information means how much it costs to get, or potentially get, a specific kind of information. It might cost me 30 seconds to check the weather on my phone, and it might cost several days and human lives to scout an enemy position. Cost-benefit analysis is a way to decide what to do by using the simple ratio of how much I pay and how much I get. Information can be insanely valuable, which is why insider stock trading is illegal. Information is usually not what you ultimately want. To get what you want, you must act on your information. In any real life situation, there is a perfect but unknowable balance of exploring for more information and exploiting the information you have, explore exploit. Your job is to balance the costs of more information and taking your objectives using the information you have.

Curiosity

There are failures of knowledge at the extremes, absolute certainty, nihilism, relativism. You stop learning. Without learning, you stop flexibly responding to your environment, you lose agency. Insatiable curiosity is a virtue. Once you have the information you need, you might think you are done. But what if the information is wrong, or there is additional information you didn't know you needed? Keep an open mind, collect all available information, stay curious.

What do you think you know, and how do you think you know it? Eliezer Yudkowsky HPMoR Chapter 7

I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken. Oliver Cromwell

Burning the Fog

In this universe, humans are puny, each of us surrounded by our own fog of war. Some of the fog is impenetrable. But some of the fog is penetrable. Your choice is to roll in the mud and complain about how unfair and difficult life is, or to get up and do what you can. To do that, you have to trade off your resources to collect information or to advance your objectives, including the objective to gain more resources. It's a mess, and at any moment an unstoppable wave can emerge from the fog and engulf you completely. Do what you can, with what you have. Shine your light to others. Fight on in darkness.

Perfect Information

Fog of War

On War by Clausewitz

Examples of Costs of Information

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Epistemic Humility

Hyperthymesia

Three-body Problem

This is Serious

What You Have to Do

You are born, gain awareness, and you have to play the game that appears in front of you. You live by the expectations, exhortations, demands, costs and benefits defined by the environment and people around you. It seems that you have to. They tell you that you have to. You don't know any different, and you see all the other people around you playing by the rules of that game that they tell you to play. Life is not a game! Life is serious! You must follow our traditions! Fit into society. Do what we tell you.

Slavery

If you think you have to do what others tell you to do, if you think you have to spend most or all of your life playing games that you don't want to play, you are effectively a slave. Slavery is not a physical arrangement of chains or a

social status. Slavery is an internal choice, a state of mind. A slave can free themselves at any time. By this I imply that the worst that someone or something can threaten to do to you is torture you, destroy the things that you care about, or kill you. That sounds very bad, until you remember that you will eventually be tortured by old age, die and lose everything anyway. Your choice is only between now or sometime later, the threat is only the stakes of every human life. Every life has restrictions, the question is which ones chafe you. It is often possible to escape your worst restrictions. Sometimes you can't, you really can't, and human life is cheap as grass. Life can be a terrible game, and it is the only game in town.

Metagames

One day a friend lent me a Game Boy Advance in an airport and I first played the game Warioware. Every previous video game I had played was one game, but Warioware was different. A game has one concept, one set of rules, one kind of experience. If you want a different experience, you can play a different game. Warioware is not one game, Warioware is a multigame, or a metagame. The experience of Warioware is a series of minigames. Each minigame is different, although they share a certain graphical style and repeat many Mario game elements. The minigames are not Warioware, Warioware is the game where you adapt to the sudden introduction of new minigames. Your score in Warioware measures your skill at learning novel minigames, making Warioware a metagame. Some of the minigames are fun, but shallow. Some are lame and shallow. Some are fun and deep, and some are lame and deep.

Life is a game. Specifically, life is a multilevel meta game. It's not one game, it's many games, some at different places, some at different times, and always games within games, many games simultaneously. Some games are games that you have to play in order to keep playing the other games. Many games you can ignore completely or forfeit at effectively no cost. Buying an airplane ticket is a lame and shallow game. Going to school is a lame and deep game, one that lasts much of your life. Having a conversation is a fun and shallow game. Arranging your life is a fun and deep game. You can learn something from a conversation at school that causes you to change your strategy in life. You can win at a conversation, graduate from school, and lose in your life strategy. You can lose in a conversation, drop out of school, and win in a life strategy. The environment of life is an arcade with many games to choose from. The life metagame becomes mainly about what games you choose to play. Life is a metagame where you decide the rules. Your terminal goals define your scoring system for your game of life.

Life Score

When I walk down the street and see people, I naturally calculate a score for them according to my life game scoring system. I first notice human stuff. Are they attractive? Do they have a romantic partner? Do they have kids? Are they fit? Are they wealthy? Are they respected? Then I notice game stuff. Are they a juicy mob for me to loot? Are they a potential teammate to coordinate with? Are they an impossible raid boss? Then I notice metagame stuff. Do they know what games they are playing? Do they have their stuff together? Are they playing their life by others' rules, or are they living on their own terms? Do they like their life? Are they playing to win? People watching is part of playing the metagame, comparing my game scores against others, looking at which games they choose to play, seeing how it affects their life score. In my opinion, most people suck at life. Get good.

Dead and Live Players

A dead player may be in the game, but they are not a threat. A live player is a worthy ally or opponent, they could decide, or affect the outcome of the game. The dead to live continuum is a description of a player's agency. A dead player may be literally dead, or they may still be walking and talking, have resources, power, make moves, but are unresponsive to the changing meta. Dead players use a losing or a fixed strategy which will be countered sooner or later. Deadness and liveness are relative. Against a low capability player, an opponent may be a live threat. Against a high capability player, the same opponent may be dead meat. People and organizations start dead, some grow in agency and become live, then usually calcify and die again. A dead player can continue to succeed temporarily, a missile continuing upward after its propulsion stops. Reanimation is possible, but rare, it is usually cheaper to make a new live player than to reanimate a dead one. When the meta shifts, new strategies emerge that counter the previously successful strategies. Previously successful dead players start losing, live players adapt and win. You want to become, and remain a live player.
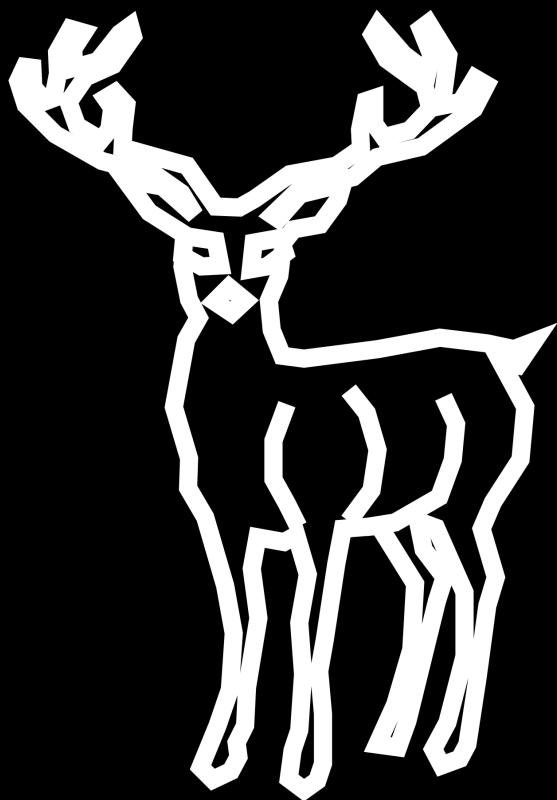
Benjamin Franklin. Most people die at 25, and aren't buried until they're 75.

Play to Win

You can't pick your spawn point, and it may appear that the first game you see is the only one there is. It isn't. Life is not serious. You don't have to follow the tradition. You don't have to fit into society. You don't have to do what they tell you. You don't have to play their games. You make the rules of your life, but there are some games you have to play if you want to keep playing. Play the games you want to play. Play to win, decisively.

Metagame

Dead and Live Players

Decisions

The Potential

Everyone feels that they make good decisions, until they compare their results against a true expert and see someone achieve so much more than them. I was first humbled by strategy game players who trounced my scores. I played the same scenario as them, but their performance was over 100x better. Everyone's decision making can improve. What are you going to do about yours?

Awareness of a Decision

You cannot make a decision you don't notice. Objects and unconscious life can react but can't respond. A forest animal can be trained to react differently, but they never deliberately decide. You are not a forest animal, but you can act like one. At low agency, you are not aware of decisions passing you by, you react without thinking or make snap decisions. The higher your agency, the more potential decisions can rise to your conscious awareness for consideration. Higher agency detects potential decisions that lower agency can't. You cannot consider every potential decision. Above a certain level of agency, you see infinite potential decisions.

Collecting Information

Information can define the decision and its context. Information describes the structure of the situation, the possibilities, metrics, how other people decided and the stakes. Resource limitations define an ideal amount of information. One special kind of information is dispositive information which can determine, in this situation, with these possibilities, which option is best under the given metrics, it's decisive. Information can be irrelevant, distracting, false, incomplete, out of date, or even disinformation, an information attack designed by an opponent to cause you to make a bad decision.

Stakes

Stakes are how valuable a decision is, how much you could gain or lose, the difference in value between the best and worst outcomes. The stakes of a decision have nothing to do with the absolute amount of resources involved. You could be in charge of a multimillion dollar deal, but the stakes of deciding to sign the deal with different colored ink are negligible. Other decisions might appear mundane and inconsequential, but are actually high stakes, such as being conscientious about checking a shopping list or locking a door. Always consider both the downside risks and upside opportunities when considering the stakes. Value is value, there is no value difference between earning $10 and saving $10. Stakes usually determine importance, but different people care about different things. They may agree that x is at stake, but one party cares about x and the other does not. This gap between individual valuations is the source of gains from trade and deals.

Do not entertain unimportant decisions. You can freeze up or fall out of the joyful flow of life by considering unimportant decisions. If it's unimportant, choose something immediately or avoid the decision to focus on something more important. Delegate low stakes decisions if you are willing to accept the consequences of making the wrong choice. High stakes decisions must never be ignored, delegated or avoided. Face your high stakes decisions yourself.

Urgency

George Patton. A good solution applied with vigor now is better than a perfect solution applied ten minutes later.

Decisions often have a time component. Sometimes people are waiting on you, one decision depends on another, or you are limited by a schedule. Decisions have different stakes, so how do you balance importance and urgency? You should carefully prioritize decisions by some form of importance x urgency. If you multiply them together, a zero in importance or urgency means you don't need to make the decision, because zero times anything is zero. You should make the decisions that are both high importance and high urgency first.

Generating Options

Next, you generate options. You can only choose among the options you can generate. More capable agents can generate more options from the same information than less capable agents. Higher capability includes doing things better than less capable agents, and sometimes things they can't imagine. Generating options can loop back to

collecting information. If you are missing information, you have to consider the cost of information to get it. Once you have the information and the options, you can deliberate.

Deliberation

Deliberation doesn't have to be formal or use special techniques, you just carefully think about the value of each option using the available information. Use the information to evaluate the options according to your decision metric. Check the reliability of the evidence, combine it with first principles and make logical deductions until you reach a conclusion.

Deliberation costs time and other resources. These costs directly reduce the potential benefit from the decision. If you have a preliminary conclusion and further deliberation could improve your conclusion by less than the cost of the deliberation, don't do it! Stop deliberating and use your preliminary conclusion. You also must stop deliberating if you have deliberated long enough that the remaining stakes of the decision are lower than your other decisions. It is possible that you will return to the decision later, or you may have to abandon the decision. You have to either decide in advance how long to deliberate for, or periodically interrupt your deliberation to do a cost-benefit analysis of continuing to deliberate. Many questions can be thoroughly considered if you spend an honest five minutes to think about them. Spend more time on high stakes decisions.

Some decisions are simple and you can conclude with certainty. Usually, the fog of war limits your information and your conclusion is not perfectly certain, you have a level of confidence. Depending on your level of confidence and risk tolerance, accept or reject your conclusion. If you reject it due to low confidence, you may need more information, it may not be worth it, or it may be intractable.

If you face opposition, solving the current problem may not be enough. If you can act, your opponent can act against you. People intuitively plan as though everything will go the way that they want, the planning fallacy. If you are planning against an opponent, you have to consider how you can succeed even if they try to stop you, minimax. Sometimes the natural environment just happens to make the same moves against you that a competent opponent would, Murphy's Law, so don't assume no opposition when there is no opposing agent.

Many people never apply logical, first principles reasoning. They wing it, use mental shortcuts or pick their conclusion before justifying it. These methods reliably give the wrong answer in many modern situations. Use all information when making a decision, including your gut, vibes, similar situations, everything. For an important decision, always think it through step by step, calculate.

Reversibility and Iteration

A decision may be high stakes but reversible. The stakes determine the potential benefit from making the best decision overall, not the best decision on your first try. If a decision is reversible, deliberation is worth much less. There are degrees of reversibility. If a decision is cheaply reversible, low immediate stakes and fast feedback, don't deliberate, use an iterative approach. Guess and check until the data tells you which option is best. You can even compare multiple options simultaneously.

Implementation

Decision in hand, you have to implement it. Sometimes this is trivial and sometimes this kicks off a new decision process of how to best implement your decision. Your best choice is not the best theoretical choice, choose the best implementation you are capable of. You will usually get the best results by commiting to your decision as if it is irreversible. The moment that results prove your decision wrong, admit your mistake. Have confidence in your decisions, and have greater confidence in reality. There is sometimes a way to reverse a bad decision or reduce your losses, but remember to include downside risk in your deliberation. Your decisions have social consequences. If you don't conform to expectations, people will notice and criticize you due to signalling and confirmation bias, both explained in later chapters.

Imperfection

If people aren't perfect, and you are a person, then you aren't perfect. Most people already accept this much, you know you aren't perfect. That means that sometimes you make a small oops. Occasional small oops is not your situation. Your situation is oops oops oops oops oops. You never do the right thing. It's not a question of whether

you are wrong, it is a question of how wrong, and more importantly how you can become less wrong. Humanity has solved some simple games, such as tic-tac-toe. We know the correct choice for any state of that game. If you make that choice you are correct and if you make any other choice you are wrong. You have severe limits on information and computation that prevent you from finding the correct choices in your life.

Review your performance. Hold yourself accountable. Don't forget about the past or stay stuck in it. Don't indulge yourself or beat yourself up, be proportionate. How did you do? What could you do better? What should you do about it now?

When people make deals, they talk about leaving money on the table. A deal is made over a table, and each side makes offers until they agree and trade or they give up. Leaving money on the table means that one side could have asked the other side for more money and still made the deal. In your life, you are not almost correct, you are not taking all or most of the money on the table. You are leaving almost all of the money on the table.

The bad news is that you aren't a little wrong, you are very wrong. Your intuitive feeling that you are doing pretty well, that you are almost correct, is a delusion. The good news is that the frustrating feeling that you can't really improve is false. You can improve a lot!

Being Reasonable

I faced an infinite number of potential decisions about what to write about decisions to advance my goals, and these are my conclusions. You can only make decisions you are aware of. You can only consider information and options you are aware of. If you balance importance, urgency and cost of information to prioritize your decisions, then make deliberate conclusions, you can be reasonable. This will increase your ability to think, improving your observe, think, act cycle. Both the potential losses and gains from your decisions mean everything to you. The decision is yours.

Rationality: From AI to Zombies

Planning Fallacy

Minimax
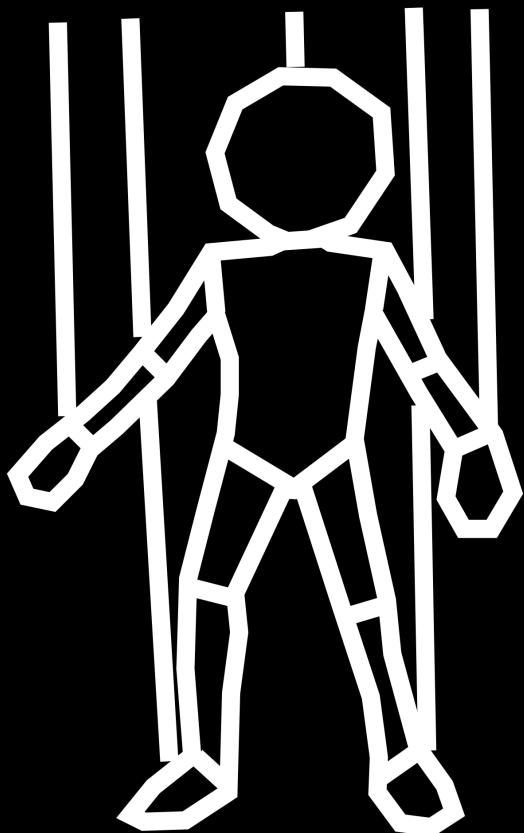
Iterative and Incremental Development

A B Testing

Mathematical Optimization

Monte Carlo Tree Search

Logical Uncertainty

I Have Free Will

Determinism

Determinism and predestination are terms that describe a clockwork model of the universe where the entire course of history is predetermined by the initial state. Everything that will happen is fixed from the beginning and the future is knowable in advance. Free will is the opposite of determinism, it is the idea that I can choose to do otherwise, there is no fate but what I make. If there is no free will, every action is predetermined, no one deserves praise or blame for their actions, they are marionettes moved by the strings of fate. If you don't like it, blame fate, not the marionette. If people have free will, they decide what they do and they deserve praise and blame for their choices. These terms are confused and there is no conundrum.

Predicting the Future

The world has consistent and universal laws of energy and motion, the physical laws. If the universe is deterministic and knowable, that creates the world without free will that we call determinism. If it is deterministic but unknowable, then you can't tell the difference whether you are predetermined or not. Maybe you can choose to do otherwise, or maybe every time it feels like you do otherwise, that's just what was predetermined. If the world is non-deterministic from random variation, it is exactly equivalent to being deterministic and unknowable. There is only one important question about determinism and free will. Is it possible to predict the future? The answer is no, it isn't possible. You can't fully represent the state of the universe using any less precision than the universe itself. You can't simulate the universe any faster than one second per second. Of course some degree of future prediction is possible and we do it all the time, but it is limited and imperfect. You cannot predict the far future accurately. Too many things interact with each other, you can't know where everything is exactly due to the uncertainty principle, and inaccuracy accumulates instead of canceling out. Predicting the future is looking into the fog.

No Free Will

The deterministic physical laws absolutely make you a marionette with no free will. You stay stuck to the ground because you cannot do otherwise. If you don't eat, you get hungry, your physical fate pulls the strings of your life. Your mental state and decisions are equivalent to lawful electrochemical reactions in your brain. Machines can observe your decisions before your conscious mind knows about them. Does that mean people have no free will, in that they do not deserve praise or blame?

If we could predict the future, then the responsibility would be on society to support the talented and prevent crimes, no responsibility to the individual puppets. As our capabilities improve, I do think society bears an increasing responsibility.
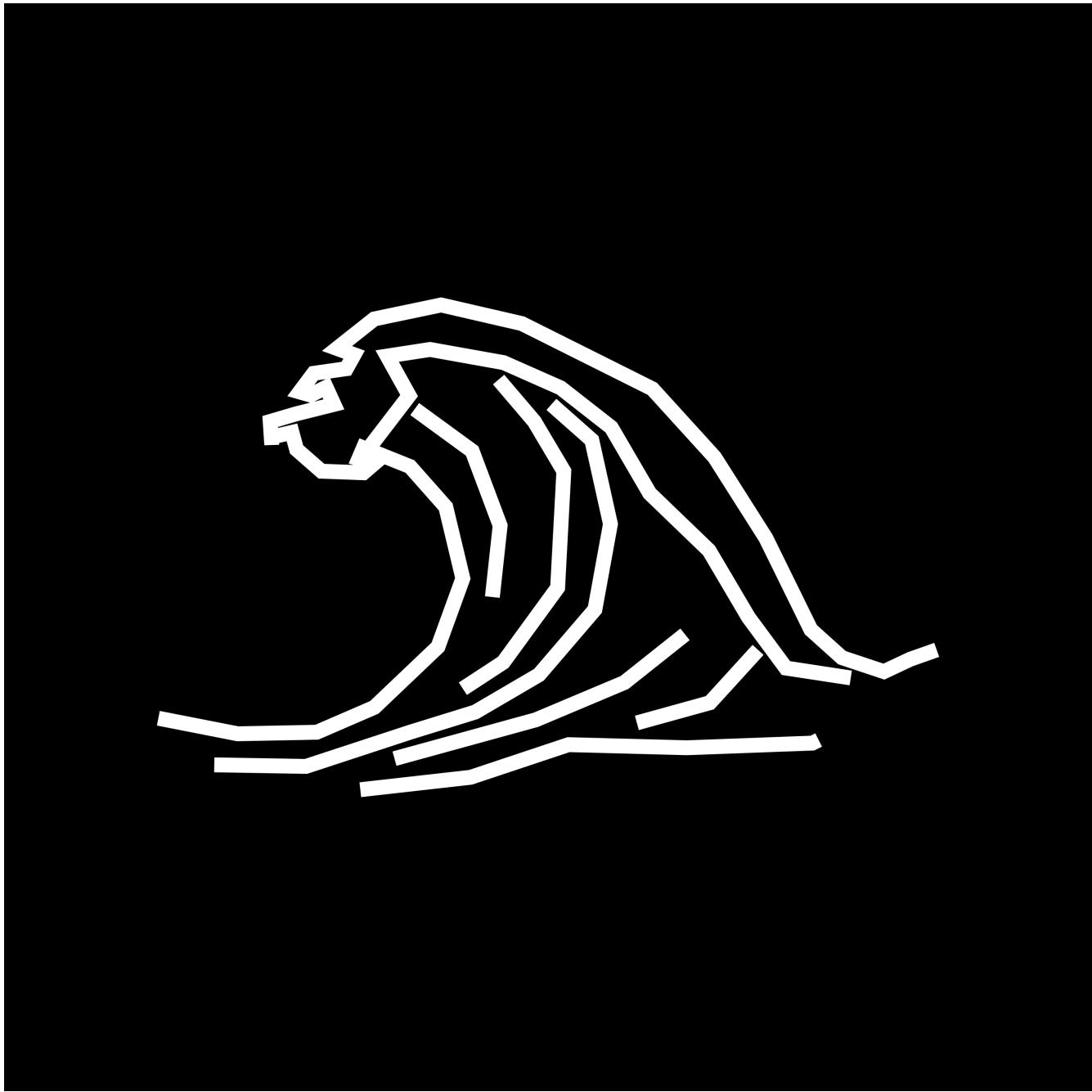
But fundamentally we can't predict the future, so everything you do is your fault. We do not have free will in the sense that we can arbitrarily contradict physical laws to change the future, that is incoherent. We have free will in that we operate within a uniform physical process, we have agency within that process, we can collect information, make decisions, and act with some confidence about the immediate consequences. Praise and blame are the rewards and punishments that incentivize good and bad behavior in agents, where good and bad are associated with life and death for the species. I was compelled to write this and I am responsible for it, while you are responsible for what you do before and after reading it. You are an agent that responds to incentives that lives in a deterministic but unpredictable universe. You have no free will and are fully responsible for your choices.

Free Will

Determinism

Compatibilism

Moral Agency

I Am a Success

A Human Contradiction

What do we want? Success. What do we not want? Effort. What does success require? Effort. This is a human contradiction. Why are we like this? Our species developed in an environment where calories were hard to get. Effort is our perception of spending calories. People who carelessly spent effort wasted calories and died of starvation, while people who saved every unnecessary effort survived and multiplied. We became a species that hates effort but works when needed.

Species Success

What is success? The success of our species is creating surviving descendents, having children who have grandchildren. People who failed didn't reproduce and aren't human, humans are the ones that succeeded and reproduced. You

start as a human and grow as a human because you are the success of the previous generation. Eventually you have to succeed in your generation or your line will die out and humanity will move away from you. You love to succeed and you hate to do it. The human life is the reproductive tool of the species, you and your life as it appears to you don't exist.

Human Success

Society could easily arrange to have almost everyone make babies and be species successful by age twenty. We don't do that. People do not intuitively obsess over creating descendents. People aren't descendent maximizers. Human success is instrumental goals of species success such as gaining resources, increasing social status and finding a partner, which usually contribute to having children. Human success creates sexual opportunities, and the sex drive usually closes the loop to create descendents and cause species success without people wanting species success itself. This explains the strange form of the song, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage. This fated sequence seems to befall people inexplicably, it comes to them unrequested. They aren't aiming for love, love happens to them when they are trying to succeed at something else. This song was upsetting to me when I heard it as a child. As a human, I want human success, meaning I want things like earning lots of resources and gaining the respect of my community. Then, unexpectedly, here comes love, dot dot dot descendents, I fail as a human and succeed as a species. I didn't want babies, I wanted human success. I was wary of falling in love with someone in case it would prevent the human success of my life.

Free Successes

Most human success is hard to get, but some life milestone successes are cheap or almost automatic. It doesn't take special effort as a child to reach your birthdays, and it doesn't take all that much action to complete elementary school. People have congratulated me on these kinds of occasions, causing me painful confusion. What are you congratulating me for? I haven't done anything significant, I am sure of it, but you are rewarding me as if I did. Society gives you a taste of the fruits of human success to encourage you to actually succeed later. You must show the rabbit to the dog.

Positional Success

In adulthood we begin to compete. The human success we want is socially determined and positional. Positional means being number one, and if you're number one, someone else isn't. There is no fixed amount of beasts you can kill to be successful, not everyone can be successful. To be successful you have to be highly ranked in a significant ranking. The only kind of good we care about is that you are better than others. We grade on a curve, most people must be losers, always. It is crushingly unfair and cruel, and it is our nature.

My Success

The kind of success that I desire, what I call success, is even harsher than species success and human success. As a human, I do not directly desire descendents, species success. Species success is an infinite baby loop, human human human human until the end. Life continues another day, until it doesn't. If that was all that ever happened, so what? I also do not consider human success, a life with enough resources, the respect of a community and a partner, to be a successful life for me. Human success is incoherent. Gather resources! OK, here is a pile of gold. Now more gold. Now I have the most gold! So what? Human success is a hole that can never be filled, insatiable. After you notice that, you can accept a very moderate amount of human success and look higher. For me, success means making my mark, contributing to the human project, advancing civilization, making progress. This is a terminal personal goal, I cannot tell you to care about it, but many do, and so do I.

Conventional Methods

Contributing to the human project was never easy, but in the past it could be achieved with conventional methods. You could settle new territory, build something that will last, create or improve a social group, make a discovery. People did these things, we used to name things after them, and I salute them, full stop. Today, we have already mapped and claimed the entire planet, we have factories and engines that emit skyscrapers, associate with each other at the speed of thought over the internet, and have hyper-specialized laboratories swarming with researchers. It is possible that it was equally as hard to contribute in the past as it is today, but it seems that there is now a

massive, entrenched competition for every conventional way to contribute to humanity. If so, how can you or I succeed today? We can't, in that there is no convention, no known reliable method. Some people still do succeed with effort, which now comes down to luck.

Waves

Success happens when you do what you normally do and this time, instead of nothing special happening, something unprecedented happens and you contribute to humanity. You are the right person, at the right place, at the right time. It is rare and unpredictable to be the right person at the right place at the right time. You can only recognize afterward that there was a fortuitous confluence of factors and events, a wave, that conspired to create a success through you. Fortune favors the prepared. Overnight success happens after years of fruitless hateful effort.

Excellence

We all start as weak people who are the right person for nothing. Even with opportunity, such as being born a genius or winning a lottery, weak people can't succeed. Becoming more excellent increases the number of possible right people that you can be. What is more excellent, how do you become more excellent? It's always different, there is no standard or process, it is impossible to know in advance, so you crosstrain. I suggest things like being curious, practicing skills, intense scrutiny, hard work, play, becoming more like yourself. Things that sound like nonsense until you look back and see that they happened to, this time, be the critical ingredients of your peculiar success.

No matter how much effort you spend, you can't wholly create success with your small power, you are too insignificant of a player in the system. The system is the interaction of the entire physical world and every human mind in real time. You can't even keep up with yourself. Even excellent people will likely never succeed because they aren't excellent enough to be the right person for most waves, and waves are rare. Still, your only lever to become successful is becoming more excellent so that you are the right person for more waves, more waves are your waves. When your wave comes, you are naturally able surf like usual, but this time to success.

Your best option is to work your hardest for your entire life without success. The alternative is to not try, live your life for nothing, experience solipsistic nihilistic suffering, collect fleeting creature comforts and leave no mark. When you take the only viable alternative, you will spend effort to become more excellent, which is the best kind of life you can choose. Increasing excellence is your final reward, because you are definitely increasing your success in expectation. You just may not succeed in this life. A success isn't a reward, it's only luck. Success is a rare, lucky situation that only happens to excellent people. Successful people can't claim to have achieved their specific success by their own talent and effort. Lots of people are talented, and you aren't the source of your own talent, your talent is part of your luck. Lots of talented people make effort and fail. They fail not once, but every time, and never succeed in their life. Successful people are no better than equally excellent unsuccessful people, they are only more lucky this time.
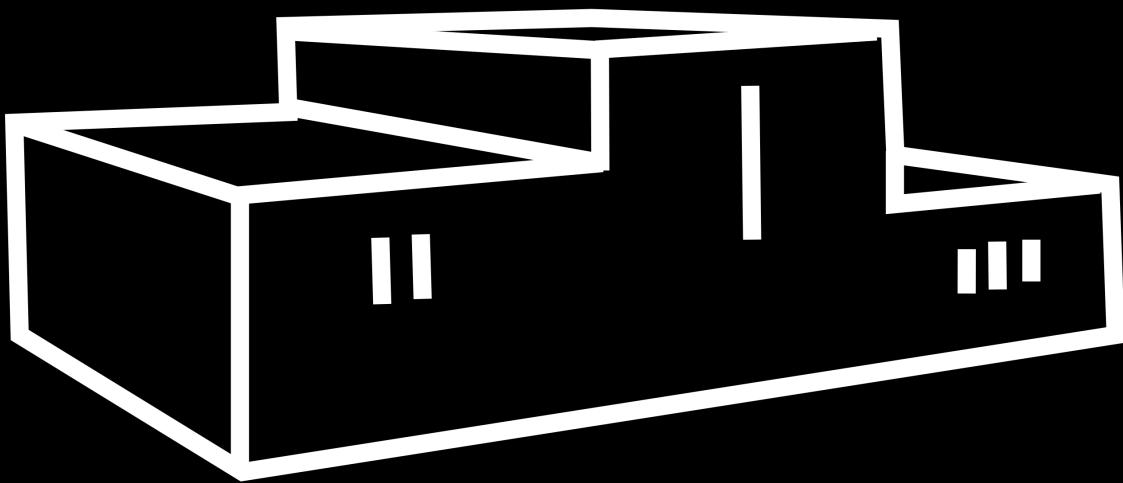
In this life, only excellent people succeed, it's down to luck, I will probably fail, I hate it and I will do it anyway, because it's the best. My human life as it appears to me doesn't exist, my goals make me an unreliable disposable tool of civilization to advance civilization. In most of my lives, I achieve nothing and feel despair. No matter what your goals are, by becoming more excellent, you increase your chances of success. Your choice is between nothing and something. Choose something. Success.

Role of Chance in Scientific Discoveries

Survivorship Bias

Jack Conte describing Excellence and Waves

Naval explaining human success

I Know the Score

The Footrace

Your peers are the people who are born around the same time as you. It seems like life is a competitive footrace against your peers. Early human development has convergent milestones, walking, talking, reading and writing, parents and children are happy to reach the milestones and compare their speed against others. Early on, everyone is going the same direction and everyone knows their score.

Diverging Paths and Your Dao

Beyond the human universals or near universals, everyone's paths diverge in their own direction. Different paths are incomparable, there is no universal score. Every agent's goals, capabilities and circumstances are different. Everyones' life also has a best possible path. The convergent methods to walk all paths is the dao, the way. Applying

the dao to your path is your dao. Fail to pursue your dao, and you stray from your best path. While pursuing your dao is your best path, that does not guarantee success.

Contingency vs Independence, Underdetermined vs Overdetermined

If you lived your life with a thousand variations, many lives would arrive at similar destinations or share common segments, this is path independence. Some peculiar life circumstances would take you down a rare segment, that is a contingent path. An extremely rare or unique destination is highly contingent.

When I was trying to decide my future career path, I already loved computers, but I had not found computer programming yet. I joined a high school club called Physics League, where you solve interesting challenges by making devices, like a self-propelled boat powered by a mousetrap. My contingent path was becoming a mechanical engineer because of Physics League. My convergent path, my independent path, was to become a programmer, which I did.

Contingent paths are underdetermined, a just-so story. If anything was slightly different, the result would be different. Da Vinci and Tesla were brilliant inventors ahead of their time, some of their inventions are contingent on them. If they didn't invent certain concepts, no one would invent them until a long time afterward. Independent paths are overdetermined. Sometimes the time is ripe for a certain invention, many people are pursuing the same ideas around the same time. One person will be the first and they get the deserved credit, but an overdetermined circumstance is one where if they didn't invent it, someone else would, perhaps only hours later. That is not an exaggeration.

The Internet, video calls and smartphones were overdetermined. Tesla saw them in detail eighty five years before they happened, that was contingent on Tesla's excellence.

Nikola Tesla 1926. When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance. Not only this, but through television and telephony we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of thousands of miles, and the instruments through which we shall be able to do this will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket.

People don't find something impressive until they try to do it themselves. Try to do what Tesla did yourself. Make three specific predictions about the world of the future, things that will only happen about eighty five years later, give or take. Write them down for posterity and we can see how you did in a century.

Shifting Scores

There is no universal perspective from which to compare different life paths. You can choose your own metrics and score everyone, but different people care about different metrics. You can take actions that you think score well, and other people might agree. Sometime later, the score for those same actions could change and count you as a great villain, a great hero or a nobody. The unknowable future recontextualizes the past, so it is impossible to score any action, or any life, in any stable way.

This is only the impossibility of a definitive score, not an argument for relativism. Better is better, worse is worse. Someone doing nothing or doing harm may rarely end up helping. Someone doing their best to help may rarely do harm. Pursue your goals, make progress toward them and celebrate your progress. But you can never be sure of where you are on your path. When you seem to be close to reaching a goal, you may be far. Sometimes you think you are far from a goal, and you are almost there.

According to conventional metrics for artists, Van Gogh was poor and unrecognized during his life and in that sense, he failed as an artist. Today, Van Gogh's paintings are valuable and famous. Is Van Gogh successful posthumously? Did Van Gogh care at all about being poor or rich, unrecognized or famous? Maybe you think Van Gogh's paintings are amazing, and maybe you only see old paint on canvas. Can you tell Van Gogh he is unsuccessful, or successful? Maybe Van Gogh was justifiably confident about his work during his life and lived with satisfaction. Van Gogh worked hard his entire life for no success, but he became excellent. A wave carried his work to success after his death. Van Gogh knew that he was excellent from a sufficient amount of independent information, his excellence was overdetermined. Van Gogh pursued his dao. He could never know his score during his life or after, it changes even now.

Van Gogh letter 480. If I make better work later, I still won't work otherwise than now. I mean it will be the same apple only riper - I myself won't turn from what I've thought from the start. And this is why I say for my part, if

I'm no good now, I won't be any good later either - but if later, then now too. For wheat is wheat, even if it looks like grass at first to townsfolk - and the other way round too.

I've Always Been Me

Obviously I Am Me

I know who I am. I have been the same person my entire life. I make the decisions. I exist! All false.

Your conscious mind is only one part of your mind, seemingly the only part you have introspective access to. You have other parts of your mind that you have no explicit access to. Sometimes you take conscious control over your breathing, and sometimes you leave the breathing to, who exactly? Who is doing that breathing? It's not you, you know nothing about it, you can't control it unless you take over. You, as a singular simple concept, is incoherent. You are not a single homonculus inside the monkey skull pulling all the levers to make the monkey move. You

are a single awareness within a system of multiple autonomous components that work together or not, team you. There are autonomous components within your mind and components that make up your body. There are no simple boundaries to this system, you cannot draw a circle or any other shape and declare that everything inside the boundary is you, and everything outside is not. That air you're breathing doesn't suddenly become you when it enters your lungs, bloodstream or cells, and it doesn't turn in its badge and email credentials when you breathe it out. Your conversion of oxygen to carbon dioxide is part of a global atmospheric carbon cycle, and guess what? There is no bright line between the atmosphere and space. We are all star stuff. It's all connected, in the way that destroys your petty delusions about you yourself.

Split Brain

If you look at a brain, there is a big line down the middle. The brain is mainly split into two hemispheres that connect together at the bottom. Some people have a medical condition called epilepsy, where occasionally the electical activity of the brain goes chaotic and spreads as a storm, called a seizure. A person having a seizure can lose consciousness and thrash around uncontrollably, potentially injuring themselves or others. For severe epileptics, there is no way to prevent or control the life threatening seizures. Doctors turn to a drastic mitigation to contain the seizures, they sever the connection between the two hemispheres of the brain. Then, if a seizure starts and spreads, it is isolated to one hemisphere or the other because it can not cross between. The other hemisphere can continue operating normally even if the one hemisphere is seizing. This can save the lives of severe epileptics, and they are able to live relatively normal lives, but there are some significant side effects. The procedure arguably takes one person and splits them into two disabled people, living in one body. Some unusual consequences are when the two hemispheres disagree. Each hemisphere controls the opposite side of the body. If one hemisphere is getting dressed by buttoning up a shirt with its one hand, and the other half doesn't like that shirt, the other hand might start unbuttoning it.

Maybe you think this example of multiple agents in one body doesn't apply to you. Your hands don't fight with each other when you put on a shirt. Haven't you ever hesitated, though? Your indecision could simply be due to the difficulty of determining which option is better, but it also might expose a faction struggle within your own mind. It's not that you can't tell which option is better, it's that part of you thinks one option is better, and another part of you thinks the other option is better, and they are fighting it out. Once a winner is determined, you find out which option they chose and believe that you made the decision.

I Am the Decision Maker

I am the main character of my mind, I think about problems, and I decide what to do about them! No, the actual decisions are made elsewhere, the real decision makers tell your conscious mind about it later. Scientists can scan your brain as you make decisions, and can see what you decided before your conscious mind knows about it, sometimes eleven seconds before you know about it.

Why does your conscious mind believe that it makes the decisions when it doesn't? Because it needs to lie to other people about your decisions. You want others to believe your lies, but you are bad at lying, so you deceive yourself to really think that your conscious mind made the decision. Humans are social animals. Baked into human sociality is that humans express their internal thinking with their body, face and eyes, making us terrible at lying. We are keen observers of other humans' body language, facial expressions, and use their eyes as a window to see their thoughts.

This is the human social war, a competition for survival and resources that escalates infinitely and is probably the birthplace of human intelligence. One innovation in this war was to create a conscious mind that can explain your own body's behavior to other people. Another innovation was to firewall your conscious mind from the actual decision, so it really has no idea why you did what you did. If your conscious mind truly doesn't know why you did it, then it can easily delude itself about it. Whatever excuse it makes up, yeah, that must be the real reason! Your conscious mind gets really good at making up whatever excuse sounds the best for what you do. It's all confabulatory, you'll say whatever works to make you look good to others. You are not the decider, you are the press secretary, you dress up all the terrible, stupid, selfish things you do with impressive justifications.

This is why, no matter what you do, you are always prepared to answer an accuser. I can feel myself doing it, constantly confabulating excuses about what I'm doing in case someone accuses me later. You are good at it because making excuses is your primary job. The actual thinking happens elsewhere. The moment someone catches you, you are ready with an excuse.

Aha! I knew you were stealing from the cookie jar! No, I wasn't stealing from the cookie jar, I was just checking that the cookies are still there, I am a cookie protector, of course. In fact, I am very suspicious about you now, why are you so interested in the cookie jar? Maybe you want to steal the cookies for yourself!

Ship of Theseus

Imagine a newly built wooden sailing ship, entering service and voyaging for decades. Through heavy use, parts break, boards rot and nails rust, storms damage the masts, and every time the ship is damaged, it goes to port for repairs and returns to the sea. Eventually every single board and nail that composed the original ship has been replaced. Is it the same ship?

In case you didn't notice the metaphor, the ship is you. Your body is composed of fluids and cells, these are constantly being cycled and replaced. Your skin every month, your organs at various rates, and your bones are replaced every decade.

Your brain is an exception. Your brain does produce some neurons as you go, but mainly you are born with all the neurons in your brain that you will ever have. So, you can call your brain you, and your sense of self is secured! It is not secure. Do you assume that the quivering, gelatinous blob gently floating in your skull is a durable structure, a multimillenial pyramid embodying your unchanging tetrahedral identity? Don't you know more this year than you knew last year? Aren't your beliefs, interests and behavior different from last year? Then you're not the same, are you? Perhaps your DNA is constant, but are you arguing that your genetic expression is constant and epigenetics doesn't exist? You have some consistent personal qualities, no doubt. But even those are so contextual that you cannot draw any reliable boundary around a persistent you.

The Real You

The question of the Ship of Theseus has an answer. It is a mistake to think of the ship is a single object, because the repairs are incompatible with that model of identity. The ship is not a single object, it is a dynamic system or a process, which is why the sailors experience no confusion about which ship to board no matter how many times it is repaired. There is no board that is the core identity of the ship, which is why every board can be replaced.

The gas giant Jupiter has a permanent storm that is larger than the earth. The energy and the gases that flow through the storm change constantly, the storm drifts, grows and shrinks, but the storm system is stable and has a name, the Great Red Spot. This is a dynamic system with a stable identity.
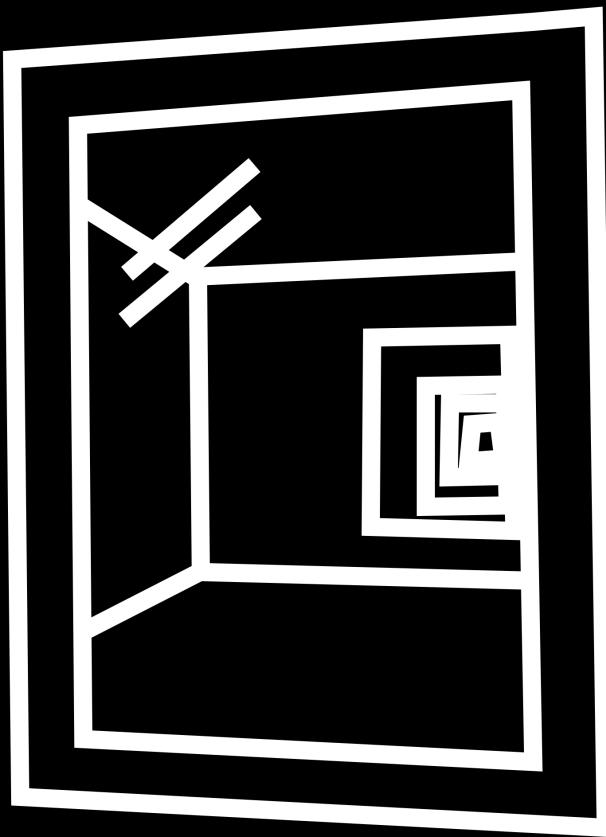
When people say, I exist, they are typically deeply mistaken, the single fixed homonculus behind your eyes pulling the levers, that I does not exist. Your body replaces itself completely, your thoughts and personality change, your conscious mind is not alone in there, and it's not in charge. There is no bright boundary between your mind, body, and the world. Yet when I address you, the pronoun is meaningful and we both know who I am talking about, because you are an identifiable dynamic system that drifts, grows and shrinks. It's just that you are also countless independent agents, very weakly self aware, and embeded within the environment.

Split-brain

Brain Scans Reveal Decisions

The Elephant in the Brain

Thinking, Fast and Slow

I Know Myself Best

How Do I Look?

You can't see your own face without an accurate reflection. The hardest person to get accurate information about is yourself. You are able to see other people objectively, particularly people you don't have a relationship with, but your view of yourself is helplessly subjective, until you use a tool like a mirror or a camera. Then your harsh judgement of your semi-objective view of yourself is heavy, or even vicious.

Other people are often unwilling or unable to give you accurate information about you, even if you sincerely request it. You need three things to get accurate information about yourself or anything important, the awareness and courage to look, revealed preferences and a large, independent sample. This works for anything, no exceptions.

Revealed Preferences

If you want to know other peoples' opinions about you, why not ask them? Asking verbally is asking the wrong person. The conscious mind isn't the decision maker, it's the press secretary. Their conscious mind doesn't know, and their other agents can't talk. Stated preferences are unreliable. Instead, watch what other people do, their revealed preferences. If you ask someone are we friends? As long as you've talked with them a few times before, they will probably say yes. Does that mean they really are your friend? Usually, no. People easily say yes because it sounds good.

When you need something from others, their response demonstrates how much they value your friendship, and vice versa. If you host a party, want to go somewhere together, or need someone to talk to, your friends are, to a first approximation, the people who show up for you. This means that you must reveal your preferences by being there for the relationships you value. You can even anticipate when your friend needs you in advance or without them asking. This is a gamble, they may not want or appreciate unrequested support, or it could significantly improve your relationship. Never make an insincere request of a friend to test them, that is a violation of trust. You can usually evaluate their commitment based on their previous behavior. If not, wait patiently for their preferences to be revealed naturally.

Large Independent Sample

Children are naturally curious about themselves and ask the people around them, including their mother. Famously, every mother thinks her child is good looking. Children have no reason to question their mother's judgment, and most kids at some point think they are good looking because their mom told them so. Your mother is biased, she is unlikely to be objective about you. Even if you use revealed preference instead of asking, one opinion is not conclusive. That person could be wrong. The more opinions you collect, the more reliable the answer, until you collect the opinion of everyone and know a definitive answer.
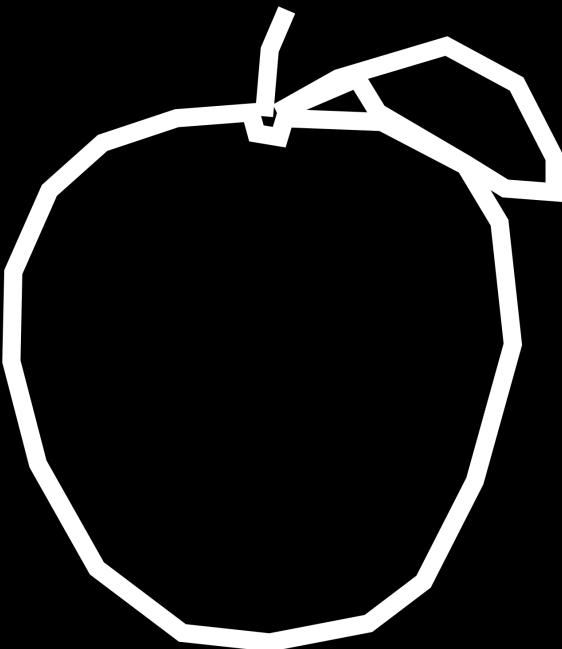
There is a problem of just collecting larger numbers of opinions. Data collection is expensive, and you may only need a few samples to form a conclusion. But if all your samples are biased in the same way, you may get the wrong answer, like if all of your friends tell you that you are funny looking. That sounds convincing, but they may be playing a prank on you. You want your samples to be independent, you want to avoid your samples all having the same bias. Independence can be increased in a variety of ways, by collecting data at different places, times, or from people who are unrelated. The classic website, Am I Hot or Not? was an Internet sensation, because it allowed people to finally assess their physical attractiveness by a more objective process, forming a score from hundreds of unrelated disinterested raters. Large numbers of independent samples, good data, strong conclusion.

Awareness and Courage

Paraphrasing Jung, what you want to find most will be where you want to look least. Your conscious mind wants to sincerely tell everyone what a great person you are, it hates to face any evidence to the contrary. For the sake of your goals, kill your pride, fully face yourself and your situation.

Nietzsche in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. One's own self is well hidden from one's own self. Of all mines of treasure, one's own is the last to be dug up.

Sampling (statistics)

I Use My Time Well

I'm Busy

You're a busy person. You have a lot of work you would like to do, but you only have so much time and energy. Life is full of mundane tasks, and you need to rest, relax and socialize, too! Life isn't only about work or survival. While you know that your use of your time isn't perfect, you are doing the best you can.

Well, guess what? Everyone is doing their best. That's how people are. No matter who you are, you could use your time much better than you are. I don't mean a little better, I mean much better. You may fill up your day, every day, and tell yourself or others that you are busy, but you probably are not spending your time doing the few things that you yourself believe are the most valuable to advance your own terminal goals. And if you were, you would probably only categorize your time as working on those things, you would not resolve the key issues themselves. You are not too busy to solve your most important problems. The common usage of the word busy is a lie. Busy does

not mean there is no time for something, busy means that you don't want to do it. You can't get yourself to do what it takes to realize your own dreams.

Tyler Cowen regularly asks, why is the project you're working on the most important thing in the world? This is a rare positively-loaded question, it presumes you are working on the most important thing, advancing your terminal goals, climbing your path. To do otherwise would be to wander from your path. Sometimes circumstances or other people block your path. Sometimes there is nothing you can do about it, but often there is something you can do about it, and that is part of your path. The majority of people today have access to more resources, particularly information, than the people of the past could dream of. They aren't blocked from their path, they tend to wander off by themselves. Why? Procrastination.

Procrastination

Procrastination is when you avoid advancing your goals. You know what you want to do, this is a time to do it, and you don't. You find something else to do and make an excuse. Procrastination is not a personal weakness, it is a human tendency.

Advancing your goals often requires doing something difficult, such as something that requires your maximum skill, exchanging your instrumental goals such as money, doing something you've never done before, or a high risk of failure. If you fail, and you will often fail, your reward for your attempt reads like a torturous punishment. You will potentially prove that you lack skill, you will prove your fear of the unknown to be correct, and you will have spent your resources for no benefit. Your conscious mind can't think of anything nice to say about this behavior, you look incompetent. If you keep doing the same things that always worked, it looks great, but rarely advances your goals. So to advance your goals you have to look incompetent. You have to be incompetent to become competent, that is the nature of learning. And the nature of pursuing your goals is that your sphere of competence is never large enough. There is no final thing to learn and arrive at your terminal goals. There is always something else, you can never arrive, that is why it can only be about the journey, not the destination. It is about climbing your path, not finding success. You never reach terminal goal competence, you keep facing failures, you look like a lunatic.

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Persisting in attempts to put a square peg in a round hole is insane, nothing changes, the behavior repeats. Continuing to attempt challenging tasks and facing continuous failures, even as you make steady objective progress is sane, that is sanity, but it looks insane to others who do not notice your progress. Your autonomous systems operate on a semi-immediate reward model with high loss aversion. To achieve your goals, you need to delay gratification, which leads to conflict. You, the conscious mind, are riding the horse of your other systems. You point to the shining mountain peak in the distance and say, we are going there. The horse agrees that the summit looks cool. Let's go! The horse starts moving and you soon face a vast, threatening jungle, the difficulty of advancing your goals. You don't see the shining peak anymore, it is so far away that it feels unreachable. The horse looks at the jungle and stops moving, or turns away. It doesn't want to go in there. You have to go, that's how we get to our goals, you slap your heels against its sides in futility. The horse won't go. You are not in charge. You are now procrastinating.

Three Selves

Kahneman describes two different selves that you use to live your life. The Experiencing Self is the you right now, experiencing this moment. You have the ability to decide and act, and you have full access to everything that is happening. The Remembering Self is what the experiencing self can use to remember the past. You won't remember the full text of this book later, your remembering self only remembers how this book made you feel, oh, the book that hurt my feelings, or some surprising parts of it. There is a big difference between what the experiencing self has and what the remembering self has, but they are both referring to the same event. These very different experiences of the same event cause the two selves to reach different conclusions about it, you are inconsistent. There is a third self we can consider. The third self is prospective, your plans for the future, the Planning Self.

The planning self is thinking about the future where you achieve all your wonderful goals, and it feels great to be at the summit of the mountain. To your planning self, the pain and effort to climb the mountain have already happened and don't matter anymore, the planning self gets to live in the moment of sweet success and come up with something even sweeter you could do. It is the experiencing self that has to drag itself through potentially endless hardship, to maybe reach the destination. The two experiences are very different, one is effortless success in a timeless imaginary future, the other is effortful frustration in an infinite series of nows. Of course it is hard to get these two people to agree. The experiencing self will eventually share that moment of success with the planning self,

if your plans come to fruition, but only for a moment. This is why people enjoy extended anticipation more than satisfaction. The planning self can have fun all day long anticipating the satisfaction, then the experiencing self only gets a moment of satisfaction. Then both selves return to mundanity, seeking the next satisfaction. You can improve the ability of your experiencing self to enjoy a moment of satisfaction, this is the skill of savoring. If you improve at savoring and reduce your indulgence in anticipation, you can better align the rewards of your experiencing and planning selves, their separate preferences can agree more and you can get more done.

Self	Time	Wants	Avoids	Negative emotion	Positive emotion
Remembering	Past	Highlights	Cringe	Shame	Pride
Experiencing	Present	Progress to goals	Wasted effort	Suffering	Joy
Planning	Future	Big plans	Hopelessness	Disappointment	Anticipation

Many times I kick my horse and we run to advance through the jungle, toward the shining summit in the distance. At some point, the horse's behavior starts changing, it becomes increasingly resistant. I have to kick it more. It slows down, it walks shorter and shorter distances, until one day, no matter what I do, it doesn't move much at all. This is burnout. Your goals didn't change, the costs didn't change, but you have delayed gratification for so long that team you won't continue. You can no longer get your other systems to work together to chase this goal, the horse won't go. Aren't you in charge of the horse? Burnout is one way to learn that you are not in charge.

Negotiating with Your Selves

Your remembering, experiencing and planning selves are all part of team you, but because of their different natures, they want different things. This is why you love planning things you don't want to do, you love doing things you don't want to remember, and you love remembering things you didn't plan. You have separate people, who want different things, committing each other to pay for what they want.

Milton Friedman. The worst results come from people spending other peoples' money on a different group of other people, e.g. government.

This also describes team you. Your planning self spends the experiencing self's suffering to create a good memory for the remembering self. The planning self will neither pay the suffering nor enjoy the memory, it can only anticipate that the memory might come out pretty well? It doesn't know. Your conscious mind feels like it is deciding everything, but often notices that your behavior is uncoordinated and inconsistent. It has to make up ridiculous excuses. Yes, I said I would do that, but, uh, something came up and I'm busy today.

To get your three selves to work together, they have to agree. To get them to agree, you have to offer all of them the things that they want. The planning self and the remembering self effectively never have to go through the suffering of the experiencing self to get what they want. And the experiencing self effectively never gets the rewards that the remembering and planning selves want. This is the hidden structure that creates the counterintuitive human behaviors of procrastination and boredom.

Boredom isn't a sudden inability to think of potential activities. If you talk to someone who is bored, they will agree that many activities are possible, but they don't want to do them. Boredom is an emotional state where the predicted pain or cost of doing anything outweighs the predicted benefit or enjoyment. The horse of the experiencing self refuses to get up, but also suffers from laying down. It's a kind of depression. Sometimes, you can suggest an activity that sounds so fun that the boredom emotion is overpowered, the experiencing self can agree to do it. Sometimes you can drag the bored person along and get them doing again. Now the experiencing self is currently experiencing the benefits of doing over wallowing, and they start having fun again. Sometimes the pain of the active experience is just as bad as they thought, and ennui ensues.

Tim Urban. Procrastination is a way of coping with challenging emotions and negative moods induced by certain tasks.

Procrastination is almost identical to boredom. The anticipated pain of doing the specific task you intend to do is higher than the expected benefit for the experiencing self. You aren't paying the experiencing self enough to do the job, so it refuses. You might offer it more money, in the form of the fun distractions that procrastinators find themselves doing instead of their important tasks. This is a coping strategy that sometimes works for smaller challenges, which

encourages you to make fun distractions a habitual technique. The more you push your experiencing self to face an unprofitable task, the more upset your experiencing self becomes. Procrastination starts as a negotiation problem, then it turns into an emotional regulation problem. Using fun distractions utterly fails to motivate your experiencing self to do the hardest tasks, which are usually the most important. This is how we get billions of people busy with their lives while completely avoiding their most important challenges. This is why I am writing a book to show you what isn't working and offer some ideas about what might work better for you.

Paying the Experiencing Self

The experiencing self is not lazy, they are mistreated and have a reasonable sense of self respect. The experiencing self is willing and able to endure unlimited pain and expend unlimited effort as long as it is making substantial progress to a worthy goal. A person embodying their foundational beliefs is terrifyingly undeterrable, so make sure to get your foundational beliefs right. The planning self can anticipate the fruits in advance, and the remembering self can hold onto the fruits afterward, but the experiencing self has to do all the work to collect the fruit and effectively never gets to enjoy the fruit. What does the experiencing self enjoy? The experiencing self enjoys each step of progress toward the fruit. When there is no progress and the effort and the pain continue accumulating, that is suffering. The experiencing self can only accept a limited amount of suffering before it halts.

Tim Urban. Procrastination is an irrational fear of taking the micro miserable steps to get out of a solvable problem.

To get the experiencing self moving, there are a few methods. They are, break hard steps down, warm up, ask a friend and blinders.

Break Hard Steps Down

Sometimes something that seems really difficult is just a large number of easy things. I love doing easy things, I can start doing them right away. Other times the hard part is something I don't understand. It's not hard if I knew how, I just don't know, so instead of trying to do something I don't know, which is impossible, I can start the easy task of finding out how to do it.

Sometimes the hard part is something that you can't break apart or figure out in advance, something like a high-stakes conversation. In that case, you can prepare. To prepare for a conversation, you can make a conversation tree, covering the worst, best, and expected case answers. You can describe the situation to a friend and practice the conversation tree with them. Prepare yourself for the worst cases. Preparation for a meeting is essential, but you can't control the world. There is an optimal amount of preparation, usually less than a day's worth of preparation, assuming you already know your stuff. Do not delude yourself that you are preparing when you are avoiding. After you adequately prepare, do it and solve your problem. Sometimes your preparation will cover the situation and your work pays off directly. Often, the actual situation will greatly exceed the scope of your plan. That's the scale of life, your preparation is the best you can do to be ready for the unexpected turns.

You can reduce task difficulty by taking something impossible to do in one step and breaking it into many easier steps, learn how to do something you didn't know before, and prepare before giving it your best shot.

If you get really good at breaking down barriers, you can face a new problem. Even if you make each step easy, on an extended quest you can keep walking for so long that you start to question, how much further? Are we even going the right direction? Are we walking in circles? Is this a treadmill? This is the infinite featureless plain. Continuing without proof of significant progress will push you to give up, no matter how shining the intended summit. The experiencing self is not being tortured, but they are not getting the material progress they want. One thing that can help with long quests is to have more than one project. You can make material progress on one project to motivate you to continue with your other projects, too.

Warming Up

There are often many options available to advance a task. One strategy is to do the hardest part first. You can attack the hardest part with your highest energy, then continue to easier and easier parts as your energy runs out. This works well if you are able to do the hardest part, but if your experiencing self refuses to do it, that strategy doesn't work. When I get stuck and procrastinate, I have a rising feeling of shame and guilt. I think that this task seems like something that I can do and I should be able to do it, but I can't. I feel miserably weak and like a failure. The longer I procrastinate, the bigger my failure feels, a growing shadow over my self image.

Instead of getting stuck, you can start the task with an easier or even a trivial part to get moving. Now your experiencing self is already working, already succeeding, enjoying making progress. I notice that there is a switch that flips for me, as soon as I start making progress on a previously scary task, suddenly I feel great about it. Sometimes, this momentum is enough to make the previously difficult part doable. When you complete the difficult part, your experiencing self will be thrilled that it made so much progress, and you can continue with the remaining easier parts, or attack even harder challenges. Sometimes you need a warmup.

Collaboration

Another strategy is to get a friend to help you overcome a hard step. Sometimes what is hard for you is easy for them, but don't let them do it. They should only train you to do it for yourself, not do it for you. Maybe it's hard for both of you, but when you can face it together, you may make progress together that you couldn't alone.

Blinders

Skinner's Law. If you are procrastinating, you have only two options. Make the pain of not doing it greater than the pain of doing it. Make the pleasure of doing it more than the pleasure of not doing it.

The flip side of increasing the rewards for the experiencing self is to take away distractions, or increase punishments. It can work, which is why I mention it, but it can become perverse, so exercise caution. Fun distractions are what the experiencing self turns to during procrastination. What happens if we remove them? Block all communication sources, lock the refridgerator, go to a remote location, put in earplugs, paint your windows black so you can't stare out the window. If you put on blinders, your experiencing self can't be distracted. It's cornered, it can either do the job or do nothing, and your mind hates doing nothing. This is a form of increasing the punishment to get the demanded behavior, it can turn adversarial and harm your relationship with yourselves. Another, more gentle form of this is to create a predetermined block of time with no distractions or interruptions, that only lasts some number of minutes. This is more of a compromise than a demand, your planning self promises not to torment your experiencing self forever, in exchange for the experiencing self not distracting for the same amount of time. Sometimes this can help them agree to work.

Another way to push yourself is to schedule with someone else to demonstrate your work, or make a specific public promise. Your desire to keep your word or avoid looking foolish can encourage creative triumph, or it can backfire.

Returning to Your Path

You have misaligned incentives between the members of team you, which leads to self-betrayal and procrastination, the avoidance of what you really want. You can resolve your own hidden disputes by restructuring and renegotiating what your different selves offer and receive to create consensus and action, a return to your path.

There are a lot of hours in the day. Effective people get a lot done, but they don't necessarily work harder than others. You can, and should, increase your total energy, endurance and speed using physical exercise and other practices. But the most effective people aren't only a little more effective, or twice as effective, they are radically more effective, which doesn't come from them being radically stronger or faster than other people. What makes them effective is not how much they do, it's their awareness and choice of what they will do and will not do. Highly effective people spiral off into exponential success by choosing what to do so much better, then coordinating themselves to get it done.

Dwarkesh Patel. What's lacking in life is not time. If you are working on the right thing, you can advance leaps and bounds in just eight hours. But if you are just slogging through, you can spend a lifetime staying in the same place.

Procrastination

Solving the Procrastination Puzzle

Thinking, Fast and Slow

Pomodoro Technique

Hyperbolic Discounting

Intertemporal Bargaining

I Understand Other People

Like Mind Fallacy

You have one body with one brain. Humans are social, we live and work together, many different bodies and brains. This is a problem. For me to work with you, I have to know what you will do. To know what you will do, I have to know what you are thinking. But I can't know what you are thinking, I only partially know my own mind. We intuitively use a false assumption to relate with each other, we assume that everyone is me. That assumption allows me to use my one brain to imagine what everyone else is thinking. Everyone else thinks what I think, meaning they think what I would think if I was in their position.

This is the like mind fallacy. It is a fallacy because they would not think what I would think, of course they would think what they would think. But I can't know what they would think, so I substitute what I can't have with what I do have. There are other symptoms of like mind, such as assuming other people know what I know, or thinking

that what I don't know about doesn't exist. The like mind fallacy is a useful assumption to make, which is why we make it. People extend like mind to non-human agents, such as pets, sometimes even to objects. The sky is angry with us because we did not worship the mountain! It's egregious. We must override the like mind fallacy to get better results.

Surpassing Like Mind

The like mind fallacy is both escapable and inescapable. You cannot escape your limit of one body one mind to model other minds, that's all you have. Your single mind can't fully contain other minds because $1 < 2$. You can partially escape your gut level method, I would do this, with more advanced modeling methods. You can consider how their circumstances differ from yours. For example, if they are taller than you, they could reach something that you can't. You can put aside your reaction to a situation and consider all possible responses instead. You can remember their previous behavior and note how it differs from yours. You can ask other people. There are many techniques, the important point is to gain awareness of when you assume like mind and learn for yourself how to surpass it.

Capability Modeling

The like mind fallacy exposes a fundamental limitation of modeling. If another agent is more capable than you, you cannot model them fully. The characters of a story can never surpass the ability of the author, that would be a contradiction. I can predict that if I play a game of chess against a chess engine, the engine will win, based on my knowledge that the engine is more capable than me at chess. Of course the more capable agent will win. What is less obvious is that I cannot predict what moves the engine would use to beat me. If I could predict what moves they would make, then I could counter them and win instead. Greater capability means that I cannot model what the other agent will do when they use their greater capability. When you attempt to model an agent that is more capable, you can estimate their capability and compare it to the challenge to predict the result, not the process.

An example that combines the like mind fallacy and capability modeling is when children claim that my dad could beat up your dad. As a child, my dad is more powerful than me, so my dad could beat me up. Assuming that the other child's dad is me, the like mind fallacy, my dad could beat your dad. Humorously wrong. The correct method is to compare my estimate of my dad's fighting capability with my estimate of your dad's fighting capability, both of which are usually unknown when children make this claim. If the child's fighting ability is higher than both dads, the child might be able to predict what would happen specifically during a fight, my dad has longer reach, he would use a choke hold, etc. But if the dads' fighting ability is higher than the child's, the child can only predict which dad would win, they could not predict how.
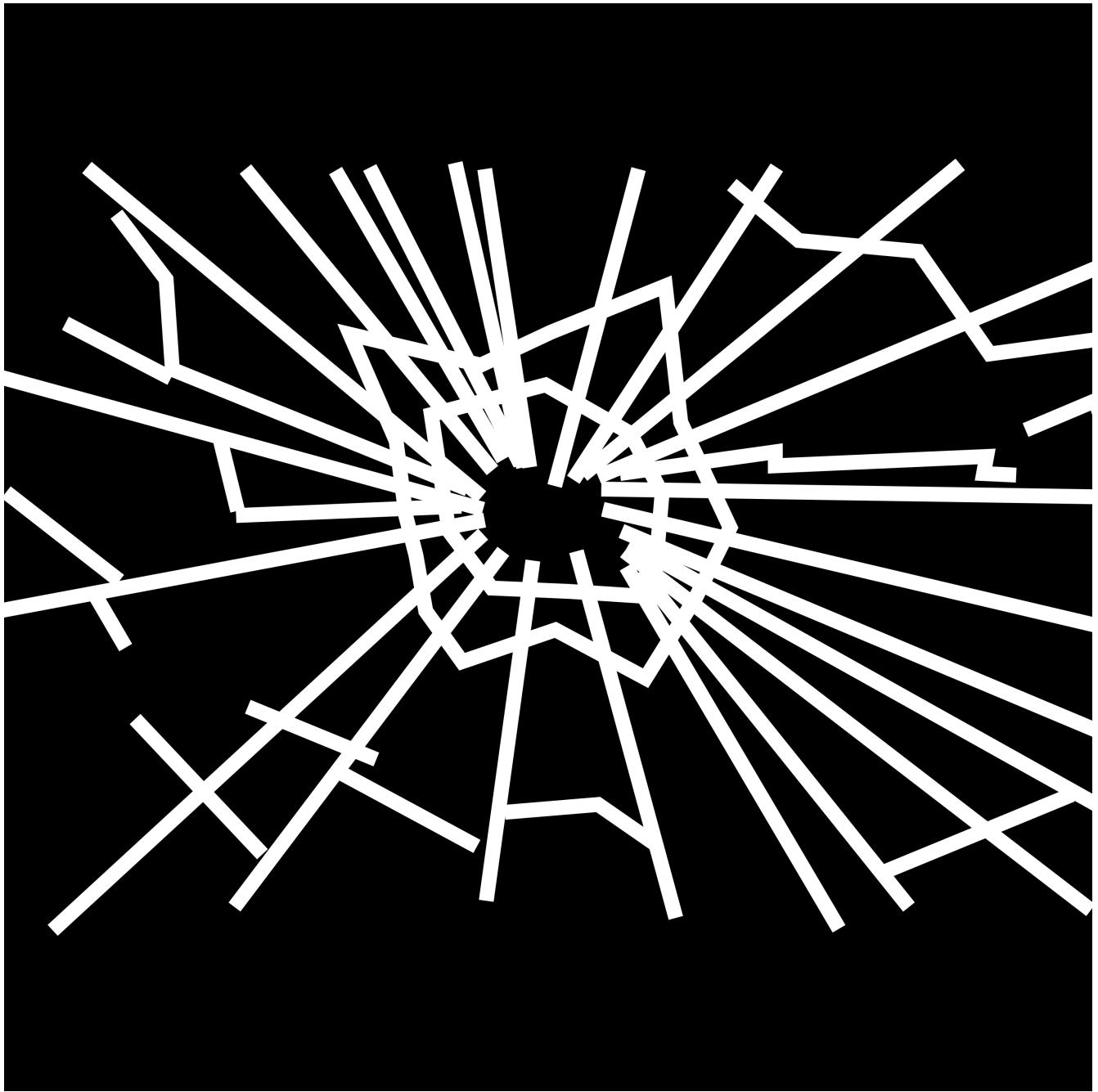
Mastering Like Mind

The world is only one place, so objectively everyone is in exactly the same situation, just in different positions. People are similar, so for convenience I assume that you think what I think. With this like mind, I can quickly model other people, but inaccurately. It takes skill and effort to notice and partially transcend the fallacy. You can never fully know what anyone else is thinking. One of the only things you can be certain of is that your thinking is not the same as theirs. When you master like mind, you can apply your limited analysis effectively. Where agents are the same as you, you already know what you would do. Where agents differ from you, you can calculate. This is a way to build your capability. At the beginning, there was only me. Now I contain multitudes.

Theory of Mind

False Consensus Effect

Mind Projection Fallacy

I Knew I Was Right

Confidence and Capability

The job of your conscious mind is to sound good to others, not to be correct. Being confident sounds good, so your conscious mind is very confident by default. People who know the least about a subject are typically the most confident about it. The more you learn about something, the less confident your conscious mind becomes. You might notice that this is backwards, agents with lower capability should be less confident, and agents with higher capability should be more confident. This is the combination of the job of your conscious mind and the like mind fallacy. If you know nothing about a subject, your accuser will also know nothing about it, like mind fallacy. The job of the conscious mind is to sound good, so if your accuser knows nothing about a subject, you can tell them anything and they might believe it. The more you know about a subject, the more your accuser will know, continuing with like mind. Now it is very hard to explain your behavior and your conscious mind loses confidence. The more you know,

the more you know that you don't know. To protect your confidence, you don't want to know.

Self Defense

This backwards confidence dynamic creates a problem for your conscious mind. Any information that proves that what you already believe is right, confirming evidence, can increase your confidence. Any information that proves that what you already believe is wrong, disconfirming evidence, will decrease your confidence. Decreasing your confidence will reduce your ability to sound good to other people, your conscious mind does not want that. Your conscious mind uses two methods to defend itself from disconfirming evidence. The first method is to outright ignore or disqualify any disconfirming evidence you see. This is partially effective, but the other parts of your mind see this information and do not ignore it, they neutrally take it into account and change your behavior. If you change your behavior, that is hard to explain to others, you might have to admit that you were wrong! In my experience, when I see disconfirming evidence, I get a feeling similar to pain, I almost wince.

That is why the conscious mind has a second method to defend existing beliefs, that is to avoid the possibility of encountering disconfirming evidence. People will bend over backwards to avoid encountering any evidence about their beliefs. What if the evidence gives the wrong answer? Similarly, you will seek out and enjoy safe demonstrations that you know in advance will confirm your beliefs. The tendency to protect your ignorant beliefs, seeking confirming evidence while dismissing and avoiding disconfirming evidence, is called confirmation bias.
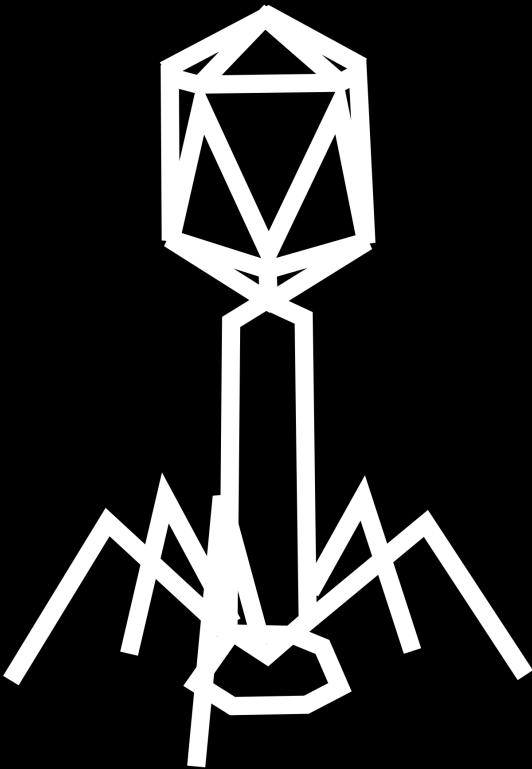
Actual Confirmation

Usually, your beliefs are wrong enough that they prevent you from achieving your goals. Confirmation bias is a convergent instrumental antigoal that your conscious mind uses against you. You are your own worst enemy. The method to counter confirmation bias is straightforward, seek disconfirming evidence of your beliefs. The execution requires high awareness, skill and endurance.

One morning I flew with my wife to visit Seattle. We then drove to a city park for a walk, but it was deserted. My wife suggested that we park somewhere with more cars. It will be fine, I said, and left everything in the rental car. When we returned from our walk, the window was smashed and everything was stolen. Lessons? I was ignorant of the crime rates, false confidence. I ignored a valid warning, dismissal of disconfirming evidence. I did not want to hear that I was not in control of the situation. Remediations? I could have checked the crime rates and cancelled our walk, I could have taken my wife's suggestion, and more.

Drag your conscious mind, kicking and screaming, into extraordinary competence. Challenging your beliefs can destroy your terminal goals. That which the truth nourishes should thrive. That which can be destroyed by the truth, should be.

Confirmation Bias

My Mind Is Safe

The Safety of Your Mental Garden

The physical world outside is a jungle, filled with things that want to physically harm you. There is a special feeling of safety within your own mind. Your private inner mental world is your secure garden. There is an equivalent mental jungle out there and you must either defend your mental garden or your mind will be invaded. Your inner world is not safe.

Memes

Evolution in the physical world finds adaptive species by adjusting the frequencies of genes. To evolution, organisms don't exist, organisms such as you are merely the reproductive method of genes. The most successful genes replicate and fill the environment. There is an analogous evolutionary process in the conceptual world that operates on

ideas, the unit is the meme. The environment of memetic evolution is the mental world. The method of memetic reproduction is communication. The methods of memetic variation are transmission errors and creativity. There are physical viruses that can invade your body and make you sick, and there are memetic viruses that can invade your mind and make you mentally sick. There are meme complexes that attack your beliefs, defend themselves, and convince you to convert others. Brain eating zombies are not fiction, they are metaphor.

Psyops

A psychological operation, psyop is when an individual or a group makes a memetic attack. Marketing is a positive psyop, usually overt, used to create positive mental associations with a product or service in a customer base. Their objective is to make you want to buy their stuff whether it's good for you or not. A negative psyop might have the objective to harm the public perception of an organization or a political candidate. Negative psyops are usually covert. Often the attackers will pose as a regular concerned citizen, or secretly seed a fake grassroots uprising.

Propaganda is a psyop by a government to exert political control over foreign countries or their own citizens. Propaganda can be positive or negative, and separately overt and covert. It can build into meme complexes, including religions and cultures, and can be beneficial or ruinous for the individual.

nosilverv. A secure connection with yourself makes psyops more difficult, if not impossible. Breaking your connection with yourself is a convergent goal of psyopppers.

Negative Suggestion

Negative suggestions are a simple attack technique. Just take something that someone likes and say that it is bad. Unavoidably, they will like it less. It's also called trash talking, muck raking and yucking someones yum. Positive beliefs are fragile because people are risk averse. There are many ways to survive, but you can only die once. If I deeply enjoy a piece of art, I consciously avoid harsh criticism of it, to protect my fragile positive sentiment. My potential ignorance of justified criticisms is worth it in these rare cases.

The Halo Effect

The halo effect is a common bias to overgeneralize good things or bad things. If you see a picture of someone good looking, you naturally assume they are also a good person, but that is unjustified. The halo effect can be used as a memetic attack. If you know that one product from a given company is good, you assume the company's other products are good. The company can offer an expensive, premium product of high quality but sell very few of them, a halo product, and then sell a huge amount of a lower priced version with low quality, low satisfaction and high profit.

Anecdotal Evidence and Statistical Blindness

People love to accept anecdotal evidence and dismiss statistical evidence, statistical blindness. You can say that 1,372 people were killed in the war this week, and people will shrug. But if you say one innocent little girl, Jessica Jones, was brutally shot by enemy soldiers as she tried to escape with her family, suddenly people are crying and sending donations. But Jessica Jones was already included in the 1,372 people you first mentioned. Anecdotes are a human mental vulnerability created by our love of stories. Anecdotes can manipulate your emotions and make you credulous, gullible.

Memetic and Antimemetic

Highly fit memetic memes are adapted to the mental environment, they are attractive ideas that people like to consume and share. Sexy girls bending over, high status people showing off, outrageous acts of villainy and happy dancing people are memetic. The opposite of adaptive memes are maladapted memes, antimemes, things that people don't want to hear about or share. The message of this book is antimemetic. Abandoning your delusions of grandeur, observing the painful truth of your reality and doing grueling work for no reward are antimemetic. Adopting effective and antimemetic memes can give you a huge advantage. The keys to success are there for everyone to see, but they are dirty. Everyone wants to take the shiny keys, but they don't work. What's wrong with getting your hands dirty and using an effective key to achieve your goals?

Virality

Memes can be viral. Virality is how fast a meme spreads, and is determined by the transmission speed and replication factor. The replication factor is a multiplier. For example, if the replication factor is one, the first person that is infected with the memetic virus will spread it to one other person and stop. The second person will spread it to the next person, and the meme spreads linearly, one by one. A replication factor of two means that each infected person will spread the meme to two other people, this leads to a completely different result. The first person spreads to two, the two spread to four, then four to eight, it doesn't take long before everyone is exposed. The replication factor of a meme can vary within a changing environment. When the replication factor falls below one, the spread decays to zero and the meme dies out.

Replication Mechanisms

Behind the replication factor is the replication mechanism. Some environments have built-in replication mechanisms. Social media services support likes and reposts on any post. Other environments don't provide a replication mechanism, so memes have to self-replicate. You can detect viral memes from their replication mechanism. The mechanism can be subtle, but they are often obscenely apparent if you look for them. And by the way, tell all your friends to read this book. If this book has helped you at all, make three copies and give them to people who might need to read it. This book is so powerful, that I bet you can't find anyone to disprove its claims! Send this book along with $10 to ten people. When they learn about this amazing opportunity, they will do the same, and send half of the money back to you. I earned $70,000 in my first month doing this! You can express your gratitude for everything you have learned from me by having as many children as possible, and teach them from this book at an early age. The previous seven sentences were examples of replication mechanisms attacking you.

Lying

Memetic memes brazenly lie, or at least brazenly suggest. Reality is mundane and, from a certain point of view, nothing ever happens. From the beginning of the universe, not one surprising thing has ever happened. A viral meme is the opposite of that, something unbelievable just happened! I have to tell everybody about this amazing thing! The lie is the superstimulous that attracts you to the viral meme. All images converge to barely dressed sexy people staring at you and smiling. Common superstimuli are get rich quick, beautiful women want to be with you, the Prince of Nigeria needs your help, do this thing to get back at the system, don't be tricked by this new scam, our group is wonderful while their group is terrible. The most important form of the get rich quick claim is the pyramid scheme, also known as multilevel marketing. A pyramid scheme combines a viral meme with a monetary incentive. They propose a fool-proof scheme to make lots of money, which only redistributes money from all the infected to the top of the pyramid.

Attention Economy

Humans were originally more survival focused. Although memes were always powerful, the focus has shifted from the physical jungle to the mental jungle and memetic competition. The economy was once primarily physical goods, then it shifted to services, to information, and now to attention. In the attention economy, memetic fitness gets attention, and attention gets money.

Memetic Defense

Control your data sources. Don't use algorithmic feeds of information. No matter what the algorithm is, the memes are too optimized against it. Curate individual information sources that are benign, disinterested and share your values. Avoid conflicts of interest, pay for information or listen to unpaid people. Anyone that is paid, but not by you, changes your role from the customer to the product they are selling to others.

Never expose yourself to psyops. If you notice you are being memetically attacked, close your eyes, mute the sound, the only defense is to avoid the attack. Information penetrates your mind even if you know that it is false or you know it is a memetic attack. Negative suggestion and the halo effect still affect you, even if you disagree. Anything you see or hear could be a psyop, which could scare you into paranoia. Most psyops are weak if you generally defend yourself, but it is helpful to always question, what is the source of this information? What claims are they making? Is there a way I could independently verify their claims? What are their goals? Who benefits?

Evaluate everything you encounter for its memetic fitness. Does it sound good? Does it make extraordinary claims? Does it colonize your life? Does it have a replication mechanism? Distrust or avoid anything memetically fit. The possibility that a meme is memetically fit and beneficial is almost zero. Beneficial memes will tend to be antimemetic. Our natural desires aren't the most effective way to achieve our terminal goals, a successful modern life overrides our instincts. If you were going to succeed by doing what you want to do anyway, I would have nothing to warn you about.

Perform a security review of your currently held beliefs, have you been infiltrated and colonized? Are you a member of a cult? Do you have beliefs that use you instead of help you? Pay special attention to things people told you when you were a child. Children have no memetic defenses and are a priority memetic target. If you have children, you need to be their memetic defense, not a vector.

Kill parasitic memes by making your beliefs and values consistent, collect reliable independent evidence and use your own experience. Protect, defend, and grow your mental garden.

Meme

The Selfish Gene

Psychological Warfare
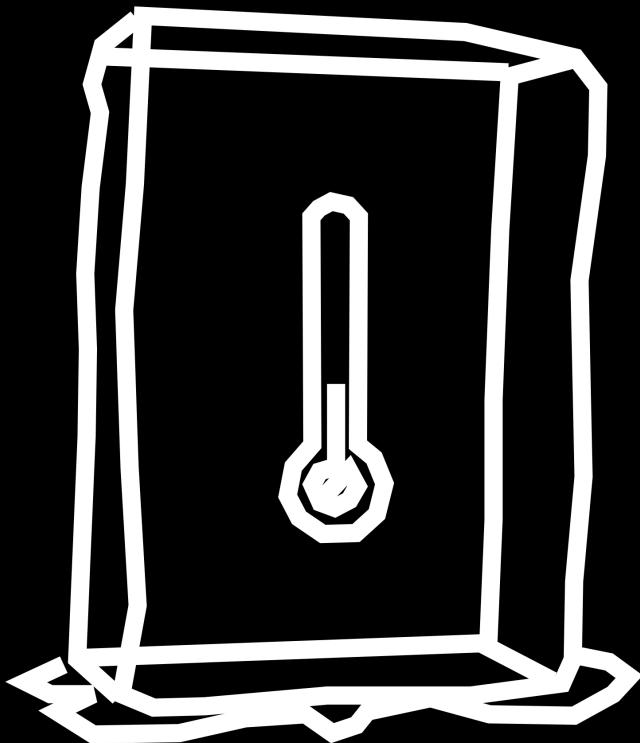
Halo Effect

Astroturfing

Information Hazard

Nothing Ever Happens

Pyramid Scheme

My Emotions Are Correct

Humans Are Emotional

You have emotions, and your emotions are important to you. If you feel something, it must be for a good reason. Emotions are a valuable part of the human mind and an essential part of the human experience. Nature developed emotions for a useful purpose. An emotional response is never erroneous. It is wrong to deny or to criticize others' emotions.

What You May Be Missing

Hahaha, I stand by every word of the above, but I carefully avoided the whole truth of emotions to lure the snowflakes in. Come closer, I want to tell you something.

Your emotions only matter to you, you ass! They have nothing to do with me!

Emotions are hard to ignore signals from your subconscious about how your beliefs react to events. They are an honest reaction. Emotions are a sensor such as a thermometer or a smoke detector. A thermometer displays the temperature of the thermometer body. But if you put the thermometer into a flame or freeze it in ice, the thermometer's reading won't have any relationship with the temperature in the rest of the world, will it? And just because your thermometer reads a given temperature, that doesn't mean that I have to do anything in particular about it. If you are cold, you could scream that I must increase the heat in the house. You could do that, or you could put on more clothing, do some exercise, or go to a different house. No matter what you feel now, it will not persist. Emotions are temporary reactions. There is no happily ever after, and you cannot keep crying. Eventually your tears will dry up.

Your feelings are not wrong relative to your beliefs, but your beliefs can be completely wrong. Further, your interpretation of your emotions can be completely wrong. Finally, how you respond to your emotions can be completely wrong. Yes, you feel a certain way. I acknowledge that you feel that way. You are not wrong for having feelings, you are not wrong for having that feeling. I hear and accept your feeling. But your reaction to your feeling is dead wrong, pull your head out of your ass!

You Make Yourself Feel

Emotions do not work how they feel like they work. When someone does something and you have a strong emotional reaction, it seems as though the other person caused your emotion. Wrong. Only you create your emotions. I am not saying that you can create or control your emotions consciously or voluntarily, generally emotion is created unconsciously and involuntarily. Your emotions are created by the subconscious reaction of your beliefs to events. If I strike two different people the same way, both will be injured the same way, same same. If I say the same thing to two different people, they may have totally different emotional reactions, different different. This distinguishes that the cause of the physical injury is me, and the cause of the emotion is you.

If I do something to you that you believe is unfair, you will get angry, whether it is actually unfair or not.

If I give you something you deeply desire, you will be joyous, whether or not others think it is valuable.

If I do something you believe is threatening, you will be frightened, even if others might not care.

Beliefs aren't voluntary, so you can't decide not to be angry, joyous or frightened, or to feel a different emotion instead. When you feel frightened, you might turn and hit the person next to you, stop scaring me. But the person who frightened you is not them, it is yourself. If you are angry at me because you believe that I mistreated you, if I provide an explanation that convinces you that I treated you properly, you will no longer believe that I mistreated you and you will stop being angry, or stop being angry about that part.

Emotional Chemistry

Emotions have a chemical component. When someone is emotionally triggered, they start dumping emotional chemicals into their body. It takes some time to dump and distribute the chemicals and hype themselves up. If you notice and respond to the emotional trigger during the latency period, it is possible to short-circuit the emotional reaction. The human mind tends to ruminate about significant events, replaying what happened and retriggering an echo of the emotional response even if the cause was already resolved. This creates aftershocks. With enough awareness, you can short-circuit your own aftershocks instead of deafening yourself in an emotional feedback loop.

After the chemicals are distributed, the person is hyped up and even if you stop the emotional alarm, the chemicals and hyperactivity remain. That is why it is impossible to proceed with calm reason immediately after an emotional issue is resolved. The chemicals eventually dissipate on their own, the cooling off period. You can either wait, or it is possible to redirect emotional energy. The chemical component of emotion is mostly arousal, excitement, energy, a hard to ignore urge to react. Overall it pushes you to act. People skilled with emotion can understand the emotional system and are able to intentionally direct emotional energy to productive ends. The actor gets upset with the director for not taking their advice. The director says perfect, perfect, use it! Action!

We express our emotions physically, which is why you can tell how someone is feeling by looking at them. Surprisingly, the mind-body emotional connection is bidirectional. To a degree, you can use your body to change your emotion. Try each of the following physical actions and pay attention to how they make you feel. If you smile, you become happier. If you slouch, you feel weak, if you stand tall, you feel strong. If you make your heart race and breathe

shallow and fast, you are anxious or excited. If you bring your heart rate down and breathe deep and slow, you are calm.

Observe Your Emotions Carefully

Emotions aren't wrong. Your beliefs are wrong, your interpretation is wrong, your reaction is wrong. Emotions are signals you give to yourself, they can be very useful to help you understand what is happening and what you should do about it to achieve your goals. As signals, feelings can be completely misinterpreted. You must carefully consider them and develop deep intuition about what your feelings may be telling you about your situation. If you are stuck in a feeling, or not sure what you are feeling, try naming what you are feeling. Naming your feelings is how you stop identifying yourself with them. I am feeling x. Challenge your interpretations with independent data. Emotions are valuable, we like them and we want to keep them. Always listen to your emotions. Never react to them. Always question your beliefs. Your emotions are your responsibility. And pull your head out of your ass!

Appraisal Theory

Theory of Constructed Emotion

How Emotions are Made, Chapter 2 The Physicality of Emotion, Chapter 4 The Origin of Feeling
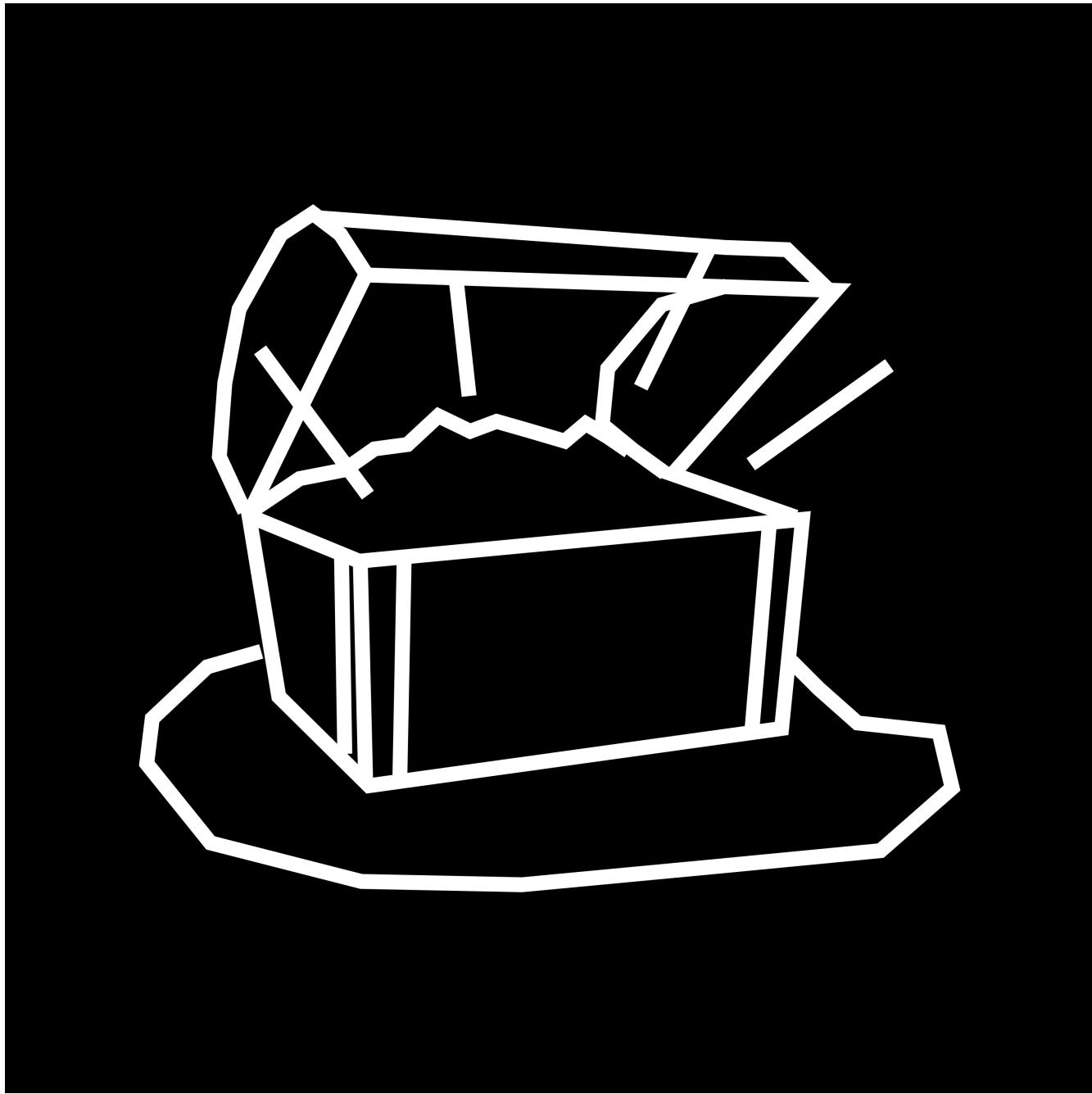
Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, Chapter 2 Glands Gooseflesh and Hormones

Valence (psychology)

Handbook of Emotion Regulation, Chapter 1 Introduction

Women Who Think Too Much, Chapter 2 Costs of Overthinking

Social, Chapter 6 Emotions and the Social Brain

I Just Want to Be Happy

Being Happy

People say things like I just want to be happy, and I will be happy when x. This is a cultural delusion. Happiness is an emotion, emotions are reactions, reactions are temporary, it is impossible to be happy in an extended way. You will never live every moment of your life in shock and delight, oh, it's another moment, how unexpected and joyful! Here comes another amazing moment, I could never have guessed?! This is mania, it is a medical condition. You will never be permanently emotionally happy.

Dissatisfaction

If you think that you will be happy only when certain conditions are met, you will rarely be happy and never be satisfied. People tend to be positional about happiness, they are happy when they make progress and increase their

ranking. They assume they will be happy when they have this much money, and remain unsatisfied until they reach that arbitrary amount. If they ever get that much money, they will see that other people have more money than them, they are not number one, continue to feel dissatisfied, and move the goal posts. Even if you become number one, more money does not make you more satisfied. Positional success does not make you satisfied. You feel happy in the moment when you react to making significant progress, then the emotion fades and you fall back to dissatisfaction. Repeat the cycle forever, or learn.

Comparison is the thief of joy. adage

Montesquieu. If we only wished to be happy, this could be easily accomplished. But we wish to be happier than other people, and this is always difficult, for we believe others to be happier than they are.

Far from Eden. It's nobody else's responsibility to make you happy. Your happiness is your own responsibility. Happiness does not depend on circumstances. . . . It's about perspective, it's about being grateful.

Satisfaction

The key to satisfaction is lowered expectations. Lower your expectations right to the ground, so low you would be happy, meaning satisfied, even if you were a doormat. Lowered expectations does not mean lowered aspirations. You don't have to aspire to be a doormat. Aspire to whatever you want. Aspire to be like unto a God. Don't expect anything. You do not deserve anything. No Thing. Nothing.

Gratitude

Is your situation bleak? Be grateful to be alive. Is your situation wonderful? Be grateful to be alive. This is an example of equanimity, a nonreactive way of life, there is no difference no matter the circumstance. I do not recommend total equanimity, I think it is better to be more grateful when your situation is better than bleak. Gratitude is not the end. You can be grateful and also ask for more. Or better yet, don't ask, licitly take more. Life is good, and you can make your life better. You do not want to feel happy feelings, you want to achieve your terminal goals, your highest good. Being miserable until you achieve your goals is counterproductive. Fully accept and be satisfied with your situation, observe, think, act. Be grateful for everything you have. Enjoy every success, then continue your relentless pursuit of your goals.

Hedonic Treadmill

Positive Psychology

Equanimity

Eudaimonia

Talking Is for Information Transfer

Why Say Anything?

Why do people talk? What is talking for? I am the only one that can live my life, you are the only one that can live your life. What do we need to say to each other? What do I need you to tell me about my life? Very little. For example, I might want you to tell me relevant information that I don't already know.

As a child, I believed in the information transfer theory of speech, that we speak to tell each other relevant information. This theory fails almost everywhere you look. I was a deeply confused child. Information transfer is a component of speech, but not the basis or even the majority of it. Some other components of speech are handshakes, filtering, social acceptance, emotion, status games, costly signals and negotiation.

Handshakes and Filtering

Hello? is a verbal handshake, reaching out your hand verbally. The question that hello asks is, does the other party understand verbal handshakes? If they are able to reply hello back, that completes the handshake. Non-reactive objects fail this test, and it filters out people incapable of speech for any reason, such as being unavailable, only speaking incompatible languages, being deaf etc. The simple protocols after hello are protocol negotiation, each party offers more advanced protocols to the other. Some examples are, my name is, how are you, and what can I do for you. At this point, the conversation has only established a connection and chosen an initial protocol, no substantive information has been transferred, but it is possible to start transferring now.

Depending on the subject, more filtering may be beneficial. Salespeople know not to jump straight from hello to buy my thing. They may ask qualifying questions. Qualifying questions appear to show general interest. What do you do for work? Have you lived here long? They avoid wasting time negotiating with an unqualified person. Depending on the sensitivity and the cost of the topic that someone wants to discuss, they may spend a long time to qualify the other person. Sometimes the filtering is the preface to the conversation, and sometimes the filtering is the purpose of the conversation, such as on an interview or a date. A job interview is an explicit series of qualifying conversations, the conclusion of which is a job negotiation. Dates are a series of qualifying conversations to filter out unsuitable romantic partners. Dating concludes with a relationship negotiation.

Social Acceptance

Small talk and chit-chat were once baffling to me. What are these people talking about? It's so trite, rote, proscribed, insincere! Why do they do it? Why do they rope me into it? How's it going? Fine, fine. Nice weather we're having. Sure is. I am screaming internally. This conversation has zero information transfer, is one hundred percent performative, yet it has a function. People do not continue to do things for no reason. There is a benefit and it is not explicit. What one or both people gain from this conversation is no information, they are expressing social acceptance to each other. I accept you to be here, I recognize you as a part of my community. It's like giving someone a welcoming, pleasant hug without touching them. It is one way of being nice to someone else. It trades social energy between both parties, it is subtly invigorating.

Consider the alternative, the stony silence, the hostility of looking at someone in the eye without speaking. People who don't know each other can't be neutrally quiet. There is either animosity, an unavoidable slight negativity, or an artificial effort to create positivity where none has been earned yet, fake chit-chat. This is one reason that people like being around people with sunny dispositions, such as children, they sprinkle positivity and social energy around, which is much more pleasant than a shuffling, grim silence. Instead of using a superficial small talk protocol, I prefer to initiate conversation on whatever non-threatening topic is on my mind, I can just ask people what they think about something more interesting than small talk. Social acceptance can expand from small talk to cameraderie and playfulness, these are more intense and personal positive expressions without significant information transfer.

Emotion

Yay! Oh no. Grrr. I can't believe they did that to me. What were you thinking? This is the best! Ugh, so bored. A lot of what people say is filled with emotion. You could say that they are transferring information about their emotional state, but it is usually possible to infer their emotional state from other cues. Rather than informing you about what they are feeling, expressions of emotion are more often implicit requests. Joy and outrage like amplification, fear likes reassurance, boredom likes an invitation. If someone tells you their pet died, they might be asking you to sympathize, which includes sincerely sharing their emotion. Oh no! I am so sorry to hear that. If you do not share their emotion, the way you speak those words could become hollow, or even mocking, making them feel rejected or insulted. If you say the same words while you re-experience a similar feeling of loss from your past, the way that you say it might demonstrate a shared experience that helps them feel less alone during a painful time.

Expressions of emotion can be opportunities to become closer with someone. This is complex. If someone is angry with you, the central message is rejection, they don't like you, they don't like something you've done, or they don't like something you haven't done but they are blaming you anyway. Resonating with their anger and being angry back at them can escalate into conflict. Remaining calm in the face of their anger can also make them more angry. Conflicting with their anger and being happy about it is probably the most likely to make them angrier. Showing submission and appeasing them can encourage them to use anger more often. This is just one section of the rat's nest of human emotion. This may sound like a no-win situation, but it is often winnable. You can only draw your

own chart of the human soul. Competent conversationalists can face this quandary and turn an angry interaction into an opportunity to become closer. After all, we are only angry about things that we care about in the first place.

Status Games and Costly Signals

The massive, invisible underwater part of the speech iceburg is status games and signaling. When there is a group of people talking, and one guy keeps going on long digressions that always happen to mention that he went to Harvard Law School, it is not an accident. By taking the group's attention and holding it for longer than his fair share, he is implicitly claiming that he is higher status and more important than other people. By somehow mentioning Harvard Law School every time, he is making sure that you know that he has exclusive credentials that prove beyond a social doubt that he is higher status and more important than you. His words are not informative nor entertaining, they are signifiers, communicating superiority, inferiority and group affiliations.

By saying something that is dubious or even obviously false, he can make a costly signal. A costly signal can spend a valuable resource, such as time or money, or something intangible such as honesty. When someone states an easily disprovable falsehood that matches the public position of a group, they are spending their trustworthiness to demonstrate their loyalty to the group. Group members often feel closer to people who make costly signals. One of us. One of us. Elaborate funerals can also be costly signals, obviously the deceased gains no benefit. Status games and signalling are also a rat's nest of human behaviors, they are the majority of what people do socially.

Negotiation

Everything is about benefits. Show me the incentive, I will show you the behavior. People use language to gain benefits. Babies cry for momma. Children beg for candy. Job candidates express fake passion for business. Two people on a date act nothing like they do normally. People express whatever they think will give them an advantage in the negotiated social reality. Whether two people are friends, whether I owe you five dollars, whether I am an employee at Initech Corp., these are all rooted in beliefs in peoples heads. Some of these beliefs are backed by facts and evidence, but most aren't. The things we say can alter these beliefs, these beliefs can alter our benefits, so you must expect people to say whatever it takes to get the benefits they want. Some people are principled, honest, fair dealing, and I salute them, full stop. Most are not honest, and it is hard to decide which is worse, the snakes that lie and know they are lying, or the clueless people that lie so intuitively that they don't notice?

Language and culture define a conversational scoring system that you typically accept as a social reality, even when it forces you to score yourself as the loser. Socially defined realities can be ignored, manipulated, or redefined if you can get others to agree. Any successful negotiation must be agreed by both parties. You can unilaterally decide what you want, what is fair, what terms are acceptable to you and your method of negotiation. If either of you don't like it, you can walk. You may not get what you want this time, but life is long. Repay betrayal with betrayal, repay kindness with kindness. People will say anything to get what they want right now. You must do anything right now to be who you want.

What Does Not Need to be Spoken
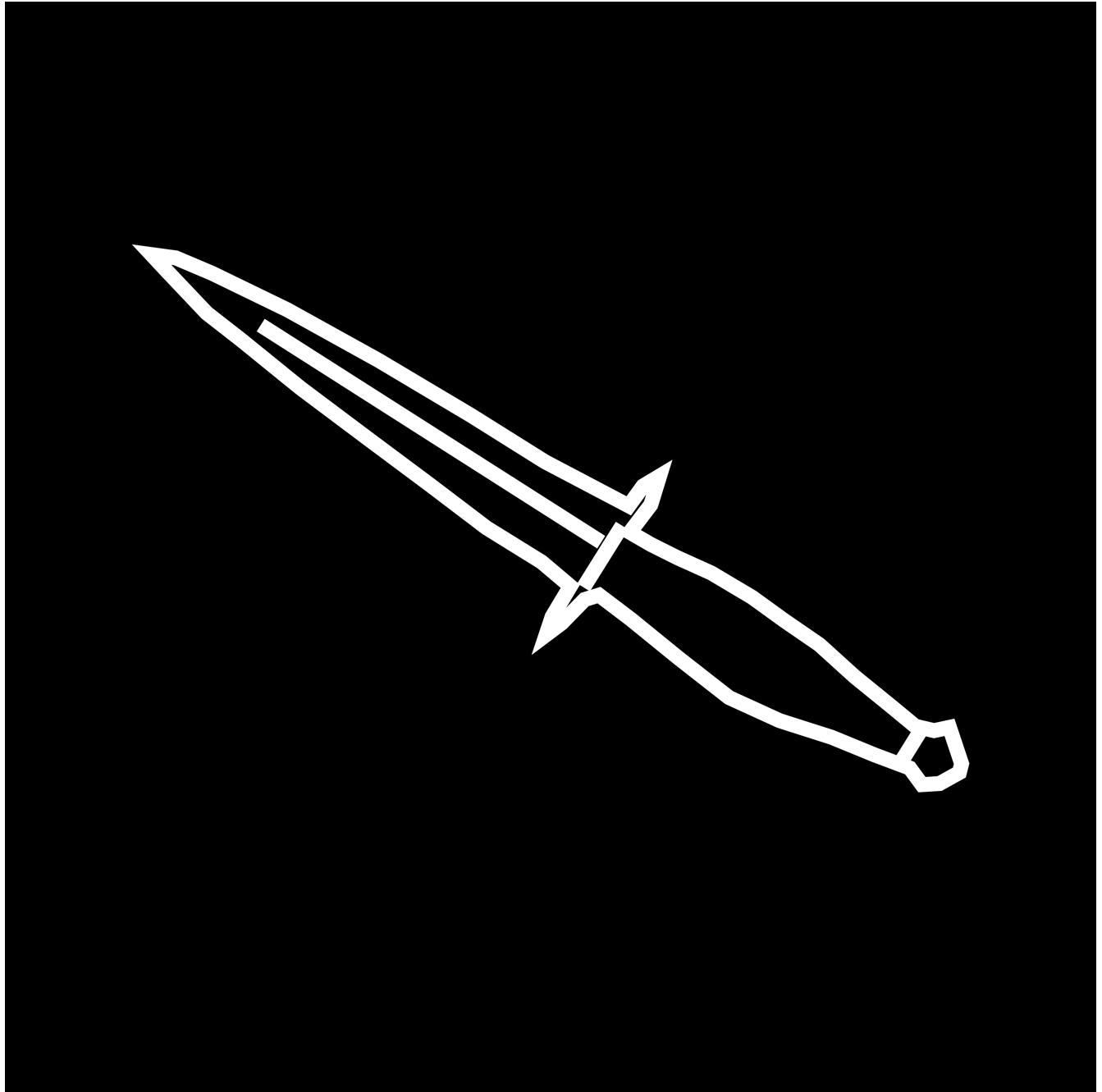
The phrase I love you never needs to be said. Professed love is no proof, demonstrated love is already proven. Saying it doesn't create it, prove it or convey it. My happiness is my responsibility, and your happiness is your responsibility. At best we can request or recommend, but that leaves most of the time silent. Most people chatter and yell at each other all the time, stuffing every moment full of sound and fury to avoid dead air. This is evidence that they are doing it wrong, they are failing to learn what is necessary and effective. Children chatter and laugh constantly, the children are correct. They are figuring out what is going on, laughter is a response to surprise, children should be suprised constantly as they learn. As you develop, you should reach a point where you don't need to talk much at all anymore.

In my marriage, I was talking all the time to try to improve understanding, resolve conflict, solve problems. One day I was sick and happened to lose my voice. It clicked. All of that talking was ineffective. I can't make another person understand me and I can't fix their problems for them, no matter what I say. From then on I was greatly relieved, I was able to avoid hours and days of wasteful talking. My silence didn't solve their problems, I avoided creating additional problems such as pointless interventions in their life. There are a few couples that stay together happily and nearly silently, they are examples of people who have figured it out. Eventually there is little more to say. You get on with living, tacitly.

Social Reality

Virtue Signaling

Pragmatics

I Am a Good Person

You Feel Like the Hero

I feel like the hero of my own story, just like everyone else does. I face adversity and I do my best in this difficult situation. I mean well. If the world is unfair and wrongs me, am I supposed to not notice or forget? Or should I stand up for myself, take what's rightfully mine and do what it takes to protect me and my community? If I am placed in a situation with no alternative, if I have to choose between me and you, losing my life or taking your life, I have to choose my life, right?

You Would Never

An atrocity is an extremely evil act, a great injustice, such as cruelly killing lots of people. Of course, you are a good person, so you would never participate in something like that, right?

People have much in common. There is important variation, but also a lot of similarity. Atrocities happen, and atrocities are caused by people. Atrocities are caused by people like you.
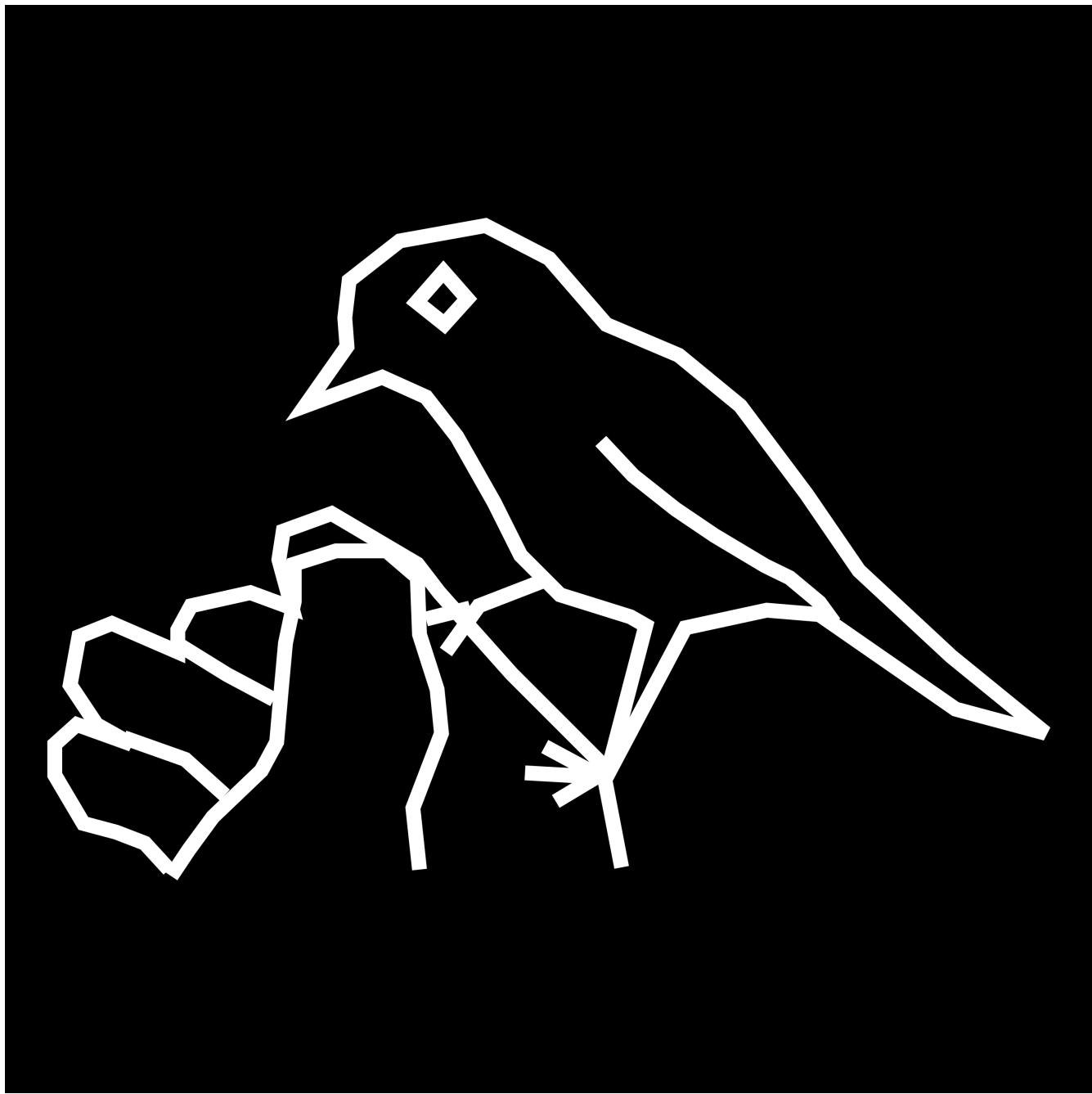
Sometimes You Are a Bad Person

You must integrate the sense that you are a good person who does not want to commit or allow for atrocities to happen, with the fact that atrocities do occur and many of the people involved are like you. We all mean well. Things don't work out the way we want. Does that make you a bad person? Sometimes, yes. Sometimes you are a bad person. When you are able to consider the possibility that you are bad, or more accurately that you are doing something bad, you can fully consider your moral actions instead of denying reality. But I'm a good person!

The Wave

District 9

Pumpkin

This Is True Love

Relationships Are Essential

No man is an island, humans are social animals, we need to form deep relationships to be healthy. Relationships are not a nice to have, they are a need. What would happen to a baby if you raised it without human contact? That would be an unethical experiment, one which humanity conducted by accident in the Romanian orphanages of the 1980s. The orphanages provided hundreds of babies with shelter and food, but almost no human contact due to lack of funding and staff. The unattended children developed problems as they grew up, rocking back and forth, wasting away despite eating enough, not connecting with other people.

New Relationship Energy

As a young man, I lived many years without a romantic relationship or any prospects. I thought that it might never happen for me, I am not good enough, I am not a lovable person. I wanted a relationship desperately. Naturally, everyone agrees desperation is unattractive. Lack of a romantic relationship was the biggest problem in my life at that time. I remember the morning when a girl first accepted me, where I was standing, the girl gave me a hug and a kiss, my body flooded with dopamine and norepinephrine. It was the most intense, happiest feeling I have felt in my life. I understood those stupid expressions, like, I was walking on clouds and the birds' song was joyful. This is new relationship energy, the exciting time in the first months of a deep relationship where you think about the person all the time and are very excited and happy about it. That excitment has nothing to do with whether the relationship is mutually benefitial or durable, a powerful feelings over facts experience.

Voluntary and Honorable

No matter what you need from human relationships, you can't take it from other people, you will get only what they choose to give. Relationships are purely voluntary exchange. No matter what other people do to you, and certainly I have been mistreated, you must never lie, neglect or try to hurt others feelings. Stand up for yourself, do what you should, be bold as brass, but always be polite and kind. Kindness takes little effort, creates unexpected opportunities, and if you lose your integrity, you will regret it and gain nothing.

Managing Relationships
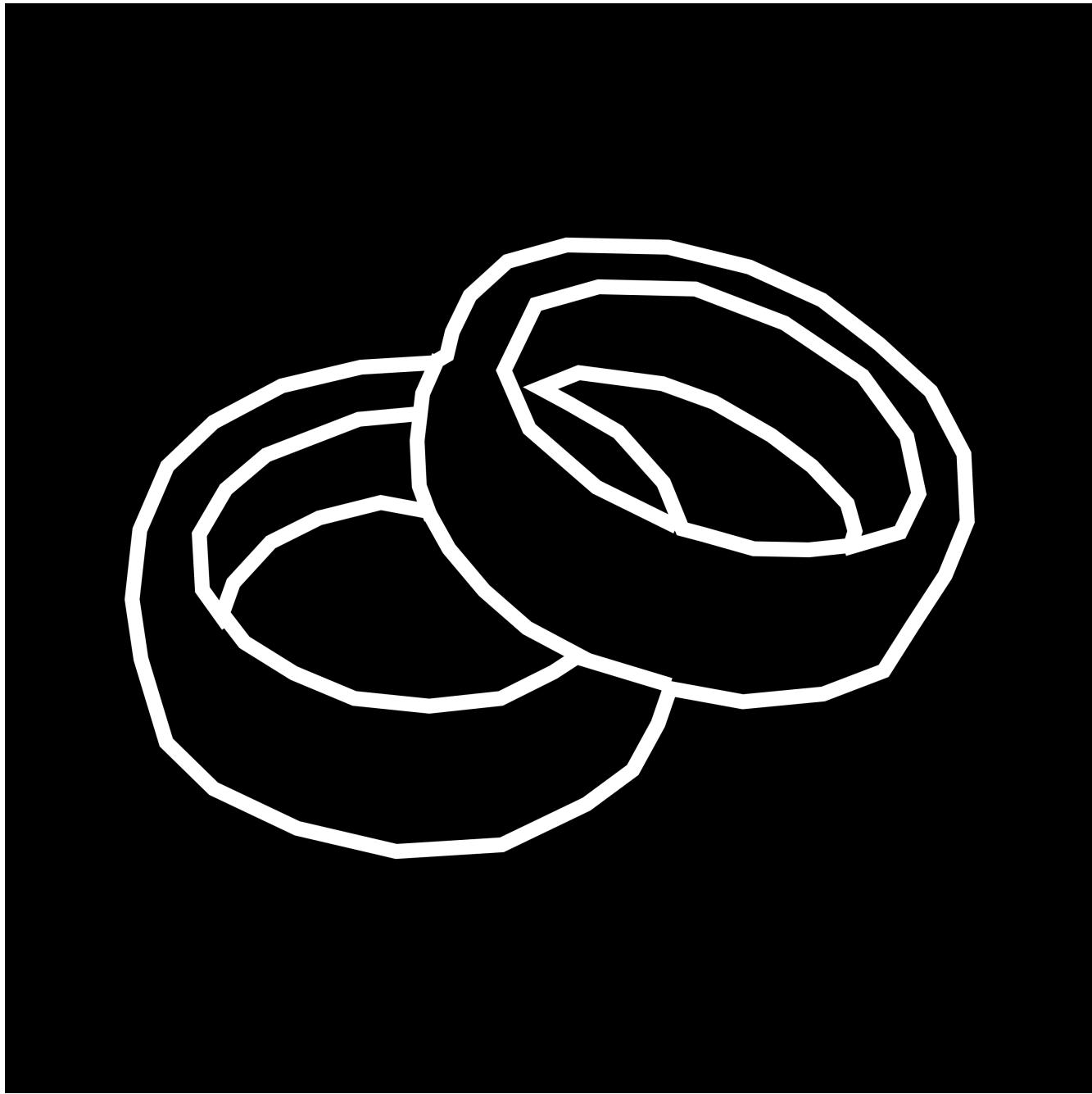
Facing the other person in your relationship, it seems that if you want to make something happen, you are evenly matched, 1 vs 1. But a relationship is a dynamic system of two people, confusingly it contains yourself. Neither individual person within a relationship can control it, $1 < 2+$. Read the previous sentence again until you believe it. You have to submit to the relationship dynamic. Of course you can influence it, but your influence feeds back into you, so avoid sudden changes. After some experience with a given relationship, the dynamic settles and you can observe the cost-benefit ratio of what you give to the relationship and what you get from the relationship. You have limited resources, so you cannot keep every relationship that piles up. Relationships can be time divided, but they need regular care and feeding or you drift apart. You have to choose which relationships to develop. Only commit to people who also commit to you and treat you well. Keep and invest in the relationships with the best cost-benefit, cut the rest. That's what's best for you and overall for the world. It's not heartless, it's responsible, which is very attractive.

1980s Romanian Orphans Phenomenon

New Relationship Energy

The World as Will and Idea, by Arthur Schopenhauer, Volume III Chapter XLIV, The Metaphysics Of The Love Of The Sexes

Limerence

What Is Love?

Love Is Sacred

Robin Hanson's theory is that we take love as a sacred cultural value. Making something sacred means that we all agree about it and don't touch it. But people have different opinions, we can't agree on almost anything except some universal generalities, gravity is down, sky is blue. Sanctifying something means that the group collectively agrees to treat it as an untouchable vague simple abstract, even if it is in fact a complex reality that affects us. The vagueness and importance of the sacred make people curious, they ask, what is love? The useless answer follows, love is a mysterious thing. This is a social Do Not Enter sign, don't touch the sacred. Anyone who tries to talk about the complex realities of a sacred subject, pointing to myself, is profaning the sacred, a traitor to group unity. While I cannot unravel all of human nature, we know plenty to understand the fundamentals of love.

Love in Theory

We have one word for love while the greeks distinguished several forms.

Greek Word	Meaning	Example
Agape	Unconditional abstract love	I wish you well
Eros	Intimate love, appreciation of their beauty	You are so pretty
Platonic	Appreciation of the abstract, without physical attraction	The perfection of a circle
Philia	Loyalty to equals	Friendship
Storge	Affection for unequals	Between parents and children
Philautia	Self love	Positive and negative thoughts about yourself
Xenia	Hospitality	Care for guests

Romantic relationships as we think of them today usually have eros. Anything else? People like to say their romantic partner is also their best friend. When they break up, they sometimes say I wish them well. This suggests a combination of eros, philia, and agape, love is sex friends who care about each other. I like you a lot. Is that what people mean when they say I love you? Sometimes. But emotions are temporary. Often I love you doesn't refer to liking, as in the otherwise contradictory phrase, I love you, but I don't like you right now. That love means commitment.

Commitment
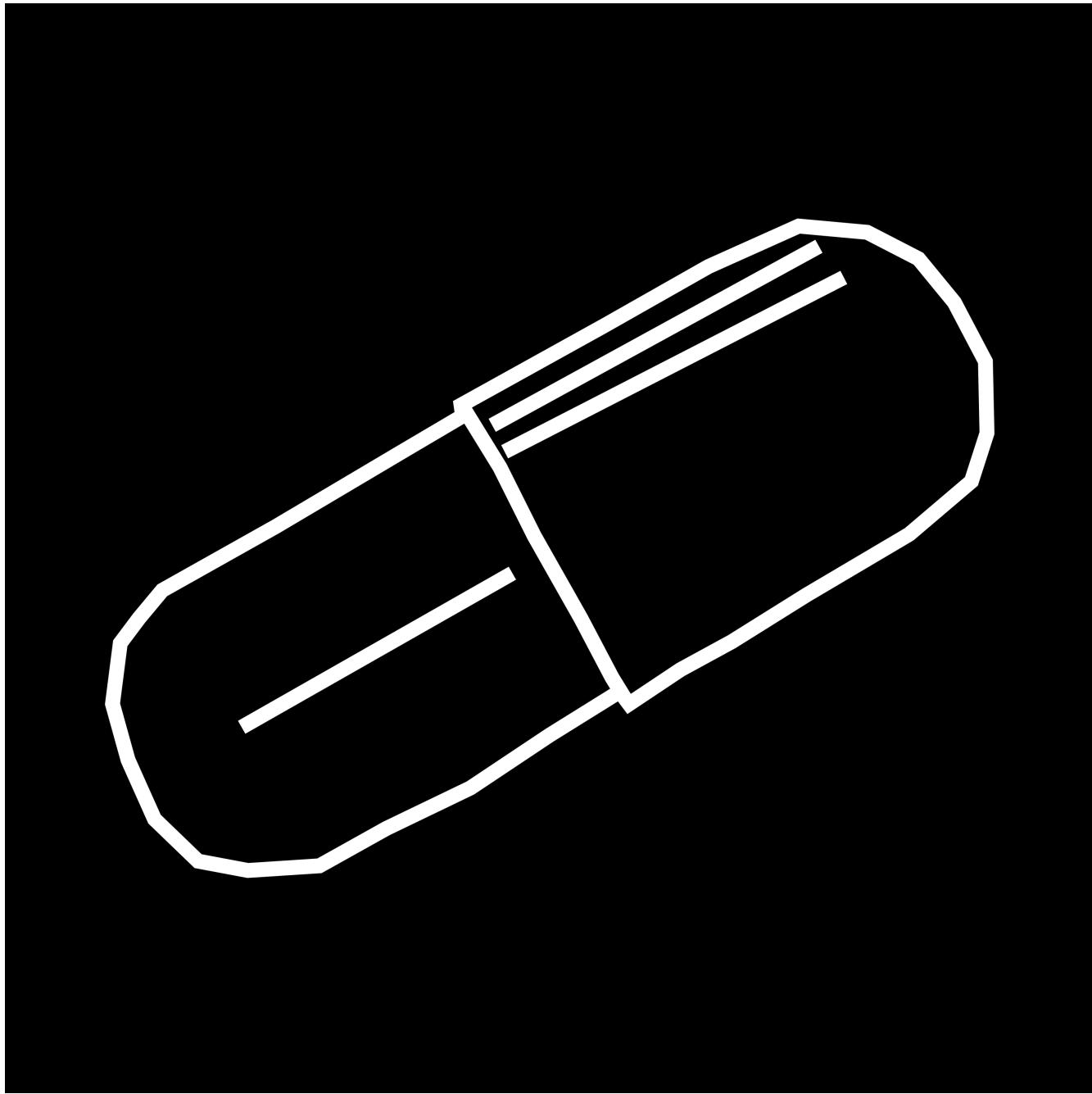
If you like someone a lot, you want to support them. A common meaning of I love you is I am commited to support you. People need a lot of help at every part of life. Do we like people in need? No. Human life is often ugly. Love is less emotional, and more contractual. Will you love me forever? Forever is a long time. Love is a voluntary choice to commit to another person. This is not a momentary decision or occasional, it is a continuous decision. You commit at every moment. You can be fully committed to a relationship with another person, but if the relationship doesn't work, eventually your commitment to the other person makes it impossible to continue. If you no longer believe that being together is what is best for them, you can't make yourself want to be together. Your commitment is voluntary, but your belief is involuntary. You don't fall out of love, your love is taken from you.

Love in Practice

Love is also a collection of skills. What makes someone a small person or a large person, metaphorically, is the size of their heart, their skill in love. With practice, you can be a better lover, have more love to give at little cost to yourself. Choosing who you love is a major life decision. Be generous with your love, never let others take advantage of your generousity, and don't sell yourself short. No matter how much two people love each other, they are still separate people. You cannot change someone else's mind, the most you can do for another person is be of service. You are only responsible for what you do. Love can be a wonderful thing, I hope you find it, I wish you well.

Love

Interpersonal Relationship

Organizations Pursue Their Mission

The Benevolent Mission

School is for learning, research is for discovery, hospitals are for health, companies are for profit, government is for better organizing society, courts are for justice, jobs are for money, news is for information, religion is for spiritual growth, food is for nutrition, exercise is for muscle, marriage is for love. These are some commonly claimed missions of various organizations and practices. All of these things achieve their claimed mission at least a little bit. Of course you learn something at school, but is it even possible to learn nothing from an experience? The question is not whether someone can proclaim that they have a grand benevolent mission, which sounds very good, you should notice. The question is whether they can deliver grand benevolent results.

Perverse Incentives

Any nice sounding mission statement for a group does not naturally align with the benefits of the individual group members. Even a group whose mission is simply to benefit its members has conflicts of interest between the members, one member can take more benefits than another. It's fine to say that the mission of the school institution is to teach the children. If you were hired as a teacher at a school, does that mean that you would want to selflessly pursue the educational mission? Wouldn't you continue to want the same things that everyone does, increased pay, fewer work hours, relaxed quality requirements? It is possible to align the goals of the organization and the individual with thoughtful incentive structures, for example by paying teachers for long term learning results. In practice this is never done, the incentives are perverse.

Pournelle's Iron Law of Bureaucracy. In any bureaucracy, the people devoted to the benefit of the bureaucracy itself always get in control and those dedicated to the goals that the bureaucracy is supposed to accomplish have less and less influence, and sometimes are eliminated entirely.

Stafford Beer. The purpose of any organization or system is not what it claims it is. The purpose of the system is what it does.

School Is for Learning

We always knew the basics of how people effectively learn. If learning was the goal, then school would consist of private or small group tutoring by competent experts who adapt the material to the students' talent and interest. They would teach topics that have immediate application to the students' life and improve retention using spaced repetition. Interaction with an instructor wouldn't take that long per pupil. Students can only focus intensely for a few brief periods in a day and would spend most of their time in unstructured play and some structured practice. Modern tools are capable of supporting even more effective learning methodologies. The common practice of school has almost nothing to do with learning. It is day-care for children so parents can work, it is indoctrination of cultural programming and a jobs program for unproductive adults.

Research Is for Discovery

People sincerely demand that other people must believe the science, which is an oxymoron for anyone who understands anything about science. Science is not a collection of facts or formulas, a literary tradition or a group of people. Science is the practice of empiricism, that is, the attitude of I don't believe what you tell me, I want to see for myself. People talk about the scientific method as if it were some rigid process or formula. You take people and money, mix them together according to the scientific method, and out comes science, eureka! OK, it's more complicated than that, the first step is to figure out which people get how much money. Uh oh. We failed on the first step.

Hospitals Are for Health

Hospitals, medical professionals, pharmaceutical companies, I sincerely thank everyone in this sector for saving and healing the injured and sick, improving lives around the world. Just because a group does some of what they say their mission is, does not mean they are really pursuing their mission. Their mission isn't even to make you healthy, it's to heal the sick. Those are not the same. They obsess over what is an illness and how to fix it, and completely ignore anything that could make you better than not sick. If the medical system was interested in increasing your health, they would take a health maximizing mission, unify medical records, have transparent pricing, incentivize based on long term patient health, distribute massive volumes of medical information for anyone to study, perform bold voluntary medical research, incentivize cures over managing symptoms, allow a free market for medical education and certification, and more. Institutional Review Boards have more blood on their hands than any butcher in history.

Companies Are for Profit

Any company listed on the public stock market has a legally enforcable fiduciary duty to the shareholders, which means that the company must overall maximize profit. Shareholders could sue the directors of the company if they are negligent or corrupt, but companies waste tons of money and blow easy market opportunities all the time. The employees are not incentivized to increase the company's profit, so they seek their own benefits over the success of the company. Companies frequently die for preventable reasons.

Living with Organizations

Organizations have the same convergent instrumental goals that you do, to survive and grow. They are bigger and stronger than you. They can crush you easily if you provoke them. Organizations are not usually rampant, because if they crush the wrong people, they are a big target. Unless the organization has effectively aligned the incentives of the individual members with the mission, and no major organization does this at the time of writing, you can be certain that the organization will be self-interested first, and pursue its mission second, if at all. Many organizations are so incompetent that you can give better service to yourself, if it's important to you, but your time and resources are limited. When you need their services, go along with their procedures, but be assertive. They will take advantage of weakness.

The Purpose of a System Is What it Does
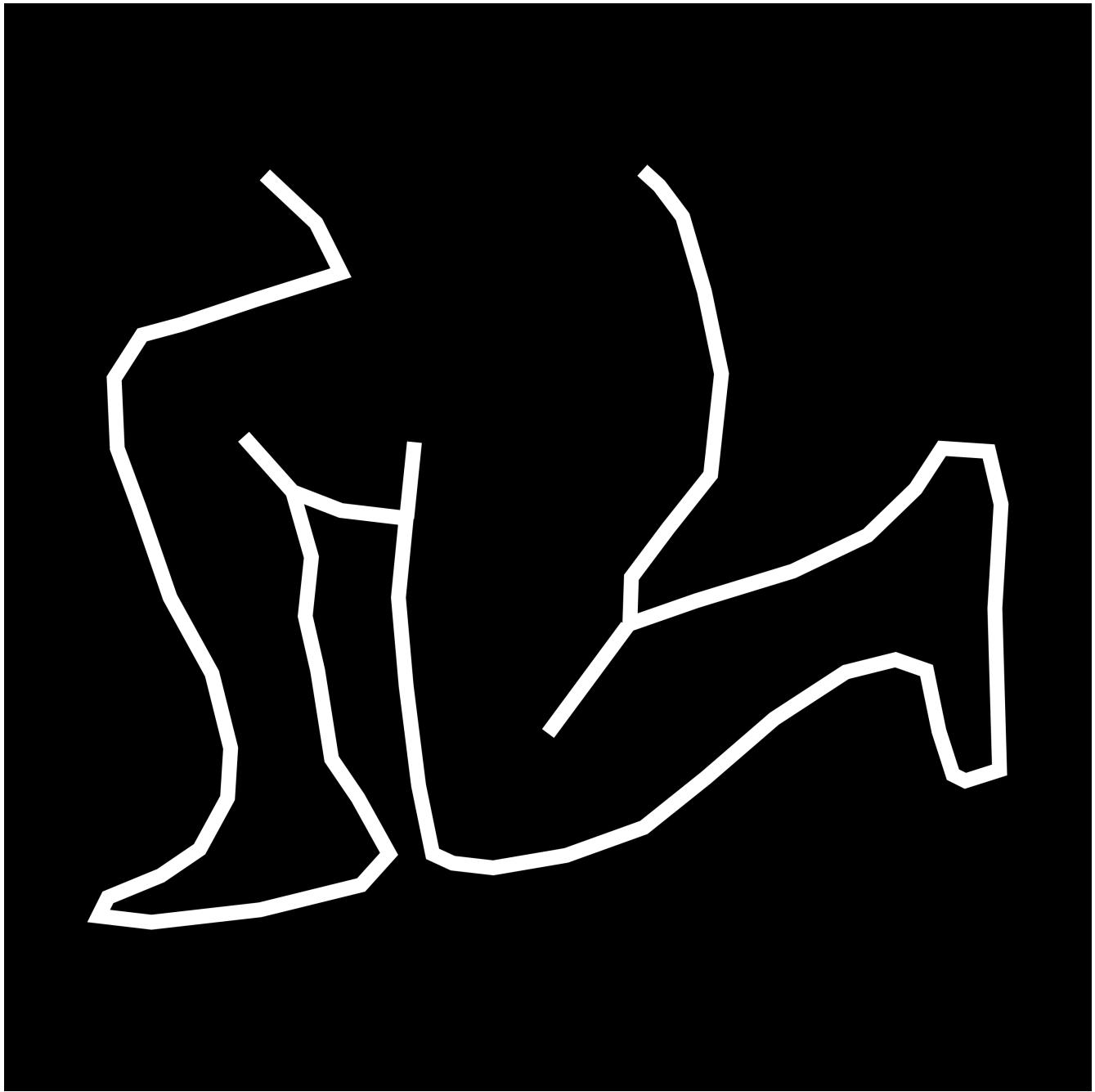
The Elephant in the Brain

The Bozo Explosion

Regression toward the Mean

The Diamond Age

What's Our Problem

I Don't Need Anyone

Entitled Individualism

Some cultures emphasize the group, some cultures emphasize the individual. Individualist cultures with rights, freedoms, protections and self determination, they empower the individual to make the most of their precious life within the society. The individual is not an island or a self-sufficient sovereign, they still live within a culture and a society. The individual must cooperate with their society and fulfill the obligations that come with their rights. The problems come when individuals go beyond individualism to entitled individualism. I get what I want, my way, you can't do that, you didn't ask me, I don't have to, that has nothing to do with me. If you share a society, other people have something to do with you.

When to Surrender

Entitled individualists demand everything and offer nothing. They will never change their mind by reason, never compromise nor surrender. Entitled individualists can't work with each other. They are impossible to coordinate with, unless you consider absolute submission as coordination. I do not, becuase coordination is bidirectional and submission is unidirectional. In fact everyone surrenders in many ways, we accept the chains of gravity and the laws of our society, mostly. Everyone who deals with reality has one or more bosses, no one gets to do whatever they want. Entitled individualists delude themselves that they are above everyone else whereever they can get away with it, and conveniently ignore their submission or throw a tantrum when they can't. The reasonable person rejects self-aggrandizing delusions and looks for the best deal. Surprisingly, from an individualist point of view, the best deal is often surrendering some of your personal liberty in voluntarily exchanges of obligations.

Advantages of Loyalty
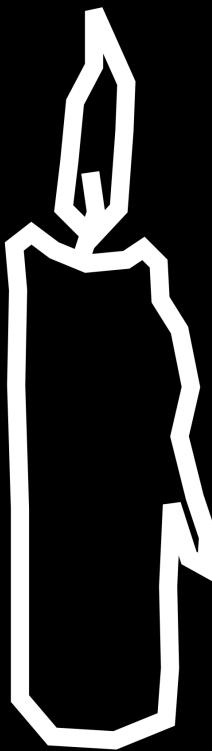
A group of individuals can coordinate with aligned incentives. The problem is that life is complicated, and even with generally good incentives, any interruption to their benefits or a requirement for some sacrifice would make the cooperation explode. There is no flexibility, no commitment, no trust, no loyalty. Loyalty as a word and concept have become an anachronism. The bases of any functional relationship are trust! respect! communication! A group of people who care about something in addition to themselves can coordinate to pursue it. Each individual is willing to contribute and compromise to advance a shared mission. A group can be much more capable than an individual. Generally groups need a leader. If you care about anything beyond yourself, you may want to voluntarily join a group that shares your mission. If the group and its leader are worthy, for your maximum benefit, you may choose to become loyal to the group and receive the gains from trade.

Oh no! The individual has lost their individual rights! There are no rights without obligations. Exchanging loyalty is a mutually beneficial voluntary exchange, a contract that mutually restricts both parties to help the group stably coordinate to achieve a goal. The member offers their services to the organization and its leader, the leader and the organization supports and cooperates with the member, both the organization and the member want to pursue the same mission in the first place. With agreements in place, the organization with its new member can specialize and focus efforts, advancing the mission far more powerfully than the member alone or a loosely bound association of individuals. When the mission becomes difficult, the contract binds either party to carry the other when they are down. On the basis of trust, respect and communication, the relationship is durable and effective. A leader may be higher hierarchically, but is in no way superior to the member. They have different roles, both essential, mutually supportive. Loyalty has benefits, of course it also has risks. If a member gives their loyalty to the wrong organization or leader, they may lose out. When the individual escapes at the first inconvenience, the contracted member can lose by giving their loyalty to the wrong group.

We All Serve

You are not the hero of the story of the world, you are a person. There are more followers than leaders, being a follower isn't bad and being a leader isn't good. Even the leader answers to someone, and followers at one level often lead at another level. Even proud countries sign treaties and sometimes surrender, you are a much smaller individual. A committed, unified group can be much more capable than a loose association or an individual. Throw away useless, obstinate pride and look for the best way to achieve your goals. If you find a worthy leader, it is often to your advantage to offer your loyalty and service. If there are no worthy leaders, you have to become one.

Loyalty

Death Is Scary and Bad

No Purpose

Death is the cruel joke of life. Why create me only to destroy me? Why make me love people only to lose them, or make them lose me? Life is so mean! I previously thought that old age and death was a miserable consequence of the evolutionary focus on reproduction. After you reproduce, evolutionarily you don't matter, so whatever. Evolution optimizes sex, pregnancy, babies, children and young adults who become parents and start the cycle anew. Then evolution stops optimizing and your body coasts until it crashes in death. I was naive, I did not see the evolutionary purpose of old age and death. Evolution doesn't ignore anything, everything matters, inclusive fitness. There are species benefits to grandparents being unable to reproduce and caring for their grandchildren. There are benefits to frailty in old age, and benefits for death. Human life has several stages, those stages have certain lengths, each stage serves a function, and the lengths are optimized. Your death serves a purpose for the species, you don't exist from

evolution's perspective.

The Death Mechanic

Humans live in groups, groups have dominance hierarchies. To be a successful group, the leader must be well-adapted to the environment. Other group members can challenge them, but often the leader is stronger and stays in charge. In a stable environment, once a group has a strong leader, the strongest in the group, they want to keep that leader forever, old age and death would just deprive the group of their strongest member, lose lose. The environment is not stable, it is dynamic. If a group member forms a dominant strategy in the current environment, they may become leader and calcify their strategy, becoming a dead player. When the environment shifts, the strong dead player may be able to suppress challengers. Without old age or death, the dead player may hold onto the leader position with their now maladaptive strategy, causing the group to fail or die out.

The solution to the problem of stagnation is a pipeline of life stages. The youth explore the environment and form dominant strategies in the current environment. While they are exploring, the leader is exploiting the previous adaptive strategy from the recent environment. There is an ideal balance of explore and exploit given a constant rate of change in the environment, this defines how long each stage of the pipeline should be. The leader stays in power for some years, exploiting the known strategy until it is too maladapitve in the changed environment. The aging leader, once strong, becomes frail. The younger members of the group have developed strategies that are more adapted to the current environment, eventually there is a power struggle and the leader is replaced. The older leader can remain to support the transition and the youth. Eventually the old leader is a net cost to the group, the end of the pipeline, death. The youth are live players exploring for new dominant strategies. The adults are dead players exploiting the current dominant strategies and reproducing. The old are there to transition, after the transition they die.

Max Planck. A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.

Speed Running

Like most games, your life is on the clock. If you were not on the clock, if you lived forever, you would face a problem of motivation. Motivation comes from constraint. If you have unlimited time, why hurry to do anything now? The models and strategies we commonly use fail if you remove time limits, they freeze or say I'll do it later. Players frequently complain about game rules and limitations, but what makes a game fun, what defines a game essentially, are the rules. Games are limitations, limitations are games. I invite you to play the game of no rules right now. What can you do in this game? Anything you want. What is the victory condition? Anything you want. In fact, you win. Or you don't, up to you. Are you motivated to make any move in this game? Is it fun to play? Time limits are not the only fun constraint a game can have. The motivational challenge of unlimited time is resolvable, turn-based games are fun, too. Life isn't the game of no rules, some games you have to play. Whether there is a game clock or not, you can speedrun.

Speedrunning is a metagame where players find ways to complete games as quickly as possible. Speedrunners routinely take on a task that takes months or days to complete ordinarily, and complete it in minutes or seconds. Usually this involves breaking the rules. If you attempt to speedrun the games of your life, consider the consequences and be ethical. But if the rules you are breaking are just commonly held assumptions or conventions, sometimes it is their time to die.

Memento Mori

Evolution of Ageing

Life History Theory

Speedrunning

Summary

Chapter	Delusion	Cost	Mechanisms	Opportunity
I Experience the World	The world is like it appears	Inaccurate, incomplete view of the world, unobservant	Fovea, saccades, blind spot, visual processing, conceptual lens	Account for physical limitations to get a fuller view of the world, become observant
Goals	Goals are unimportant	Aimless confused life	Terminal, instrumental, non, anti, convergent, divergent, exchange instruments	Find your goals and how to pursue them
Agents	Life happens to you	Neglect your ability to direct your life	Awareness, mastering habits, internal locus, observe think act cycle	Active pursuit of your goals
I Know Exactly What's Happening	I have all the information I need	Miss crucial information	Fog of war, physical, resource, computational limits, cost of information, cost-benefit, explore exploit	Prioritize and fight for information
This Is Serious	I have to play their game	Suffer under others' rules, never play your own game	Life is a metagame, dead and live players, define your rules, play to win	Live your own life
Decisions	I make good decisions	Make bad decisions with catastrophic results, overanalyze trivial decisions	Detecting decisions, collecting information, generating options, stakes, delegation, urgency, deliberation, reversibility, iteration	Efficiently use resources to make better decisions
I Have Free Will	I have free will	Fatalism or overestimate yourself	Unpredictable determinism, praise and blame	Agency in an unpredictable deterministic world
I Am a Success	I know what success is and I can achieve it	Empty wins or constant disappointment	Species, human and personal success, waves, excellence	Reliably pursue your own success
I Know the Score	I can measure how I am doing	Follow the wrong metrics, wrong methods, wrong path	No objective score, paths, continency and independence, over and under determined, dao	Pursue your dao

Chapter	Delusion	Cost	Mechanisms	Opportunity
I've Always Been Me	I am what I seem to be	Don't know what you are	Multiple autonomous agents, press secretary, boundaryless dynamic process	Embrace an accurate view of your own nature
I Know Myself Best	I have accurate information about myself	Act on wrong view of yourself	Challenge of self reflection, revealed preferences, large independent samples, awareness and courage	Realistic self-assessment
I Use My Time Well	I am not procrastinating	Avoid your most important problems	Savoring, breaking down tasks, warming up, ask a friend, blinders, deciding what to do and not	Resume climbing your path when you get stuck
I Understand Other People	Like mind fallacy	Misunderstand other people consistently	Noticing like mind, surpassing like mind, capability modeling	Predict other people more accurately
I Knew I Was Right	Confirmation bias	Act on persistent inaccurate beliefs	Reversed confidence, disconfirming evidence, seek the truth	Limit beliefs to evidence
My Mind Is Safe	No one can attack my mind	Loss of mental control to aggresive memes	Memes, psyops, negative suggestion, halo effect, anecdotes, memetic and antimemetic, virality, memetic defense	Mental sovereignty
My Emotions Are Correct	My emotions are always right, other people cause my emotions	Feelings over facts leads to misguided actions	Subconscious reaction to beliefs, created only by you, requires skill to interpret, independent verification	Use emotions as a powerful tool
I Just Want to Be Happy	I am satisfiable	Chase the illusion of happiness	Lowered expectations, gratitude, humble ambition	Live gratefully, pursue your values

Chapter	Delusion	Cost	Mechanisms	Opportunity
Talking Is for Information Transfer	I understand why people talk	Fail to effectively use or understand speech, lose social games	Filtering, social acceptance, implicit requests, dominance hierarchy, signaling, socially defined reality, when to speak	Understand the rules of social games
I Am a Good Person	I am a righteous hero	Unable to consider your moral problems	Accept that you can be bad	Become able to make moral choices
This Is True Love	I don't need relationships, I must accept my relationships	Suffer alone, suffer together	New relationship energy, honor, limits to control, cost-benefit relationship management	Beneficial relationships
What Is Love?	Love is sacred and mysterious	You don't know what love is or how to love	The sacred, commitment, love is a skill	More love in your life
Organizations Pursue Their Mission	Organizations primarily do what they say they do	Misunderstand organizations, fail to get what you want, get crushed	Group mission vs individual goals, alignment of incentives, assertiveness	Survive among organizations
I Don't Need Anyone	I never need to surrender, compromise or coordinate	Fail to coordinate with other people	Individualism, loyalty, service, following, leading	Achieve your goals through stable cooperation
Death Is Scary and Bad	Old age and death are pointless	Fear and dissociate about old age and death, misplay your life stages	Old age and death mechanics, pipeline of life stages, benefits of limitations, speedrunning	Play your life stage, speedrun your life

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The end of Your Situation

Shakubuku. A swift spiritual kick to the head that alters your reality forever.

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