

Systems Thinking

Narratives & Metamodernism

Systems Thinking

Narratives



Narratives

What are narratives?

“Narratives are stories we use to make sense of the world”

- Mythic and **religious** narratives (cosmogonic)
- Cautionary tales and **parables**
- Cultural **memory** and **values**
- Social commentary and **politics**
- Explicative narratives (science)



Timeline of Human Cognition

1. 300k Years Ago - Baseline Capacity

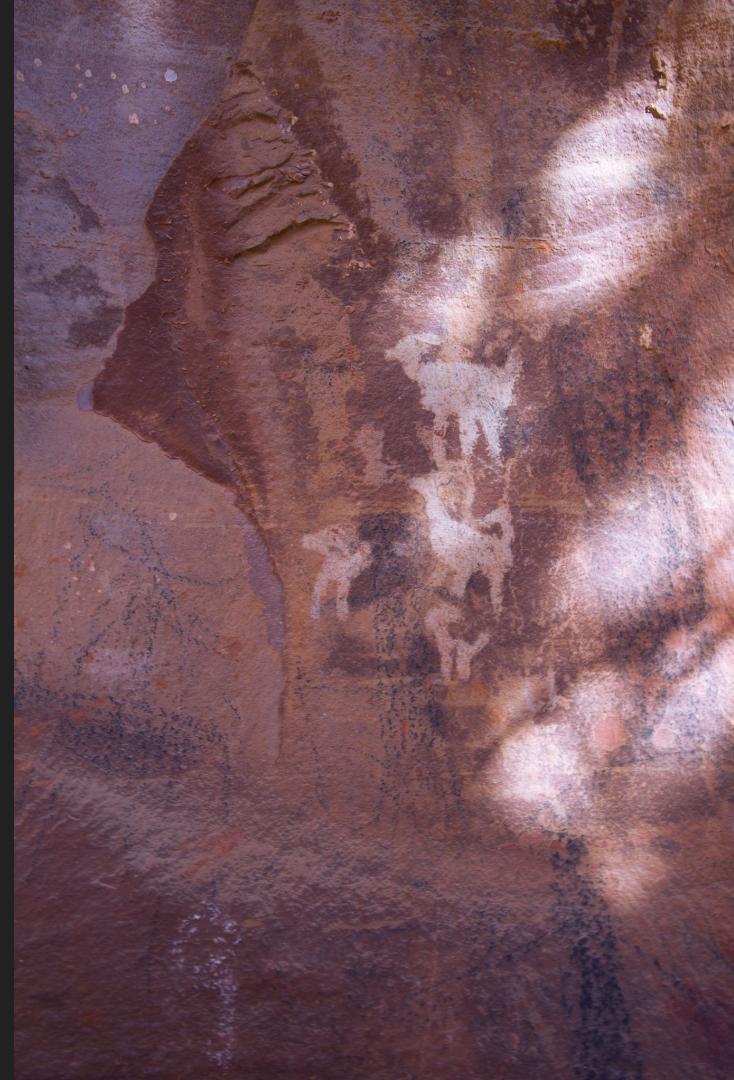
- a. Phenotypically modern humans emerge
- b. We haven't changed much physically or structurally
- c. Therefore, *maybe* we already had the capacity all along

2. 70k Years Ago - Abstract Thought

- a. "Cognitive Revolution" happened
- b. Lascaux cave primary example (40k years ago)
- c. Artifacts become significantly more sophisticated
- d. Artifacts also traveled much further than before
- e. Art becomes more abstract (things that don't exist, e.g. fiction)

3. 12k Years Ago - Systemizing Behaviors

- a. End of the Younger Dryas period (ice age)
- b. Foundation of permanent settlements
- c. Rise of agriculture and domestication, transition from hunters
- d. Mythology and religion become much bigger (Gobekli Tepe)
- e. Increasingly sophisticated social structures
- f. Writing and more formal systems



Forces of Human Intellect

1. **Curiosity:** Many animals are curious. Curiosity is an impulse to gain more knowledge through exploration, trial, and experimentation.
2. **Systematic Sensemaking:** This goes beyond basic curiosity and applies system, rules, structure, and rigor to making sense of the world.
3. **Cognitive Dissonance:** This is the unpleasant sensation when we cannot reconcile two or more ideas, facts, beliefs, narratives, etc. It compels us to figure stuff out.

This is why, over time, philosophy and the human condition becomes more **nuanced** and **sophisticated** (not necessarily more complex). Science is an attempt to formalize this process. But it is entirely rooted in inborn animal instincts that evolved in humans.



What Are Narratives?

1. **Definition of Narrative:**
 - a. **A set of stories to make sense of the world**
2. **Two overarching types of narratives**
 - a. Organic Narratives
 - b. Constructed Narratives
3. **Organic Narratives**
 - a. Emerge through experience, observation, reflection, interaction, and conversation
 - b. Tend to be unstoppable and evolve naturally over time
4. **Constructed Narratives**
 - a. Deliberately propagated through messaging, often by institutions such as governments, corporations, religions, and academia
 - b. Tend to be fragile or rigid, and serve a rhetorical purpose
5. **Subtypes of Narratives**
 - a. Personal, Historical, Political, Scientific, Religious, Cultural, Economic, Social, Universal, Human



Why Are Narratives Important?

Evolution: Speech and storytelling coevolved during Cognitive Revolution

- **Cautionary Tales:** Conveying warnings and lessons
- **Resource Coordination:** Facilitating collaboration, e.g., hunting
- **Social Structure Maintenance:** Gossip for community bonding, lie detection
- **Memory Preservation:** Transmitting history and traditions
- **Values and Norms:** Establishing shared beliefs and ethics
- **Understanding Complexity:** Simplifying complex phenomena for comprehension; teaching and making sense

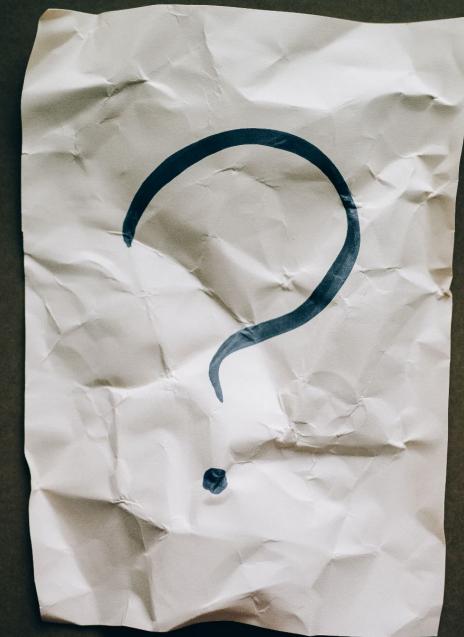


Truth Today

Truth today seems to be defined by four components:

1. A collection of **evidence** (facts, events, principles)
2. A set of **interpretations or narratives**
3. A set of **generalized beliefs** from the first two
4. A general **consensus** within an **epistemic tribe**

Remember, an epistemic tribe has norms and values around the **validity of facts and expertise**. When you can **categorically reject** most sources of information as “fake news” you can carefully cherry pick sources of “legitimate” news.

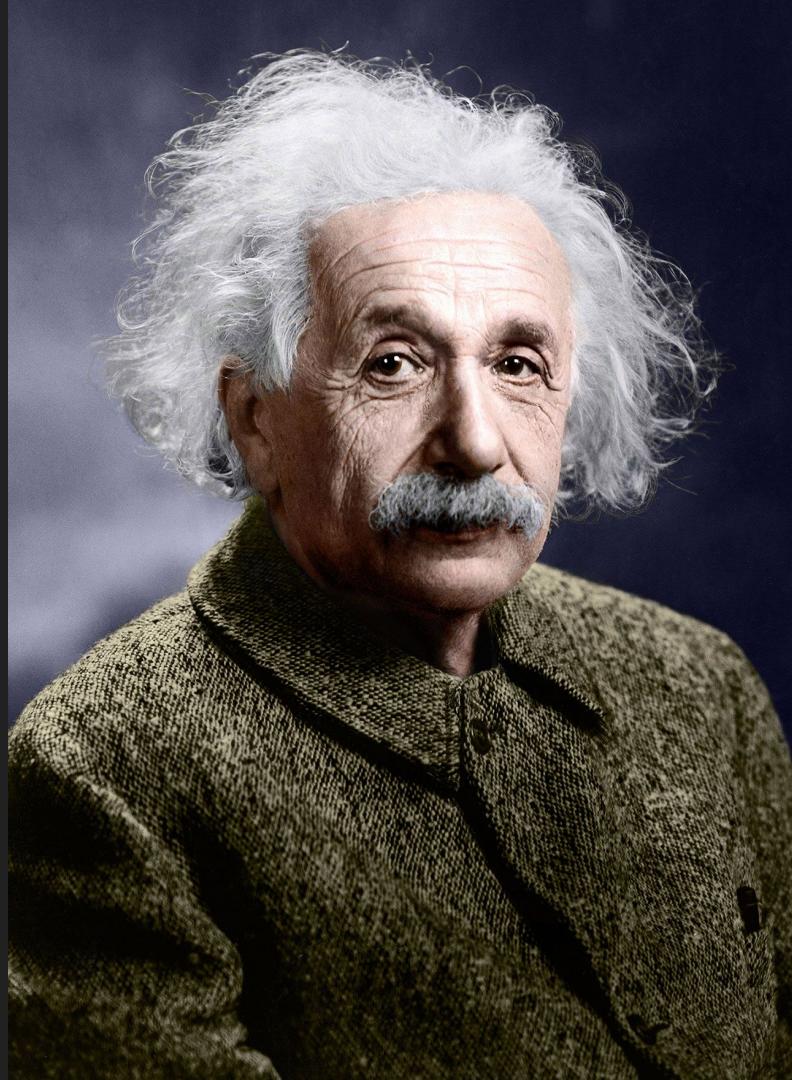


Metamodernism

Metamodernism is the **inevitable result of globalism and internet**. It is characterized by several things: systematic **deconstruction and reconstruction of narratives**; bringing narratives from **implicit to explicit**; rigorously **alleviating cognitive dissonance**; moving from an absolute or relativistic model to an **emergent model**; and the construction of **hyper-narratives**.

Modernism in a Nutshell

- **Top-Down Model**
 - Absolute truth from on high: Truth is “out there”
 - Rooted in Judeo-Christian influence
 - Cosmic fiat or mandate
- **Grand Narratives:** All things are objectively knowable, and external to humanity
 - Science
 - Culture and Humanity
 - Ethics and morality
 - Tend to be poetic, grandiloquent, and hyperbolic
- **Western colonialism** and imperialism
 - Originated in late 19th and early 20th century
 - Primarily by white Europeans and American men
 - Still had “civilizing mission” (e.g. Westerners are the arbiters of what counts as civilization)



Postmodernism in a Nutshell

- **Relativistic Model:**

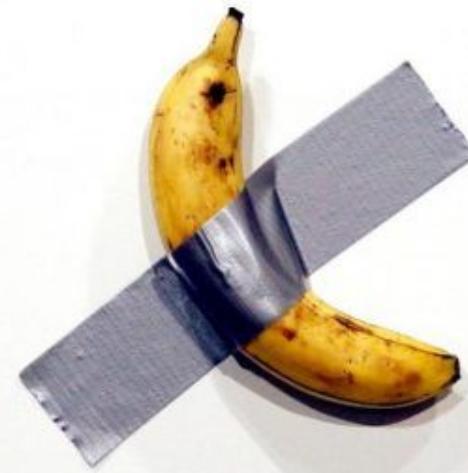
- Things can only be defined in relation to each other
- Categorical rejection of all absolutes and narratives
- “Fake news” is an example of categorical rejection
- This is a lazy way of reconciling cognitive dissonance

- **Just a bunch of Counter-Narratives:**

- “No one knows anything”
- “Truth or morality is relative”
- “No one can define anything”
- “No one can gatekeep anything”
- Therefore: Throw baby out with the bathwater!

- **Nascent self-awareness** about privilege and dominance

- Characterized by insecurity, irony, sarcasm, dismissiveness, bitterness, low-effort, and cynicism
- Particularly for establishment types (listen for all the bitterness from people like Jordan Peterson)
- This is rooted in anger and resentment at losing power
- Something of an **intellectual temper tantrum** by the West



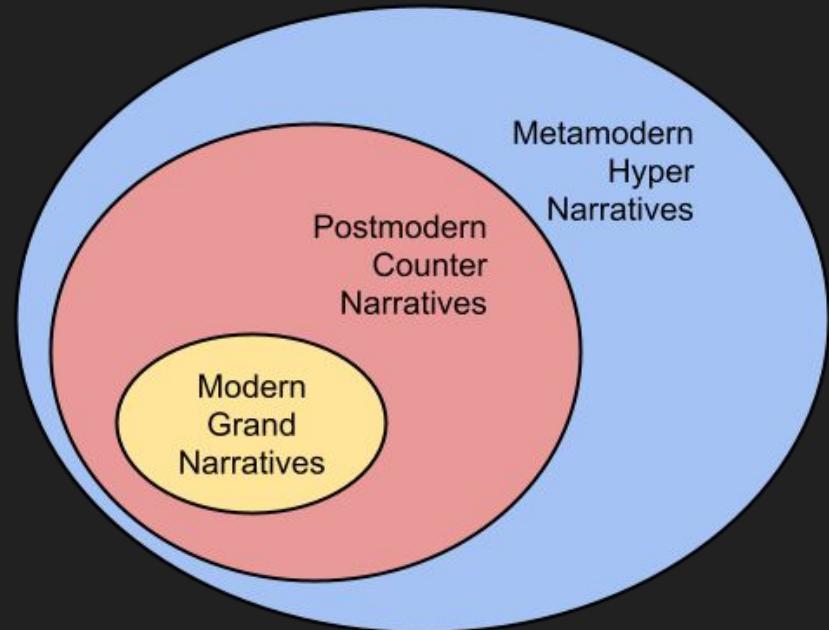
Hypernarratives

Definition of Hypernarratives: Sophisticated, layered models of reality that go beyond singular grand narratives or mere counter-narratives.

Embracing Complexity: Hypernarratives accept multifaceted truths, recognizing nuances and embracing the full spectrum of human experience.

True Metanarratives: An evolutionary step beyond modernism and postmodernism, hypernarratives represent a more mature, inclusive approach to understanding and articulating human existence.

Global Influence: The rise of globalism and the internet has fueled the development of hypernarratives, fostering greater interconnectedness and mutual understanding.



Hypernarratives Today

1. Intersectionality

- a. Recognition that identities and narratives are all intrinsically composite
- b. People belong to multiple epistemic tribes

2. Decolonization

- a. Recognize historical Western dominance of science, academia, and culture
- b. Deliberately deconstructing and reconstructing narratives with broader, global POV
- c. Do it with dignity, rather than cynicism and hyperbole

3. Transdisciplinarity

- a. Recognition of need for cross-pollination
- b. Deconstructing silos and gatekeeping
- c. Taking off the blinders
- d. Beyond interdisciplinary
- e. Synthesize entirely new disciplines to address increasingly complex problems

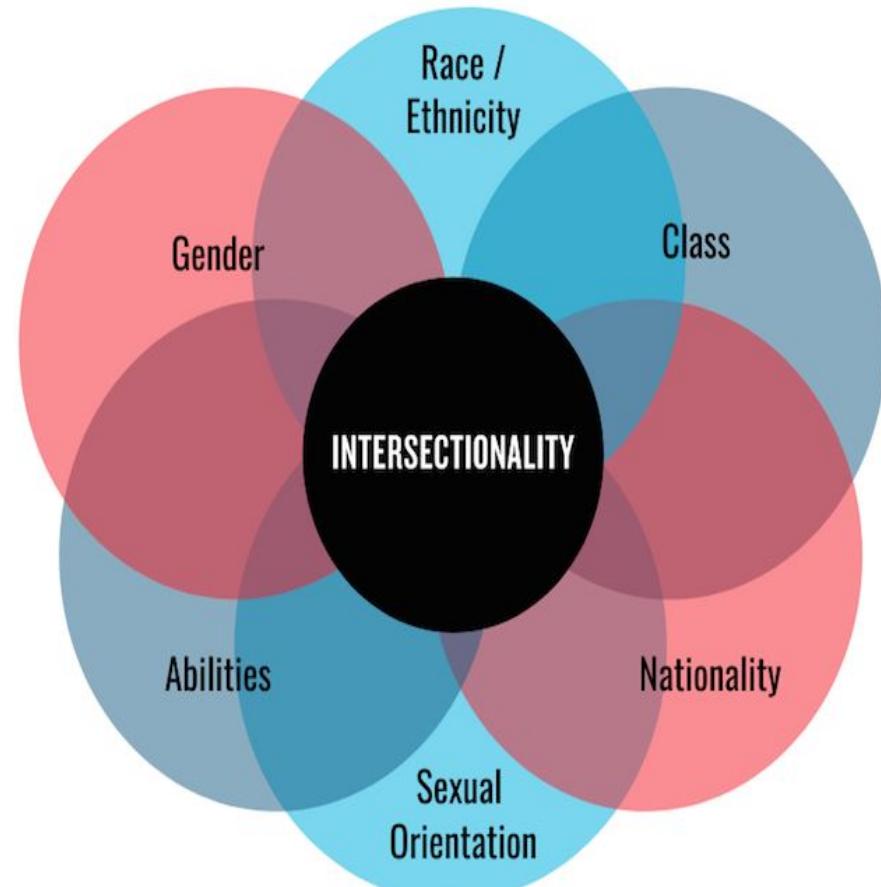


Image: First Book

Epistemic Tribes

Epistemic Tribe: A group united by shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and cultural norms, forming a distinct worldview within a broader societal context.

Recognition of Tribes: Acceptance of numerous epistemic tribes, acknowledging diversity in thought, values, and belief systems.

Characteristics of Tribes: Unique knowledge bases, cultural norms, shared experiences, and values defining each tribe. Distinct relationship to self, others, humanity, truth, morality, etc.

Overlap & Intersectionality: Exploration of commonalities and shared spaces between tribes, fostering understanding and collaboration. We all have some underpinning ontologies in common.

Tensions Between Tribes: Acknowledgment of conflicts and disagreements, viewed through an emergence lens rather than a pathology. Can have diametrically opposed worldviews, for instance.

Beyond Echo Chambers: Shift from pathologizing to recognizing the organic emergence of tribes, emphasizing mutual respect and learning. “Echo chambers” have always existed, and serve important functions. (University)

Embracing Complexity: Emphasizing the multi-dimensional nature of tribes, promoting empathy, dialogue, and integration within a global conversation. No one tribe is the arbiter of “normal” or “truth”.

Metamodernism in Film

1. **Everything, Everywhere, All at Once**

- a. Deconstructing and challenging narratives about meaning
- b. Cuts away everything else to examine human condition in many contexts (everyone is just rocks, etc)
- c. Weaves in trauma, abandonment, and a few social trends

2. **Barbie**

- a. Deconstructing and challenging multiple narratives
- b. Feminism: Promises and cognitive dissonance
- c. Patriarchy: Male-centered culture
- d. Toxic masculinity: Insecurity and control
- e. Capitalism: Profit motives

3. **Asteroid City (failed attempt)**

- a. Couldn't quite make the jump from Postmodernism (self-aware, ironic) to Metamodernism
- b. Nested framing narratives: "All life is but a stage" (Shakespeare)
- c. Would have been profound... 20 years ago



Metamodernism in a Nutshell

1. Depathologizing

- a. Pathologizing and gatekeeping are tools of control
- b. Implied normativity intrinsically promotes one “correct” view

2. Nuance and Sophistication

- a. Rather than categorical rejection to reconcile cognitive dissonance, embrace complexity
- b. Adopt increasingly sophisticated models and frameworks
- c. Skepticism of bitterness, appeals to power, cynicism (e.g. reject thought-stopping emotional language)

3. Emergence Model

- a. Bottom-up emergence rather than top-down cosmic fiat or relativistic anything-goes view of reality

4. Hypernarratives

- a. Beyond grand narratives and simple counter-narratives
- b. Recognition of multiplicity of narratives
- c. Aka true metanarratives
- d. Includes ideas like intersectionality and decolonization



Emergence

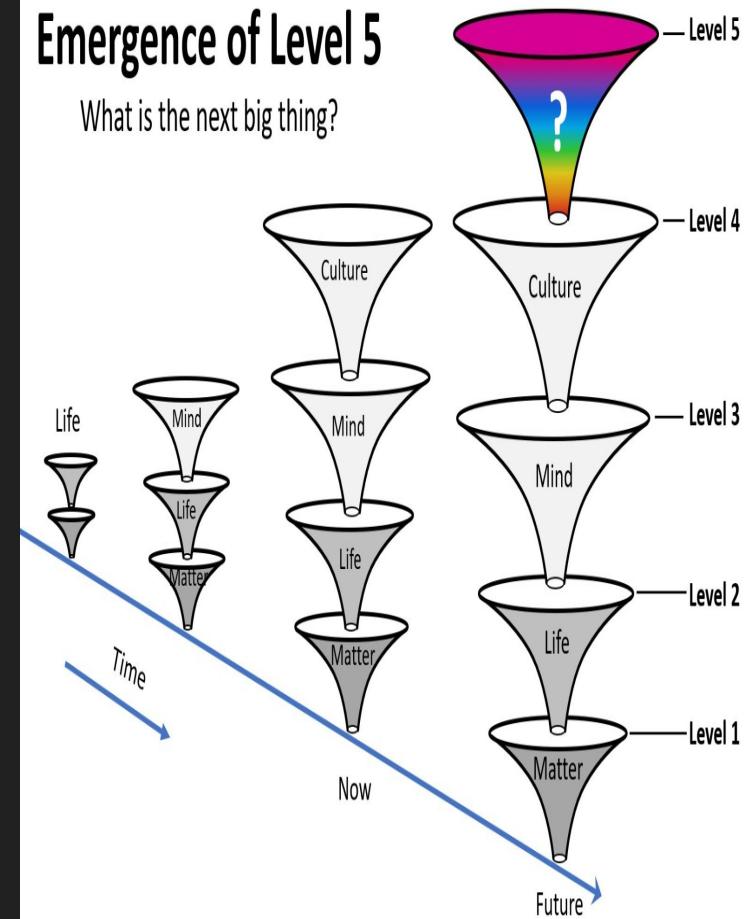
Emergence Model

Ontological Strata: Hierarchical layers of existence and complexity, each building upon and transcending the underlying layers. For instance, life emerges from underlying systems of matter and energy. Mind and intelligence emerges from underlying systems of life.

1. **Primordial Substrate:** Something underpins everything
 - a. Consciousness? Strings? Simulator? Quantum gravity? God?
2. **Matter & Energy:** Physics and chemistry
 - a. Lowest level we can directly **observe** and **measure**
3. **Biology & Life:** Systems that run contrary to entropy
 - a. Systems of matter and energy that **reproduce**, etc
4. **Cognition:** Individual biological systems that think & feel
 - a. Thought, memory, self-awareness, subjectivity, **consciousness**
5. **Collective Constructs:** Beginning of metaphysics
 - a. Society, culture, science, religion, **narratives**, truth, morality
 - b. Things that **don't physically exist** outside our minds
 - c. But they do **exist** in collections of minds (like **democracy**)

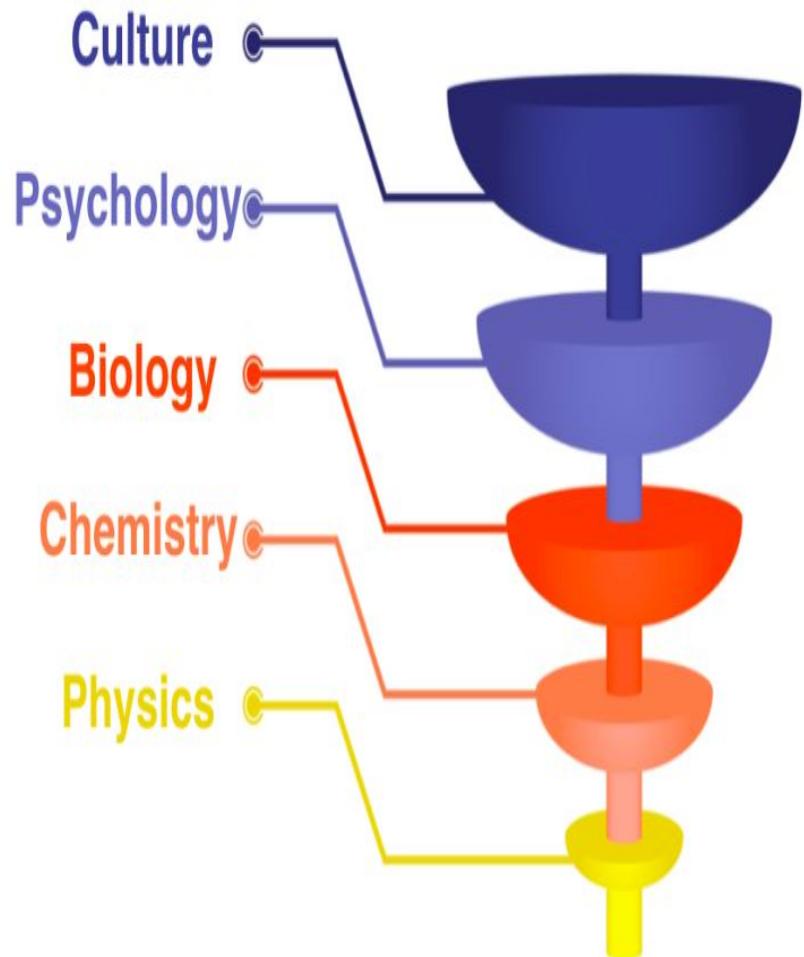
Emergence of Level 5

What is the next big thing?



Metamodernism & Emergence

- **Systematic Deconstruction and Reconstruction**
 - Pick apart, rebuild, examine (holistic, reductionist, all)
 - Society as components, society as gestalt, etc
- **From Implicit to Explicit**
 - Articulate things clearly
 - Bring from unconscious to conscious
- **Rigorously Alleviate Cognitive Dissonance**
 - Resolve internal tensions and double standards
 - Call it out when you see it, rather than categorically reject
- **Adopt Emergence Model**
 - Modernism: Absolute; Top-down
 - Postmodernism: Relativistic; unstable, rejection
 - Metamodernism: Emergence; Bottom-up
- **Construct Hyper-Narratives**
 - Modernism: Grand Narratives
 - Postmodernism: Counter-Narratives (reject everything)
 - **Metamodernism: Hyper-narratives**



Implications of Emergence

Emergent Morality: Morality, ethics, and truth arise from bottom-up systems, not top-down decrees or relativism.

Interconnected Layers: Emphasizes adaptability and fluidity in understanding the connections between all layers.

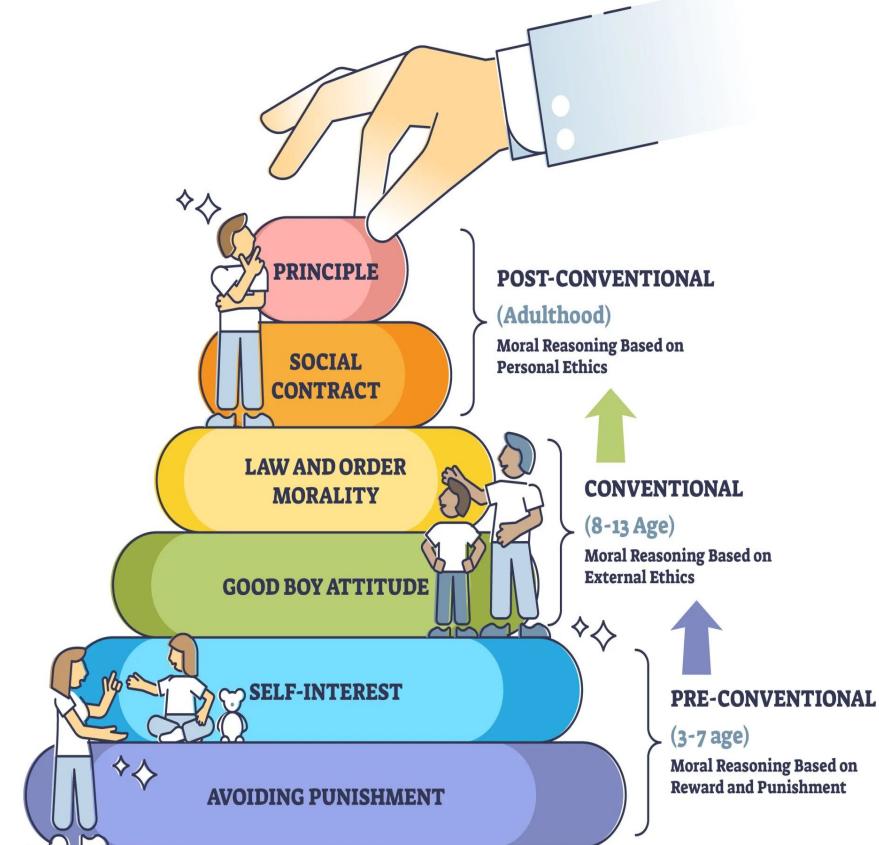
Narrative Construction: Layer 5 constructs shaped through diverse human interactions and interpretations.

Challenges in Observation: Difficulty in observing lower strata like primordial substrate due to vast ontological distances.

Limited Experience of Lower Strata: Entities like electrons cannot experience or interact with higher-level constructs, like democracy.

Humility in Understanding: Recognition of possible unknown levels of complexity, fostering humility in our perception of existence. (Maybe souls are level 6?)

STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT



Current Narratives

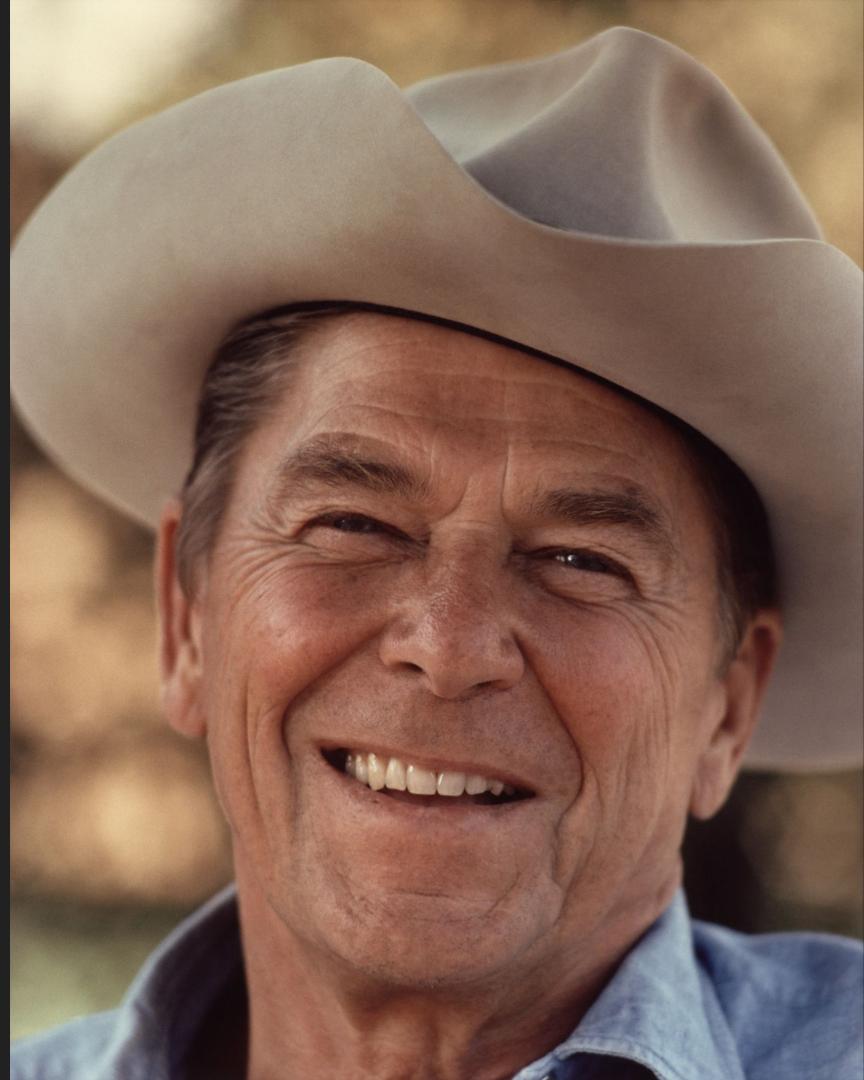
Anti-Communism Narratives

- **“Communism is bad”**
 - Narratives tend to become distilled/simplified over time
 - This makes them simple, compelling, and memorable
 - They also tend to over-simplify things
 - Origins of the narrative ultimately don't matter
 - Deeply entrenched from Cold War
 - Served political agenda at the time
- **Economic Components:**
 - Central management is evil and always fails
 - Free market is superior, always efficient
 - Redistribution inevitably leads to genocide (????)
- **Narrative is Evolving**
 - Authoritarianism, dictatorships, totalitarianism, fascism is the real problem
 - Historical context, distillation, conversation, debate



Neoliberalism Narratives

- **Counter-narrative** against “embedded liberalism”
 - Strong unions, labor rights
 - Welfare state, intervention
 - Managed services and goods
 - Class solidarity
 - National autonomy
- **Characteristics of Neoliberal Narrative:**
 - Unions are bad
 - Deregulation is good
 - Small government is good
 - Taxing business and wealthy is bad
 - Privatization is good
 - Globalism is good
 - Society does not exist, only individuals and families
 - People are fundamentally self-serving
- **Response to events:**
 - Oil shocks
 - Inflation, recessions
 - Labor strikes



“AI will kill everyone”

- This is a **fictional narrative**
 - AI hasn't killed anyone yet (on purpose)
 - Some people argue AI doesn't even exist yet
 - Rooted entirely in novels, TV, movies, and games
 - AI as an extinction risk has... **zero actual evidence**
- **Who benefits?**
 - **Businesses** seeking regulatory capture: “AI is dangerous so you need to regulate the heck out of it! Trust us!”
 - **People** who make a living extolling the dangers of AI: “Trust me, AI is gonna kill everyone, now give me money for a speaking engagement!”
 - **Governments** seeking excuses for more surveillance and control: “Well, you said AI is dangerous, so we gotta really crack down for the sake of freedom and safety”



“AI will fix everything”

- This is *also* a **fictional narrative**
 - AI has only changed a few things so far
 - Objectively speaking, AI has done a lot of harm (Cambridge Analytica, etc)
 - AI *might* do a lot of good, if we use it correctly
 - In short: **we really hope that AI will do good, but this is a hope and dream, not fact.**
- Who benefits?
 - **Businesses** seeking deregulation and acceleration: “AI is gonna fix everything, trust us! Full speed ahead!”
 - **People** who make a living extolling the values of AI: “Here’s 4.89 million ways to make a billion dollars on ChatGPT!!!!”
 - **Governments** seeking new tools and weapons: “You mean we can automate drone strikes and surveillance?”



“Metacrisis” narrative

- **Assertion:** All calamities are interrelated, connected, and caught in a **vicious cycle**, and it's all about to **spiral out of control!**
 - **Environmental crisis:** collapse, climate change
 - **Economic crisis:** inequality, wealth concentration, market failures
 - **Technology crisis:** AI, bioweapons, nuclear
 - **Cultural crisis:** meaning crisis, patriarchy, etc
 - **Political crisis:** alt right, social media, polarization
 - **Human nature:** Greed, myopia, etc
- Remember, this is just a narrative, an interpretation of evidence, accumulated into a belief system
 - It's particularly potent because it's **spooky and scary**
 - **“If it bleeds it leads”**
 - Uses **mythic** and **demonic iconography** (Moloch)
 - ***The Metacrisis is a failed attempt at hypernarrative***



Thank you