

Beyond the Tragedy of the Commons: A Path to Cooperative Coordination

Exploring cooperative paradigms for pluralistic human coordination.



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Photo by Rhys Kentish on Unsplash

Traditional, rigid hierarchical institutions are failing us.

They incentivise self-interested behaviour, pitting us against each other, and leading to large, seemingly-intractable problems.

Here's how I think we can do better, and why I'm working on it:

At the heart of the problem is the tension between collective interest and individual self-interest.

This is a problem famously described as "[the tragedy of the commons](#)", which proposes that (without coordination) humans sharing a public resource will each act selfishly, depleting that resource.

I extend this concept to include any behaviour, such the use of technology, that confers an advantage to the wielder, whilst socialising negative externalities collectively. To avoid this requires effective coordination of individual actions in pursuit of the collective good.

Daniel Schmachtenberger frames this problem with exquisite clarity in his series, “The Third Attractor”:

In Search of the Third Attractor, Daniel Schmachtenberger (part 1)



Most people, most of the time, do what is incentivised by the environments and systems that they live in.

That is, people tend to first prioritise what meets their own needs, and what makes them feel comfortable, included & safe. However, being a human is hard and scary, and our needs are often far from met.

The environments we co-create and our existing approaches to coordination often exacerbate this problem, leading to widespread selfishness. Far from selfishness being an immutable fact of human behaviour, I believe that humans tend to be communally-minded and prefer to act generously and with reciprocity, *when their own needs are adequately met*.

Not all humans, not all of the time; most humans, most of the time.

The trick then, is adopting systems of coordination that are more effective at meeting more people's needs, more of the time, and better incentivise generosity, reciprocity, and collectively beneficial (positive-sum) outcomes. That's easier said than done, to say the least. Collectively beneficial outcomes rely upon individuals putting communal interests ahead of their own self-interest, for the benefit of all.

Game theory teaches us that people will hesitate to act generously if they are scared of being exploited for it by selfish actors; they will instead act to protect themselves.

To avoid the tragedy of the commons, we need effective coordination that builds cooperation, trust and a sense of safety among participants, so that contributors acting generously can have confidence they will be looked after. Traditionally, we've relied upon hierarchical coordination and rigid, monolithic structures with centralised control.

In a smaller, less-connected world, this was an effective approach that was well-suited to analog human processes, and which had good economies of scale. In a hyper-connected digital world, human society is bigger, faster & more connected than ever before. With greater scale comes greater complexity.

The paradigm of rigid, hierarchical control, and one way of doing things, is under increasing strain. That strain is expressed as tension, divisiveness, and conflict, as the system fails to meet people's needs and becomes increasingly unfair.

For things to improve, we need coordination that's more dynamic, adaptive, pluralistic, and better suited to the complexity.

The good news is that I think it's possible:

- **Coordination** that relies more on *alignment* and less on control.
- **Stability** that relies more on the *evolutionary system dynamics* of pluralistic, autonomous coordination, and less on rigid, monolithic structures.

Stable and cooperative coordination is a big, complicated & hard problem, and few problems are more important. At the heart of many intractable problems, you will find coordination failure (an inability to reach agreement).

It is my goal (and the focus of our work at funDAOmental), to do long-term work that contributes to our collective ability to coordinate cooperatively and play positive-sum games at scale, so that we can build a fairer, more reciprocal world that better meets people's needs, and reduces the grip of the tragedy of the commons.

I've had a life-long interest in reciprocity and positive-sum games. If you are interested to learn more about my personal motivations, and some background on what led me here, you can read more in my original twitter post:



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I've had the good fortune of being an early adopter of many transformative technologies such as the web and blockchain, and being persistent enough to find success and profit as a tech entrepreneur & investor.

To my earlier points, my needs have become relatively well met. 14/23

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A guest post by

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Technologist, entrepreneur, investor & intransigent coffee fiend. Founder of funDAOmental; man of man hats. Working on stable cooperative coordination, and distributed, evolutionary coordination systems & protocols.

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