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Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.
Viktor E. Frankl

Happiness and fulfillment

Feelings and emotions

The more common stories that we hear about feelings talk about universal phenomena supposedly encoded in our genes such as happiness, fear, disgust and so on. Usually the story features a conflict between different parts of the brain, one that we inherited from our animal ancestors that drives our impulses and another one, exclusively human, that drives the conscious thoughts. In these stories feelings appear out of nowhere, as if we were possessed by spirits, or playful Gods like a cupid were throwing magical arrows at us. And the rational mind has a hard time dealing with the consequences of our inexplicable erratic behaviors, often unsuccessfully.

Some scientists have been contesting the story since over a century ago, and their voices have been mostly unheard until recently. However from the neuroscience discoveries of the last few decades is emerging a new story, the story of constructed emotions. Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman makes a very compelling case for it in the book “how emotions are made: the secret life of the brain” in which she discusses decades of her own research combined with results from other scientists.

This new story works great for the purpose of this book series. Not only because it has better explanatory power over scientific evidence than previous stories, but also because constructionism is also the best framework to make sense of the apparent social contradictions listed in the introduction. Therefore we’ll be able to use the same tool, construction, to understand, and plan how to hack for better outcomes, different aspects of our reality. Starting from the micro-phenomena of our feelings and emotions, to our relationships, to our communities and all the way to the macro global social dynamics.

We’ll discuss social constructionism shortly, and we’ll use it in the next book to have a deeper understanding of social dynamics. For now though, let’s start with the story of socially constructed emotions. It goes like this:

Humans have the ability to perceive information from different sources. Most obviously our senses confer information from the outer world. At the same time we receive information about our internal state. Our brain collects and summarizes all internal information, from organs and tissues, blood pressure, temperature, immune system, etc. in **a single process called interoception**. Our **perception of interoception is called affect**, which we feel all the time, the same way we can feel loudness or brightness. Interoception is represented in **only two variables, valence and arousal**.

Affective valence is the feeling on the scale of pleasant to unpleasant, and affective arousal is the feeling on the scale from calm to agitated.

That’s basically it from the perspective of the physiology of feelings. It might feel a bit disappointing that all of humanity’s exuberant emotional display, that all the poetry and dramas, come from a variable that can be simply expressed

as a dot moving in a plane through time. Your brain is now representing that feeling in the affective plane.

Surely there must be much more. And there is indeed. That much more, as the story of constructed emotions goes, is a social phenomena and not encoded in our genes.

One interesting thing about feelings is that they are a very recent invention, from the 17th century. Before that authors talked about other phenomena like emotions and sentiments, there was quite a big catalogue of them, but they were generally much less nuanced. Even more interestingly, many of today's common feelings were invented much more recently, just in the 20th century. We are talking about the imperialistically dominant western culture of course, even though many other cultures have embraced them by now.

Before discussing further the wonderful invention of feelings, it's relevant to disclose a few more details from the brain's physiology. First, the brain is a very expensive piece of equipment, in terms of energy used. And, presumably to save energy and space (to still pass through the birth canal) evolution has taken some shortcuts. Information about the inner and the outer world is stored together, representing a single state.

Second, words have a quasi-magical effect in the brain. They allow the brain to group together a bunch of otherwise completely unrelated objects from the perspective of sensorial characteristics such as shape, color, texture, taste,... for instance, think about the concept of "toiletries that I take with me when I go on a long trip". You'll find a large variation of items in that category, maybe toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, conditioner, shaving machine, perfume, ... other animals can make categories based on physical characteristics, but no other animal can perform this feat.

Third, what we experience in the world is largely a prediction of what we expect to experience based on past experiences. When we see a snake, in reality we see first the prediction of a snake based on some clues like the movement of the leaves in the forest from the corner of our eyes. Only later can we confirm or invalidate this prediction. This allows us to escape from danger before we are conscious of it, as well as to play games like throwing balls at each other at a faster speed than we would be able to catch if we'd have to calculate their trajectory consciously.

Fourth, intimately related to the previous point, is that information about muscular responses, such as running, punching, or accelerating the heart's beating, is stored and predicted together, with the rest of the information and predictions about the inner and outer worlds.

And fifth, the same brain regions that classify emotions are in charge of regulating the body's energy budget. Our body gains energy when we eat, drink and sleep. When it predicts danger, when it gets stressed, it increases the energy spent during a given time, in anticipation that we'll need it to fight or fly. And when

we feel relaxed, secure with our peers or have sex, it reduces the amount of energy it spends per unit of time.

Now that we've had this brain physiology primer, let's go back to the topic of emotions. Fieldman claims that our society has created emotions to fulfill these three functions for their members:

First, make meaning. Humans like to use the magic of words to group very different things that serve some common purpose. This ability is not limited to physical objects such as "toiletries" but can be applied to intangible feelings as well. Fear of failing an exam is very different from the fear of being bitten by the neighbor's dog, but it serves a social purpose to group both experiences under the same category "fear". Those are called different instances of the fear emotion category.

Second, they prescribe an action, such as cancelling social activities in favor of studying for the exam, or taking a detour to get home avoiding passing next to the neighbor with the frightening dog.

Third, to regulate the body budget. Since the same areas of the brain regulate the predictions about our environment and our movements are also in charge of our body budget, by accessing an emotion, we also regulate the body budget. With the emotion we anticipate that we'll be resting or that we'll have to run, and the body regulates the energy expenditure accordingly, in the very same process.

Furthermore, emotions serve two social purposes. One of them is, obviously, emotional communication. The other, which might seem quite a bit of magic, is to regulate other people's body budgets. Indeed, when we tell our friend about us running frightened from the neighbor's scary dog, quasi-magical things are happening. On one hand, we are constructing a particular instance of the emotion category "fear" that is adequate for the situation. This means that we are regulating our body's energy *as if* we were, at that moment, getting ready to run away from the dog, because our brain circuits for memory, sensory, and prediction are exactly the same, performing different roles according to the occasion. The second quasi-magical thing that happens, is that our caring friend is at the same time constructing as well an instance of fear suitable for the occasion. Which means that she is feeling, somatically, the same as if she was at this very moment, getting ready to run away from a dog. The same energy expense and the same butterflies in her stomach. If we are both skilled at communicating emotions, this coordination in somatic states will strengthen the bond between us and her.

In summary, emotions are our interpretations of what we are feeling. Of the humble two dimensional affect, the dot moving in time on the affective plane. They are contextual, the exact same feelings can be mapped to different feelings depending on our situation and intention. They are socially constructed. We learn them from a very early age when our caregivers reflect them to us "you are hungry, you are sleepy, you are cranky, ..." and point out to others and

label the emotion that they are experiencing “Alice is crying because she is angry”. As we grow, we learn to look for other people’s emotions and improve our understanding and granularity of them. That enables us to better communicate and connect with others.

Human collective essence and the basic need for attachment

Being human means to be an autonomous member of a collective. We evolved in environments where we would die if left alone and we developed strong grouping traits.

Humans signal to each other that they belong to the collective by taking care of each other with affection. Human babies that are given food but no affection will die. Adults that are not given affection will die as well, but they are more resilient and will take longer. If they don’t suicide on their own, their immune system will slowly degrade. Humans that are given affection will be healthier. Touch and sex, for example, are known to boost the immune system.

Humans need to feel a secure bond with some of the members of their tribe. From childhood and throughout adulthood people need to form and maintain secure attachments, otherwise, they suffer distress. This need is physiological as real as the need for water, food, shelter, and health support. We evolved knowing that without the secure attachments we would eventually lack all those other needs and die.

Happiness is altruism and gratitude

Evolution works by promoting behaviors that maximize the chances of individuals making copies of their genes. One mechanism for promoting that is feeling pleasure when engaging in behaviours that will keep us alive until reproductive and parenting age. For example, eating energetic and nutritious food generally tastes good while eating poisonous food tastes bad. Also behavior that is conducive to reproduction such as courtship and sex tend to feel good.

For gregarious animals such as hominids however, the survival of the group is much more important than the survival of the individual for maximizing the reproduction of genes. It makes sense therefore that behaviors that help the individual survive and reproduce feel pleasant at the moment of performing them, but quickly saturate and don’t feel good anymore if the behavior lasts long. And, on the other hand, behaviors that contribute to the survival of the tribe produce a much more profound and lasting happiness.

Granted, the previous explanation of evolution is anachronically incorrect because happiness wasn’t invented yet when we were evolving into sapiens. We should instead say feeling pleasant affective balance from our interoceptive system. Frankly though, happiness is a wonderful modern invention, so wonderful that it’s worth taking this anachronistic license for the sake of brevity and clarity.

Jonathan Haidt, in *The Happiness Hypothesis*, summarizes how modern science has established that regular practice of altruism and gratitude are the basis for achieving and maintaining happiness. Which, incidentally, is in line with what many ancient spiritual traditions have been prescribing for millennia.

For the collective to function smoothly, each individual has to provide more than it would seem they need for themselves. They have to provide as well for the elder and infirm, for the young ones, some extra to store for bad times, etc. Therefore we are wired to get more pleasure from giving than from receiving. Also for the whole schema to work we have to act with full autonomy. Evolution has highly discouraged any non-autonomous behavior. Any hierarchy, coercion or objectification will take away some of the pleasure of contributing to the group, which we get when we feel gratitude for our gifts. In order to be more efficient we usually specialize in a task, at least for a short period of time, but during any given period of time we'll have many needs that we can't fulfill ourselves if we are specialized. In this way we'll be able to practice a lot of gratitude, for all the different things that we are given to us by the community. With this simple trick we can at the same time provide more than we receive and be constantly exposed to experiences that enable us to practice both altruism and gratitude.

For gratitude to be genuine we need to give unconditionally, without expecting anything in exchange. Unfortunately nowadays we are mostly expected to trade rather than to give unconditionally. We often do a job, not because of our pleasure to contribute to society, but because we feel coerced to do so, since we need the money to buy food and shelter. We trade rather than give and receive unconditionally.

By its very nature trading pushes us out of our happiness zone and moves us towards calculating and anxiety. Despite the appearance of equality and autonomy trading leads to inequality and power dynamics, therefore it is not surprising that evolution discourages it. This is true even though a particular transaction might feel pleasurable (what a good deal!) and shopping might even become addictive. Without the ability to unconditionally give the fruit of a big chunk of our daily effort we are robbed from a most powerful source of happiness.

In summary we need to feel that we are autonomous and valued members of a collective. This is often called unconditional love and it's expressed through altruism and generosity. Without it the collective is an evolutionary disadvantage because we are stripping people of their individuality and hindering them from contributing their most precious gifts to the collective. If we don't get unconditional love we hurt, and when we hurt we look for alternative groups, and the dysfunctional one vanishes.

In our present society we have remarkably managed to transfer almost all resources from the community to the market. Therefore we are largely forced to interact with the market to meet our needs for nutrition, shelter and health. We don't have anymore the option to switch to a nearby tribe where we would be able to give and receive unconditionally because there are no more such tribes

with access to the resources needed to sustain their members. Therefore we are condemned to live a slave-like life, where our contributions are extracted from us rather than given willingly, and in latent emotional lack and hurt from the difficulty of practicing generosity and gratitude. On top of that we are constantly forced to practice trade, which is an intrinsic violent behaviour, where we are encouraged to get as much from others while giving as little as possible. This latent violence further separates and hurts us.

Trauma and the myth of happiness by selfishness

There are two very powerful, and slightly contradictory, stories that we inhabit in our modern world.

The first story recognizes both the capacity of doing good and bad inherent in human beings. Our lights and shadows, to use Jungian terminology.

This story usually features clearly separated public and private spheres of life. Our light, it is said, is to be reserved for the private sphere of our lives. To be gifted to our family and friends. Unfortunately the light is a poor tool to help us navigate in the public sphere. There are many wolves there. We'd be crushed and eaten in no time. Our shadow is the proper tool to navigate there: we expose only our self interest and we negotiate with others to seek mutually beneficial, win-win, agreements. In order to prevent our shadows to wreak havoc we agree that we'll collectively punish those who let themselves be overtaken by their shadow and act without the agreement of their peers: rape, murder, violence, robbery, etc. are all natural inclinations that need to be prevented by collective coercive pressure. Typically the State is in charge of coercion and accomplishes it by deploying the police.

This story feels very real because we have constant validation for it. We see all the time our closest connections being nice to us and then the same people being ruthless when they bargain a price in the market or work to crush the competition in their job.

It is a story that paints a grim view of humanity and doesn't provide a satisfactory answer to how those without a powerful public voice are supposed to negotiate for their self-interest. What about the forests? The infirm? The minorities? What fate awaits them in this story?

The second very popular and powerful story that we inhabit is even simpler. It states that the one and only path towards happiness is to fulfill our self-interests. We are a sort of black box that produces some random desires and preferences and we are supposed to work towards fulfilling those, and that will bring us happiness.

Both stories are very popular and they are inconsistent because the second doesn't quite explain why people are nice to each other, at least to their closest connections. However the second story seems to be winning over the first one. Increasingly people look at their relationships, even their most intimate

partnerships, in an utilitarian and disposable way. Popular magazines routinely encourage people to look for partners as a kind of investment to maximize their wealth and social capital. Not surprisingly intimate partnership relationships are getting shorter and more and more people are opting to have children on their own.

This second story of absolute self-interest also seems very real because we are getting constant confirmation of it. We can clearly see that people generally respond to incentives. Given two similar products or services with different prices, people will generally choose the cheapest one. Given two jobs with similar working hours and commuting time, people will generally choose the best paid.

At the same time we are still used to expecting some level of “humanity” from people. Up to a certain point we consider selfish behavior natural and past a certain point we consider it pathological. “They would sell their own mother” is a slur commonly used against somebody who has surpassed the threshold of what is considered normal selfish behavior. For example, being selfish to people that we would expect to be part of their inner circle and therefore be worthy of their light rather than their shadow.

This third story, the one of “a sense of humanity” which calls for some “balance” clearly gives away that the two first stories don’t describe something fundamental about human nature, but rather, a social construction. As such, the boundaries of which behaviors are considered normal and which are aberrant can shift culturally, in time, and geography.

However, despite the variations, the underlying tenets of these stories, the concept that, at least up to some extent, humans are selfish, seems to contradict the scientific findings that what makes people happy and fulfilled is, fundamentally, the practice of generosity and gratitude.

We can use the following three concepts to make sense of this apparent contradiction:

1. We don’t necessarily seek happiness
2. We often don’t know what makes us happy
3. Trauma prevents us from reaching out to happiness

Most people, consciously or not, are not driven by the pursuit of happiness. They are driven instead for the pursuit of more abstract concepts such as wealth, success or fame. Even when such pursuit goes against their immediate or long term happiness.

Being able to postpone immediate gratification for a longer term goal that will provide for a deeper contentment and fulfillment is a characteristic of maturity and emotional health. Here we are talking about the opposite phenomena, giving up doing things that will contribute to long term wellbeing, like spending time caring and in the care of loved ones, to pursue something that will just give us pain even in the long run, like spending time with successful people when

we don't care about each other, with the purpose to use those connections to escalate further up in the social ladder.

Sometimes we engage in such self-destructive behaviors fully conscious of the harm they do to us. We do it because we have a deep need for social belonging, and we understand that such behaviors are expected from us, in order to be accepted in society. Therefore we decide to pursue them despite their negative consequences.

Other times we do it completely fooled by the thought that they will provide us with happiness. It is well known that we are flooded with consumerist propaganda that makes us believe that buying more, a bigger car, bigger apartment, newer tech gadgets, fancier dresses and perfumes, . . . all that will supposedly make us happy. Therefore we sacrifice what would actually make us happy, cultivating deeper connections, for spending time making more money. Turns out though that the boost that consumerism provides is very short lived. We rapidly get accustomed to the new luxury, and we need to get more. It can be a damaging addiction.

This pattern is not exclusive to consumerist society. The same can happen in counter-cultural collectives, anti-capitalist, environmentalist, feminist, etc. We might get caught up by the need to conform to the culture in the group and we might neglect our own happiness in the process. In turn, the group that is not fostering a culture of caring for the happiness of their members, is likely to descend into some sort of fringe cult. When that happens it becomes more difficult to connect with the outside, since outsiders can see the damage that is going inside, and want to keep themselves away from harm. This in turn might make the group feel more alienated and become more fanatical.

Up to here are understandable behaviors for even the most mentally healthy people. On top of that we should take into account that most of us are seriously broken from childhood trauma.

If while growing up we weren't able to form secure and stable bonds with adults, or we were not accepted and loved by other kids, then we were likely deeply hurt. We learned that when trying to reach out to others we experience pain.

Childhood trauma makes us fear opening up and connecting to others as adults. Which can result in lacking the secure connections that help us feel part of a group and practice generosity and gratitude. This might create a feeling of void in ourselves that we try to compensate by consuming or by forcing others to do things, like they would if they would actually like us.

Childhood trauma can happen very casually, it doesn't require sick parents or very violent bullies. It can happen as a combination of more subtle conditions. For example, Professor Gabor Maté has shown that children from parents under stress are more likely to suffer from addiction as adults. Not necessarily substance abuse, it can be, for example, consumption addiction. So even children of very committed and loving parents might be subject to trauma. And who's parents

are not worried and stressed about money and career nowadays?

Intrinsic motivations: Autonomy, mastery and purpose

One aspect of human behavior that has been researched quite extensively is how to motivate people to be more productive.

Since we live in a labor market system, where people are paid for the work they do, it would seem obvious that the more we pay somebody the more productive they would be. It turns out however that research results generally don't support this view. Except for very mechanical tasks, when offering more money to the same people, they perform worse. Presumably because of the fact that there is more at stake, that makes them more nervous, which inhibits their creative thinking, and makes them perform worse at any task that has even a bit of creativity component.

There are nuances to results though. For example, take somebody who is used to doing a certain job somewhat mechanically, for example fill in some forms based on some inputs that they need to evaluate, and they usually do it somewhat sloppily. If they are told that for a particular form they will be paid much more if they fill it properly, then yes, the quality improves, but they spend more time doing it.

Another counter example would be that offering higher salaries might give you access to more qualified workers, who would perform better than if you had recruited with lower compensation offerings. Notice though that here we are talking about different people. We are not contesting the idea that using more money helps you get more stuff done, we are contesting the idea that paying more to the same person will get you more and better quality in the same amount of time.

Generally, then, the consensus in the literature is that extrinsic motivations work very poorly in helping people perform better.

On the other hand there is agreement in the literature that extrinsic motivators, and in particular autonomy, mastery and purpose, do help people perform better.

Autonomy means that people perform better if they are given a goal and are allowed to figure out how to achieve it, rather than being told and monitored at every step of the way. Mastery means people enjoy challenging tasks so that they can notice getting better and better at performing them. And purpose means that it is really hard to motivate people to work by admitting to them that the purpose of the company they work for is to make a bunch of the richest people on the planet even richer. That's why companies spend so much effort creating a culture that emphasizes how the work they are doing is having such a positive impact on the lives of their customers or users.

The findings on autonomy in this context are consistent with the story of evolution we just discussed. For millions of years evolution found it more

efficient to incentivize autonomous tribe members to contribute to the group by making generosity and gratitude feel particularly good, and greed and hoarding particularly bad. This, it seems, was much more efficient than schemas based on hierarchy. This view on the positive importance of autonomy in the human experience is key to the proposal of society detailed in the third books of this series.

Elevation in the 5th dimension and being part of a whole

It turns out that humans, on top of the four physical dimensions of space and time, we can also perceive a fifth dimension, totally of our own making. This dimension has been explored at length by spiritual traditions. It is refreshing though to study it through the works of non-religious scientific authors, such as Jonathan Haidt explanations in A Happiness Hypothesis.

We have the ability to classify places and actions in this 5th dimension in which we perceive ourselves traveling. Not only our physical self, but also a conceptual persona traditionally called spirit. And thus we can talk about spiritual elevation. This fifth dimension typically is correlated with cleanliness and aesthetics. We develop rituals to clean ourselves, our food, the spaces we live in, etc. and certain aesthetic traditions to decorate them.

And most interestingly, when we are able to perceive this 5th dimension, and travel upwards, that contributes to our happiness.

Also being spiritually elevated helps us connect with a sense of being just a part of something much greater, which is also a contributing factor to happiness.

In modern times this feeling is no longer exclusive to spiritual practitioners but has been also practiced by members of virtual communities such as nations, social class or political parties, who feel part of that whole that is the virtual community. Also, in postmodernity we can experience it feeling part of a movement. We can perceive such spiritual elevation if, let's say, are eating at a feminist cooperative serving locally sourced, organic, fair and seasonal food with comrades of the same creed. And, on the other end of the spectrum, we can feel we are at the bottom of a spiritual pit when we are eating at a corporate fast food restaurant using produce from intensive farming that exploits their labor force using patriarchal hierarchy, violence and coercion.

Since this 5th dimension is totally of our own making it is up to us to construct it responsibly to make ourselves feel happier when we are actually doing something for the greater good. We could as easily construct it in counter-productive ways, making ourselves feel elevated for example when participating in an army inflicting violence on other people. Or we could design it in a way that makes us feel good when we don't have any impact at all in the world, like when praying or playing video games.

Understanding the outer world

Mind as a collective experience

In the previous section we looked at the role of feelings and emotions to understand our needs, other people's needs, and the need to build secure, attached, giving relationships in order to achieve happy and fulfilled lives.

Obviously our lives and our relationships happen in a broader context, which is in part physical and in part social. Therefore in order to operate in this world we need to have an operational understanding of both. We must learn physical concepts such as gravity or climate as well as social concepts such as money, police and marriage.

You might think of the human mind as some sort of computer software that runs in the brain, inside our heads, processing inputs from our senses, learning from them, and delivering as outputs thoughts and feelings.

In reality, though, the human mind is something quite more complex and it's worth looking at it with a bit more depth because it has implications on how to properly understand and effectively have impact in the world.

First of all, physiologically, the mind is not only located in the brain, but as neuroscientist Nazaret Castellanos points out, what happens in the brain is also influenced by what happens in the intestines, the stomach, the lungs, the facial muscles, The breath, for example, works as an emotion regulator (no wonder it has been used in meditation techniques for millenia).

Furthermore, and even more impressively, the mind is not a phenomena that emerges from our body, it is instead, a collective phenomena. We have already seen how emotions are a collective phenomena, how talking about emotions we can regulate each other's body budget. We don't even need to talk about emotions in order to transmit them. We have developed a code of facial and corporal gestures. As Castellanos points out when we see other people smiling, it impacts us and makes us feel happier.

The same mechanism that the brain uses for emotion concepts it uses as well for every other concept. Even our concept of self. The discursive mind somehow emerges from this social activity of classifying stuff into different categories and giving them names. Without the collective there is no mind, there is no self, there is no discursive, seemingly rational, experience of the world.

Therefore, Feldman says "Your mind is a grand collaboration that you have no awareness of. Through construction, you perceive the world not in any objectively accurate sense but through the lens of your own needs, goals and prior experience".

She puts as an example that one could perceive the same object either as a healthful muffin or as a decadent cupcake depending on the social situation. The different perceptions will influence our body budget and our digestion! Therefore,

these seemingly arbitrary classifications that we make of the physical world have a very real somatic impact.

On a more philosophical note she adds that “We know enough to say that neither biological determinism nor cultural determinism is correct”.

Emotions drive our thoughts and actions

Our brains are constantly absorbing information and classifying it according to the linguistic concepts we are hearing. The information collected contains information about the outside world, information about how we are feeling, and information about what is the appropriate response to that situation, from what we see other people doing (or ourselves).

This is a necessity from our brain’s architecture: as we saw earlier we are wired in a way that interoceptive information is stored together with sensory data, seeing other people doing or talking about something makes us recreate instances of the relevant categories, and that gets stored in the same place where we store what are the appropriate responses to the situation. The more we access such information the more we reinforce its importance in the brain and the more likely it is to be accessed again in similar situations in the future.

If we live in a society where a response to a certain situation is, let’s say, feel outraged and slap the person in front of us, we’ll learn that through repeated observations. And if we ever experience a similar situation our brain will make us feel outraged and want to slap the person in front of us.

The autobiographical confabulator

At the same time we are accessing the concepts of outrage and the need to slap the person in front of us, we are accessing all sorts of related concepts, each one with the corresponding words that neatly create their categories in our brain. And that enables us to be discursive about what’s going on.

Hidit explains that our emotions tend to drive our thoughts, and not the other way around. Basically, when we experience a given situation we tend to have an emotional and behavioral response that reproduces what we have learned in our culture and then we make up an explanation for it.

In order for this to work beautifully smoothly evolution has equipped our brains with what Hidit calls “the confabulator”. A “module” specialized in weaving autobiographical stories that explain what we are doing as if it had been our plan all along. These stories are designed to feed our egos and to be plausible enough to be credible (at least for ourselves) unless we do some careful investigation and shed some light which exposes the confabulator’s machinations.

Even though, technically, emotions and thoughts are both manifestations of the same brain processes, which are mostly whole brain processes, and there is no

different physical brain region dedicated to thoughts, emotions, or confabulators, the metaphor will be very useful to understand a lot of human behaviors.

Illusion of explanatory depth

A related well-known phenomenon of the human mind is called the “illusion of explanatory depth”. We commonly think that we know how seemingly simple stuff around us works, like a zipper, a candle, a toilet or a pen. But when we actually try to explain them, with details, we often realize that we don’t. Is the same “plausible enough” principle that satisfies our minds about our own behavior.

If we don’t know how relatively simple objects around us work, imagine what we know about more sophisticated stuff, like how elections work or how much money influences politics. Before designing and implementing any action to improve our society it’s worth challenging our knowledge of it, and the expected results of our interventions.

Social constructionism

Social constructionism is a postmodernist academic discipline which challenges the modernist perspective that the world we live in somehow reflects an external empirical reality. In contrast, social constructionism claims that the reality we perceive is mostly of our own making.

Social constructionists often use the discipline to challenge established power dynamics. For example Critical Psychology professor Vivien Burr has some good introductory texts and explains social constructs such as illness. Being sick or not might seem an objective question, but she contends it is a product of our productive arrangements. The difference between not feeling well and being sick is that in the former case we can still go to work but in the latter we don’t. I.e, feeling sick is a social construction that is a product of labor market dynamics and means not being fit to be exploited for somebody else’s gain.

Initially this perspective might have seemed provocative and outrageous, but as pointed out earlier, in recent decades, neuroscientists such as Feldman have proven that the social constructionist view is the one that matches better the current understanding of the brain architecture.

Social constructionism has been employed by feminist and LGBTQ+ to shed light on the arbitrary nature of gender, sex and mating arrangements. And successfully deployed non-binary gender identities, non-heteronormative and non-monogamous social roles.

Another interesting area that has been studied by social constructionists are “virtual communities” and nations in particular. An excellent work in this area is Michael Billig’s book *Banal Nationalism*. In it Billig shows how everyday casual representations, such as weather maps, are ubiquitous and together build

up the impression that nations are real and tangible. He points out how the concept of nation bends supposedly objective scientific reality, with scholars considering the same language two mutually indiscernible ways of speaking when the speakers belong to the same nation, and on the contrary, considering two mutually understandable dialects as different languages when they belong to different nations.

If the construct of nation is so powerful to trick academics trained in objectivity, what will it do to the lay people? One impact that Billig points out is to promote solidarity from the poor people in a nation towards the rich people of the same nation, rather than directing it to poorer people from other nations. By identifying people as part of the same nation our minds identify them as part of our tribe. This triggers our primal solidarity behaviors without questioning that they won't be reciprocated.

The takeaway from social constructionism is that rituals, customs and institutions seem to us as real as gravity and therefore we don't even think about the possibility of changing them. Think about how many discussions people have had since Aristoteles about how to choose the best rulers. Philosopher king or representatives? How do we choose the president? How do we choose the party that will run the government? The huge impact of such decisions is obvious, as it is obvious how badly we do it. The popularity of expressions such as "it's politically unfeasible", or "it is politically incorrect", should be enough to realize that we are doing an awful job at that.

And yet, virtually nobody stops to consider that the whole thing about governments are just human inventions. That the trivial solution would just be to dispense of governments altogether. . . . And here the "plausibility enough" brain mechanism comes into play again. For most people just thinking about dispensing with the government will trigger a reaction like suggesting removing the floor under your feet. But, surely, we'll fall! Your brain is likely complaining. And is producing a fast long list of plausible sounding catastrophes. They might include things like of course we need a government! Everybody knows it! It took us many generations to get here, how would we give up on something it took so much struggle and sacrifice from our ancestors to achieve?, impossible to coordinate so many people, we'll just all starve, impossible to have sophisticated technology, we'll go back to stone age, other countries will surely invade us, . . . All very plausible sounding yes. But if we stop and we look at those claims, and at the causality chain between them, we might actually find, as surprising and scary as it might seem, that none of them hold. We'll be looking at the validity of those scary claims during this book series.

Mememes

Throughout history we can see again and again how the ideas that become most successful tend to be the ones that cause the most suffering to humanity. In the fourth book of this series we'll explore this topic in more depth. A tool that will

help us to understand this apparent paradox is the concept of Meme.

A meme is an idea that replicates itself, regardless of whether it benefits or harms the guest (the person who is expressing the idea). Conceptually it is similar to a virus: it is not a living creature, it is simply a piece of information encoded in the form of DNA, which is reproduced using living cells from other organisms, regardless of their own will. A meme is similar, pure information, does not even have physical support, and is not reproduced in the physical world via DNA and RNA, but instead it reproduces in the world of ideas. Since ideas have been the main vehicle for human evolution in the last three hundred thousand years or so, memes can have a much bigger impact than viruses or other pathogens.

The concept of meme was introduced by Richard Dawkins in the 1976 book “The Selfish Gene” and has since been embraced by several scholars. A great introduction is Daniel Dennett’s 2015 lecture “Unified Theory of Information”. Outside academia memes have reached the popular culture with the concept of “internet memes” (catchy images that people re-send to each other). Even though, in general, unlike internet memes, there is no conscious design for most real-life memes, they evolve on their own, when people pass them to each other, they mutate during the transmission, and the more successful mutations get copied more often.

Thinking in terms of memes helps us understand why revolutions, or the election of nominally radical parties, do not bring about great changes in societies, beyond changing the faces of those who formally have power. The reason is that power is not really in the offices, in the laws or in the constitutions. Power is in the head of each one of the people governed. For example, usually regardless of whether people perceive themselves as oppressed or not, they believe that it is necessary to obey the laws made by the government, and punish those who do not. These beliefs are made up of deep-rooted memes, such as that people are selfish and violent by nature, that the natural way to relate is to trade for our own benefit, and so on. We’ll see a catalog of examples in the next book to have a better grasp of how memes work in shaping and maintaining the global status-quo.

For now though, the point is that, even when the government experiences radical changes people tend to continue behaving largely the same. It is true that being in control of the government means access to a powerful propaganda machine, which can be used to change the memetic ecosystem of the population. However, such changes take a long time, often generations. However, often the supposedly radical revolutionaries that take over the governments with the belief that they will change everything don’t realize that they themselves are governed by basically the same memes of the previous government, with just some cosmetic changes. And therefore they are unable to stir any meaningful long term change.

In fact, radicality is itself an interesting meme. The belief that one’s ideas are completely different from the mainstream ideas. If we look at most self-proclaimed radical ideas however, they look pretty much the same as the mainstream ideas:

they tend to involve private property, national governments, representative democracies, labor markets, banks, trade, money, . . . from capitalism to marxism, no matter how we recombine these basic memes, they have a life of their own, and end up manifesting pretty much the same kind of emergent behaviours with the same catastrophic results for humans and the environment.

We can combine the tools of memes and social constructionism. Constructionism helps us understand how different narratives influence our individual and collective actions. Memes help us understand how these narratives are formed, popularized, and transformed.

Memetics also helps us avoid wasting energy looking for culprits and conspiracies, which are tools with little explanatory power and often with negative power of action. We can stop thinking about oppressors and oppressed and simply think about meme hosts who take on the different roles prescribed by the meme. 0,01% of society would not oppress the other 99,99% of society if that 99,99% did not believe in the state, money, the market, nations, corporations, police, and so on. We all share the same memes and express them differently in our behavior depending on the privileges we have been born into.

Just as some microorganisms are pathogenic while others are symbiotic, memes can also contribute positively to individuals and groups. And, as microorganisms do, they evolve to adapt to their environment.

Thinking in terms of memes allows us to think about what kind of strategies would be helpful to eradicate our pathogenic fundamental beliefs. We can think of strategies that would create the conditions for resourceful memes to grow instead and take their place. Like preparing the soil for nutritious plants to grow. An example of a strategic idea in this category would be to build communal communities. Where group property is favoured over private property and voluntary work is favored over exchange schemas such as money, barter or time-banks. In this way we would be reinforcing less the memes related to individuality and selfishness and create a space for the memes about collective and altruism to flourish.

A second strategic takeaway is that we can intentionally create powerful resourceful memes and social constructs. We can think about them as antibodies that fight the pathogenic memes. Anthropologists have documented examples of such “cultural antibodies” in nomadic cultures. One example is teaching infants to share and collectively celebrate when they learn, and share for the first time, the same way that we celebrate when they learn their first words. Another example is a tradition of making ego-crashing jokes directed at people who are boosting, often teenagers, to help them tame their egos.

Social change requires inner change

By now it should start becoming clear that if we want to bring about a significant and durable change in society we need to see ourselves as part of that society. It won't do it if we see us as outsiders tinkering with a reality separated from ourselves. No matter how noble our values are and how careful our actions are, we are still carrying and reproducing memes such as gender and competition when we interact with the society.

It gets even more difficult than that. Let's look at a few more concepts that help shed light on the connection between inner and outer change, and the inherent challenges when seeking change.

The elephant

We live in societies that believe that humans are rational beings which act according to elaborated plans forged upon careful objective observation of the outside world. Therefore we might conclude that if we want to make a change in the world, it would be enough to design, plan, and decide to execute an intervention.

Turns out that this is not correct. As we shall see, it's just a popular meme that doesn't correspond to reality. Already in the year 8 AD the roman poet Ovid wrote, in *Metamorphoses*: "I am dragged along by a strange new force. Desire and reason are pulling in different directions. I see the right way and approve it, but follow the wrong". What Ovid described is the common and frustrating experience of making a plan that seems simple and feasible, like the infamous new year resolutions, and then doing the opposite.

In reality, humans act mostly unconsciously. The machinery that makes us instinctively respond to sensory inputs has been built during millions of years of evolution. It is very powerful and well refined, capable of processing and accurately responding to multiple inputs in parallel, and is the foundation of our behaviour.

In contrast, rational conscious analytical behaviour is something that appeared only very recently in our evolutionary path. Is a new, more rudimentary tool, that is only capable of processing one train of thought at a time. It has evolved as a complement, and add-on module, to the main machinery of instinctive behavior.

A good metaphor that illustrates this contrast is the "elephant and the rider", as explained by Jonathan Haidt in "a happiness hypothesis". The elephant represents the heavy machinery of instinctive behaviour and the rider the weak and fragile analytical thinking. The rider can provide hints and guidance to the elephant, but ultimately if the elephant decides for a different course of action, the rider is powerless to change it.

Feldman concurs with a different metaphor and a nicely technical explanation

“You might believe that you are a rational creature, weighing the pros and cons before deciding how to act, but the structure of your cortex makes this an implausible fiction. Your brain is wired to listen to your body budget. Affect is in the driver’s seat and rationality is a passenger”.

She explains that the concept of rationality vs emotion in the brain is a myth. In reality they are both interlinked, they both happen in the same regions of the brain, together at the same time, no rational decision is free of emotion.

Technically the mythical experience of rational side tampering with emotional side, is explained as an instance of the concept “emotion regulation”. This instance is formed through awareness of the “control network” at work. Despite the name, the control network’s job is not to help rationality to keep in check emotions. It’s job is to help distinguish the signal from the noise, to help narrow down from all the many instances of the many different concepts that could possibly explain the current inputs, to a single winning instance.

Instincts and gut feelings can be wrong

Instincts are a very powerful computational tool. Instincts are what allow us to process a lot of unstructured and noisy information and take action in less than the blink of an eye. Instincts enable us to jump a few meters away when a spider enters our field of vision, from the corner of the eye. And before we are even conscious of its presence. All of a sudden we find ourselves in a different location in the room, without having commanded our limbs to move. We look at the cause of our alarm. Oh, it’s not even a spider? No problem, better safe than sorry.

All this is perfectly fine if we are in rural Australia, where many deadly spiders are known to live. However, when we are in, say, Europe, it is rather wasteful. It is fine though. Instincts have not been designed to be *accurate*, they have been designed to be *fast*. It is the job of our conscious mind, after the fact, to accurately assess the situation.

When it comes to social interventions, sometimes activists have a gut feeling that certain tools and strategies won’t work. Very often when we talk about financing our transformative projects for social justice and environmental regeneration tools like entrepreneurship, advertisement and investment are left off the table because they feel wrong. We associate them with capitalism, hierarchy and power. It’s normal. It’s human. We store concepts with feelings and we’ve seen these concepts used mainly in situations that warrant unpleasant feelings. The architecture of our brain makes it impossible to access the concepts without the associated feelings.

It’s like we had been living in caves and huts and we would see brick housing and electricity as an imperialist tool. It’s imperative that we learn to distinguish what the tools can be used for, and how they can help us, from the causes that create the dynamics of power, violence and destruction. The causes are not the

tools themselves, but the underlying beliefs of the people who use them.

In some groups such negative association manifests itself even for such basic tools such as planning, setting goals, drawing a strategy,... sometimes even the use of precise, explicit language, such as the one used in scientific and corporate literature, is seen as part of the problem, rather than a tool that we can embrace for our own counter-cultural pursuits.

Feldman explains that feelings come mostly from brain simulations, or predictions, of what is going on around us. In a very real sense you feel what you believe. On top of that, what we feel alters our sight and hearing, in a way that is more likely to reinforce our beliefs. We are truly wired for self-deception. It takes a lot of work and conscious effort to overcome the self-deception biases and make good decisions in life.

Mind as a collective phenomena and behavioral change

Given how flawed the mind is in making and following plans, and how hard it is to change behavior, it's not a surprise that the literary genre of self-help books is so popular and prolific.

However, it strikes me as odd that in that genre, very rarely, neither academics nor pop gurus, are taking in consideration the collective nature of mind. Our mechanical or unconscious behavior does not come from an evolutionary program encoded in our genes. It comes from learned impulse-response patterns that we observe around us, and that we constantly re-learn, either enforcing the patterns that we know or changing them for the new social norms.

As Feldman points out over and over "You are the architect of your own experience". Which means that the experiences we have are training our brains for predicting, and thus perceiving, our future experiences. In her words "Every experience you construct is an investment, so invest wisely. Cultivate the experiences you want to construct again in the future."

However, the tools available for individual behavioral change tend to be rather hard, slow, and have a low success ratio. It would seem much more likely to succeed to do such a thing in a group. And there are, indeed, some collective programs for behavioral change. Most famously, programs to quit addictions, like Alcoholic Anonymous meetings.

Therefore it would seem that a strategy that would be much more likely to succeed for behavioral change would be to spend time with people who have the same goals, and practice together the behaviors we want to promote. Imagine moving in together in a small village with a few dozen friends who share the same goals. Goals like eating healthier, exercising more, playing an instrument and communicating less violently. Eating could be done communally. Having healthy food easily available and seeing other people eating it would discourage going through the trouble of procuring your own unhealthy food. There would be at all time activities organized for doing exercise or musical jamming, so

it would be very easy to casually join them, even if you hadn't planned it for that time. There would be plenty of opportunities to practice techniques to be more conscious about one's behavior, such as meditation and yoga, and also workshops to learn non-violent communication techniques. Furthermore, the organization could be designed to promote autonomy which, as we've seen, facilitates wellbeing, as opposed to hierarchy. On top of that you'd be constantly interacting with other people who are doing the same, so you'd be training your metaphorical elephant to respond the way you want it to.

If such a plan feels scarily like a cult, well, it's true that many cults follow similar patterns. It is important to be aware of such danger and establish mechanisms to avoid falling into a cult. Making sure that everybody has a voice in the organization, that everybody is free to leave in the case they don't feel valued and comfortable, that there is transparency in the way wealth is distributed and that it doesn't all flow to one or few individuals, etc.

It is worth noting as well that the human mind tends to over represent the instances of danger. We might have seen a few news or documentaries about communities descending into cults and ending catastrophically. However, there are thousands of healthy, successful and stable intentional communities and ecovillages around the world. They are the vast majority and can be used as inspiration and models. And the few failures can be used as learning tools on what not to do.

Consider the benefits of such an arrangement and weigh them against the risks. Let's add two more examples of the benefits of friendship from Feldman's book:

- Holding hands with friends or even keeping their pictures nearby > reduces your perception of pain
- If you are standing at the bottom of a hill with friends, it will > appear less steep and easier to climb than if you are alone

Granted, we can have friends without moving in together in the same community, but predominant urban arrangements make it quite difficult. Again, in Feldman's words "Modern culture, unfortunately, is engineered to screw up your body budget". Being together with people who share the same cultural goals makes it much easier to build a healthier culture than being scattered around.

Let's close this section with a few more verbatim quotes from Feldman, to further support the point that the insights from someone who has a very deep understanding of the brain's architecture point out to taking some collective actions for changing how we operate in society:

- " "Responsibility" means making deliberate choices to change our > concepts "
- "If you grow in a society full of anger or hate you can't be blamed > or having the associated concepts, but as an adult, you can choose > to educate yourself and learn additional concepts"

- “You also bear some responsibility for others because your actions > shape other people’s concepts and behaviors”
- “social reality implies we are all partly responsible for one > another’s behavior [...] in a very real brain-wiring way”
- “It is no overstatement to say that if you change your experience > today you can change who you become tomorrow”

Growth, pain and joy

The story of the train beggar

A good friend once witnessed the following scene in a train while traveling near Barcelona. A beggar got into the car. Speaking with a strangled voice and strong markers of mental disability he explained a sad autobiographical story. Then he proceeded, limping, to cross the car asking for money from the passengers.

Up to this point this story is quite unremarkable. Sadly it is quite common around Barcelona as well as in many cities around the world. What happened next though is rather interesting. As the beggar approached the end of the car he recognized an old friend. At once his sorrowful face mutated to a smile, he walked steadily and confidently, limping completely gone. He sat next to his friend, who asked how the business was doing. With a cheerful and unremarkable voice he replied that it was going well. He was performing a new script that a common friend had written and he was working on profitable train routes.

You probably have put yourself in my friend’s shoes and are now feeling outraged. Disgusted at the deception that was going on and angry at the perpetrator.

It is quite common to experience situations that provoke similar feelings. The job of unpleasant feelings is to tell us that something is not quite right, so that we can take action and avoid future unpleasantness. However, in this kind of situation, It might seem that what happens is beyond our sphere of influence, that is something intrinsic in society. This perspective might make us build a protective shell, make us cynical and insensitive to other people’s suffering. I contend that you’d benefit from a different perspective. One that allows us to tune in to other people’s needs and pains, but doesn’t make it feel like an attack to us.

As a side effect from this new perspective you’ll experience more pleasant feelings, which are known to boost your immune system and promote a healthy life, and less unpleasant ones, which are conducive to ill health.

But, how can we achieve that? Enter growth.

Personal growth as a journey

Personal growth is the journey towards taking ownership of your feelings, your goals, your needs and your actions. This in turn helps you realize that when you feel bad is not because somebody has done something to you but instead something has happened that has triggered a feeling in you. Which is great news since that realization naturally leads to actions you can take to avoid triggering unpleasant feelings when similar events play out in the future. The less often you feel bad, the more often you feel good. And as a consequence you are likely to enjoy a healthier life, mentally and physically.

The concept of feelings being “triggered” is very common in the personal growth literature but Feldman suggests replacing it with the expression “constructed” instead. The point is to remind us that it’s our mind that chooses to construct that particular instance of that particular feeling. To remind us that we are architects of our own mind, and with the proper training, we should be able to change our mind so that it creates the feelings that are most useful to us in every situation.

Growth also makes it easier to empathise with others. Being familiar with one’s own feelings and neurotic thoughts helps realize the shared nature of humanity, and understand others that otherwise might look very different to us. In the absence of personal growth you are likely to blame others when you feel bad. We already discussed the common thought process: I feel bad when I see you doing something, therefore it must be your fault, therefore you must be a bad person. Blaming others essentially means giving others the power over your feelings: other people can decide to do or not the things that make you happy or angry. Outsourcing your feelings to others usually doesn’t do any good to anybody.

In the story above the absence of personal growth (or, alternatively, self control) might have led a passenger, angry at the beggar, to confront him. Maybe someone would have gotten up and screamed and insulted him. That might have felt good initially but is very unlikely that would have changed the beggar’s behaviour: after all he probably knows what he is doing and if he had more pleasant ways of making money he likely wouldn’t inflict this charade to himself. Instead confrontation could lead to somebody getting physically hurt.

Going on a journey of personal growth will help you, when confronted with such situations to have a more accurate assessment of it. If you are a functional and healthy sapiens then you need to practice generosity. The beggar offers you an opportunity to practice that. If you embrace that opportunity you can be grateful for the experience. When you realize that the whole show is staged and you feel angry, instead of blaming the beggar, you can realize that your own mind constructed the emotion. The beggar didn’t create it.

The emotion was created by confronting your beliefs of how the world should be, and how people should behave, with reality. Now, here you have a simple way to improve: letting go of that belief. In the Buddhist tradition it’s said that

pain is the distance between how things are and how we want them to be. A simple solution is not the same as an easy one. It will be hard and painful. But many people have done this journey before and they have developed tools, such as mindfulness meditation, that have proven helpful.

Once you take ownership of your feelings and your actions you can assess the situation with a new light. Here there is a person less fortunate than you are. He hasn't had the opportunities and the privileges that allow you to make money, in a legal and socially respected job. In this way you can easily feel compassion for the beggar and gratitude for your good fortune. Similarly when somebody steals your bike, or maybe your wallet or your phone, rather than feeling angry at the person and frustrated at the inconvenience, you can experience generosity, compassion and gratitude.

It is useful to distinguish between feeling betrayal from a random person and feeling betrayal from a close connection. We all need attachment with close connections and belonging to a group. If we feel betrayed by them our primal survival needs are put at risk and we want to take actions to repair the situation, so that we either can feel secure in the existing relationships or move on to other relationships that fulfill our needs.

In the case of the beggar, in reality there is nothing personal about us. He is reacting to an environment where people have the unfulfilled strong urge to practice generosity. He's offering the service of letting people experience generosity and is doing so using the tool that people are more comfortable with, money. From this perspective, getting angry at him is as pointless as getting angry at a Hollywood movie for triggering feelings on us through fake stories. In both cases that's the nature of the game and we are free to participate in it.

Maybe even with this perspective we still get angry. Why? We'd have to look inwards to figure that out. Maybe the situation is challenging our core identity. Maybe we think of ourselves as generous beings who, through our donations, make a positive impact in the world. Maybe the story that we can make a positive impact in the world by giving a few coins here and there, sometimes a bit more to random charities, is being shattered. And with it, our image of who we are and what we are accomplishing in this life.

Let's go one level deeper. Even if we master empathy for others and ourselves, we still might feel outrage at the situation. There is still a message that something is off. There is definitely something wrong with a world where people make money by faking distress to allow others to experience the practice of gratitude from the convenience of their train seat during their commute.

A component of the growth journey is to learn how to "meet the world as it is". To learn to accept that the world is not, and will not, be like we want it. Looking both inwards and outwards, and accepting what we don't like about ourselves and others, can be rather painful. However, it enables us to not spend energy resisting or attacking it. And to use the energy that we save for analyzing

it, prioritizing our collective needs, and taking action for meeting them, in turn changing the world and making it more conducive to collective wellbeing.

One more quote from Feldman: “If all this introspection sounds implausible, realize that people pay good money to therapists and life coaches for exactly this purpose: to help them reframe situations, that is, find the most useful categorization in the service of action”

Feelings, reaction, response, freedom and agency

Feelings are messengers that either alert us that there is some imbalance between our inner and outer worlds, or they let us know that we are engaged in nurturing activities. When we react to unpleasant feelings without first looking into our inner world we are acting without agency. We are just reacting with an impulse response.

As Victor E. Frankl remarked, freedom and growth is the space between stimulus and response.

There are definitely moments where a flight or fight reaction is appropriate. When we sense a vehicle approaching us at high speed, getting out of it's way is of utmost importance. In that moment navigating into our inner world would put our survival at risk.

However, in the face of violent social injustice or environmental destruction we probably want to analyze what's going on, internally and externally, before responding. Looking externally is worth noting that such catastrophic events have been happening for thousands of years. Since we are not superhuman superheroes, no matter how good and strong our response is, such events are likely to continue for quite a while. A few decades at the very least. Probably even throughout our lifetime, to some extent.

As humans we have not been designed to sustain an internal state of alarm for a long time. If we respond to social and environmental events with feelings that prompt a flight or fight response our contribution to humankind won't be very useful. We might choose to fly away to a remote community, which is becoming increasingly difficult given the extent of climate change and deforestation. That's not going to change history or help anybody outside the community. We might choose to fight something, or somebody. A particularly onerous law, or maybe an eviction of a social project, the next mindless mega-infrastructure, a particularly corrupt politician or a particularly powerful and cruel super-rich person. If we just fight for the sake of fighting, as an thoughtless response to our pain, we might win some battles, and lose some more, but there will always be more battles to fight. Bigger battles and with more at stake. We'll likely end up stressed and burned out. Those are unresourceful states which are not helpful for getting things done, much less extraordinarily difficult tasks like changing the course of History.

Good results vs good intentions

They say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. That hell is full of good meaning, but heaven is full of good works. Is an aphorism that indicates that for a long time people have observed how often, when we try to do good, we end up harming others instead. How else could we explain the overwhelming evidence that most people that surround us have good intentions and try to put them into action? And yet, the world is full of destruction and needless pain. It's not an observational anomaly. We are not surrounded by kind weirdos that act opposite of most humankind. It's the gap between our collective intentions and results that explains the paradox. Understanding the gap is crucial, and not easy.

We often decide to do or not to do things in response to our needs and fears. Why do I want to chain myself in front of a bulldozer to stop an environmental crime or an eviction? Am I really convinced that that is the best I can do to help climate change and social justice? Or maybe it is because of my need for recognition? When I'm holding on to an ideology against all the evidence of its lack of performance, do I do that because I really know better, or because of my needs for belonging and authenticity?

When I'm pushing the group to go to one protest after the other, which doesn't give us time to think and plan. Is it really because I think that is really necessary? Or is it because of fear of failure? Do I fear that if instead of protesting we build alternatives, they will perform even worse than the current system? Maybe it's because building alternatives would put us in a position of responsibility and power? Do I fear that if I get responsibility I will perform worse than the people that I'm criticizing for mismanaging the current system? Do I fear my own greed and I suspect that as soon as I get into a position of power I'll become as corrupt as the people I'm protesting against?

The next book in this series explores in more depth the gap between intentions and results. When reading it you'll probably identify beliefs and actions that you hold dear and promote. Seriously considering their worth in light of their results can result in a very painful exercise. It's growth pain. We are often very invested in our approaches, to the point that they form part of our identities, and shedding such strong beliefs based on evidence might feel as painful as having a limb amputated.

For now, let's just agree that in order to make a significant and swift change in the world it's imperative that the results of our actions correspond with our intentions. Luckily we are now at the dawn of the data and evidence driven society. It's getting easier to have discussions about assessing whether the outcome of our actions correspond to our goals. About letting go of ideologies and instead experimenting with different methodologies and seeing what actually works.

Personal growth is about distinguishing between when we are moved by our

rational voice and when we are moved by our needs, fears and insecurities, and then our autobiographical confabulator steps in with a plausible pseudo-rational story. Having access to more real-world data helps us catch ourselves confabulating.

Personal growth is also about empowering ourselves, individually and collectively, to meet our own needs, and to let go, with the help of the loving support of the group, of our fears and insecurities. When we catch ourselves wanting to do things against the best evidence available we can see what unmet needs or unspoken fears are at play, and address those with growth tools.

Learning to be truly selfless

Identifying the false narratives that explain our behaviour in a way that is acceptable according to our values and beliefs, and that hide the emotions that motivated the actions, **will equip us to respond aware of our emotions.** Saying that we are selflessly fighting to help others when we are suffering at the state of the world is like saying that we are freely going to work under the threat of being lashed by the owners if we don't (or the modern-life version, evicted from our homes). **Only when we are conscious in which way social and environmental events make us suffer we are then free to truly act for the greater good, for the benefit of others, and not for our selfish motives of reducing our own pain.**

Such a shift will be enormously useful to assess what the most promising course of action is in order to make a positive contribution to the world, and to be able and willing to take that direction. Since all our decisions are made inextricably with our emotions, we want to make them with emotions that favor our goals (helping others) instead of emotions that favor our egoism.

That might be challenging because such an optimal route might require a lot of planning, preparation, and upfront building up work in order to have resources to make significant contributions. It might be painful to neglect apparently more pressing battles for such long-term investments. Eventually though, this way of acting will not only be better for others, but also for ourselves, as it will help us detach from getting immediate results. It will untrain us from responding to the media frenzy, to the nearest and more immediate struggle. This, in turn, will help us manage our stress and have more resources to contribute to the world.

Meeting and disliking reality as it is

Very often people drain their energies fighting in their internal worlds and then they are completely depleted when the moment comes to act in the outer world. One way we tend to do that is resisting reality as it is. Therefore it is crucial to learn to practice acceptance and surrender, and also, to understand the difference between surrendering and liking or approval.

We don't even have the proper vocabulary to express this because our culture

promotes confrontation with what we dislike. We can use the word “fine” for trivial cases, but that word doesn’t seem to make justice for more dramatic situations.

For a trivial example, I can say that it’s fine that you like vanilla ice cream whereas I prefer chocolate ice cream. This means that when we are going out together on a warm day, I can enjoy my chocolate ice cream, peacefully next to you enjoying your vanilla ice cream. Otherwise I would be wasting my energies agonizing at your disgusting taste and trying to convince you to embrace the one and true satisfying ice cream flavor.

For a more dramatic example, let’s say that even though I would prefer that everybody in the world is well fed with nutritious food, it is still fine that tens of thousands of people die everyday due to hunger. Knowing fully well that we are producing food for feeding many more people that we have on the planet, and we have technology and resources to even produce much more.

Here the word *fine* doesn’t seem to cut it. In this context it means that it is fine that I accept that’s the reality today, that it will be the same reality tomorrow, that reality has a lot of inertia, and that it won’t change from one day to the next no matter what I do. It allows me to make the issue less about me and more about the people impacted. It empowers me to quit the social media addiction that makes me constantly repost angry announcements about the sorry state of the world and instead invest my resources in building up empowering relationships to actually do something to change the world.

Surrendering to reality means going even deeper. It means using the word *fine* in the sense that the Universe has the right to be as it pleases. The world is the way it is and that is *fine*. The same way that it is fine that you have a poor taste for ice creams. It doesn’t impact my ability to enjoy good ice creams. The Earth is just a tiny spec in the firmament and sapien’s history is just a blink of an eye for the planet. If we drive ourselves to extinction or to a planet-wide authoritarian empire, if climate change drives billions of people to disease and starvation, the Universe won’t care, it will be just *fine*. And we, the ones who are privileged enough to have time to ponder about such things, we’ll most likely manage to be quite fine during our lifetimes, if we choose to.

This doesn’t mean that we *like* things the way they are and the way they are going, or that we *approve of what* people are doing (or failing to do) about it. What it means though is that if we manage to let go of fighting the way things are, and if we manage to let go of expectations of the results of our actions, to not be attached to the outcomes, we can concentrate much more of our energy into changing the course of events and influencing people to do what we believe are the right things.

It also means that we can do our healing work with a merry attitude. Which will have multiple positive feedback effects. It will give ourselves more energy, and it will attract more people to our team. It’s really hard to attract people to join a bunch of angry and sad protesters. It works much better if we work

with happiness and joy. It might seem hypocritical but real surrendering is authentic and most people will feel the authenticity. The thought of achieving deep empathy and at the same time blissful surrender might seem science-fiction, but during millenia we have perfected a bunch of contemplation technologies that help with this journey, and there is plenty of reliable data about the good results.

The importance of happiness is often underrated in activist environments. When a group of people gets together to reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world, and sees how much unnecessary suffering there is now, it is easy to view our own happiness as secondary or irrelevant. It is even easy to feel guilty about it.

On the contrary though, cultivating happiness in oneself and in one's group is key for success. We will find it much easier to spend more time and effort doing good work if that work gives us happiness. Growth techniques involve getting to know oneself much better. And we can use that information to better cultivate happiness.

Collective growth

Another nice side-effect of getting to know ourselves better is that we'll better understand what is the shared experience of being human. This in turn will increase our empathy and capacity for connecting with others.

As we shall see later in this book series, we will want to build intentional communities as part of our strategy to be of service. Unfortunately modern life makes us totally unprepared for such endeavors and that's one of the reasons why so many intentional communities struggle, suffer and often break apart. Improving ourselves in the empathy and connection departments will equip us with some of the fundamental tools to succeed in building thriving communities.

Personal growth is hard enough. Embarking on it as a solo journey is doubly so. It goes much better when surrounded by other souls who are going through similar paths and speak the same language. You can exchange tips, experiences, and techniques, in the same way you would if you were both learning a new sport or game.

Also when the people around you tell you about what emotions they feel when they are triggered by your actions it is much easier to establish connections with them than when they blame you or hold you responsible for how they feel. In the first case the situation easily lends itself to working together to improve the situation. The later case is more conducive to escalating conflict.

As sapiens we need connection with others the same way we need food, water and air. Is a basic need. When deprived of connection we will sicken and eventually die.

When we seek out these connections without embarking on a journey of growth

we may lack the tools to make everybody involved feel secure and confident. As a result we might develop attachments that trigger our insecurities. If we see the people we are attached to as having the power to create pain on us, by breaking or neglecting the relationship, we might react out of fear. Then we might try to control, coerce, manipulate or otherwise limit them.

Furthermore, the flawed architecture of our own brain makes it easy to feel distrust. As Feldman notes, we are wired for self deception. Because our brain stores and computes predictions of external events mixing in information about our own internal state, we have difficulty distinguishing between internal and external inputs. When I feel bad, if I'm interacting with you, it's quite mechanical to conclude that it must be your fault and therefore you are a bad person. Even if I feel bad because I'm thirsty, hungry, stressed, or sleep-deprived, and that has nothing to do with you. There have been some experiments confirming this bias. One of them observed judges denying parole more often when the hearing was just before lunch time (when the judges were hungry). Another one observed job interviewers rating candidates more favorably on sunny days.

Collective growth then is to consciously build a community of like-minded people, committed with personal growth, to establish and nurture supporting relationships. People who are aware of the pitfalls of our beautifully flawed minds and design social constructs to compensate for them, like prioritizing our well-being to be as much as possible in resourceful states, and lots of fun activities to enjoy together so that our brain associates the presence of others with pleasure. The mind is biased for negative experiences and needs 4 or 5 positive experiences to compensate for a negative one. This creates a feedback loop. Being surrounded by generous people makes it easier to practice gratitude and generosity, which in turn helps others do the same.

This feedback loop works at different levels. From a material perspective it creates a sort of closed economy. People who participate in the collective growth community can obtain stuff from outside the community and then give or lend it to each other when somebody else needs it more. This way the collective wealth steadily increases.

Most importantly the feedback loop works at a collective mindset level. Organizational psychologist Adam Grant has discovered that organizations thrive when it's members act as givers, rather than as takers. And a key factor in accomplishing that is to root out the "bad apples". Most people would naturally be generous and giving, and most people when they realize some of their peers, even a tiny minority, take advantage of them, they retreat into acting as takers as well.

Consciously building a community of people who are committed to growth gives its members security. They feel comforted knowing that nobody is going to try to take advantage of them on purpose. Openness and security makes it easier to seek feedback from our peers, to ask to be challenged so that we can continuously improve.

Life as play and joy

All this talk about work and purposeful effort into building a different society, improving ourselves and helping others improve, might sound like a tedious struggle. While it's true that growth involves from time to time facing things that we don't like, and painful experiences of letting go of that which is not useful for us, by and large it's a pleasant experience, and the outcome tends to be becoming somebody who enjoys life and is much easily contented. Just think about your average bunch of buddhists monks and how merry they tend to be.

Not only is the outcome pleasant, but the work itself of building such a society, which is, in essence, the work of caring for each other, can as well be very enjoyable. Our current society often equates work with unpleasantness. Life is what happens outside of our 9-5 job, which we just endure the best we can. That's probably a consequence of jobs having become about enriching some far-away elites rather than caring for each other, but it was not always like that.

Peter Gray has a series of inspiring articles in Psychology Today where he presents a ludic theory of human nature. He defends that for our ancestors, work and play were not differentiated. That children learned to be adults by imitating the adult's tasks of constructing, foraging, hunting, etc. and as they would grow older the game would become more realistic, and more fun. And how foraging and hunting expeditions would look, to the modern eye, like going out for a picnic with the family. A good one to start is with "Play Makes Us Human V: Why Hunter-Gatherers' Work is Play".

We could interpret the myth of the fall from paradise as the moment when hierarchy was introduced into society. Work had been about caring for each other as long as our ancestors preserved autonomy. With the introduction of hierarchy it became about instead about production for enriching the ones on top of the hierarchy, and the fun of work became monotonous drudgery.

We'll see this in more depth in the fourth and final book of this series. For now though, let's just consider the possibility that, if we embark on the mission to build a new society based on autonomy, we can again re-learn the skills for building work routines that are fun, playful, and centered on caring for each other.

The science of well-being

Hopefully by now you are convinced that in order to contribute to a greater well-being in the world it is necessary to work, at the same time, in our own well-being. Also, that physical, mental and social wellbeing are so connected that they are, in effect, the same. The old spiritual adage that "we are all one" is quite literally true. Our minds are a collective creation, the concepts in our mind are created collectively, including the concept of who we are. Our physical health depends on the strength of our social connections. When people are exposed to a cold virus in a lab only between 25 to 40% get sick. The introverts and

those with negative feelings are more likely to be among the sick ones. Mental illnesses have been associated with chronic pain, type II diabetes, and even cancer, dissolving the boundary between physical and mental.

There are a number of behavioral things that we can do to improve our well-being and the science supporting such interventions is getting stronger and stronger at identifying the good outcomes. Unfortunately science about the dosage is still not so clear. Doing all of them all the time is probably unfeasible, but there are plenty of choices to pick from and mix.

The main ones are eating healthfully (including occasional fasting), exercising, getting enough sleep, practicing meditation and yoga.

Meditation has been studied quite a bit and among the many benefits, reduces stress, improves the detection and processing of prediction error, facilitates recategorization (which helps regulate emotions), and reduces unpleasant effect.

Also important, and that you can also do even on your own, is to practice generosity and gratitude. Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center has found out that keeping a written diary of gratitude works very well. You can do that even on days when you don't have pleasant social interactions, you can be grateful for the weather, for a beautiful tree, for having food, shelter, being alive,... Berkeley's geniuses have even figured out how to practice generosity cheaply on your own, just visit a cafe and invite a random stranger to a coffee (without expectations for any reciprocity). You can also adopt a pet to get touch and affection.

Living close to nature is also a great way to improve health, even if it's living near a park in the city. Research has found very significant health improvement outcomes from living near a park, even for those who don't even use the park, although the mechanisms are not yet understood. Connecting with nature though is a great way to cultivate awe, to experience being part of something greater than oneself.

Getting serious into well-being though will require socializing and making friends. With them you can take your gratitude and generosity experiments one step further, and invite each other in turns when you go out. Which will also help strengthen your bonds. The more secure you are in your connections the better for your health.

Human touch is very nourishing. Therefore if possible make friends who like plenty of hugs, massages, playfight and, even better, kissing and sex.

Feldman gives a few pro tips for a healthy emotional life, or, put more technically, to keep "your predictions calibrated and body budget balanced" starting with the notion that "Stress doesn't come from the outside world, you construct it".

One trick is to become more emotionally intelligent. The main idea for that is to beef up your emotional concepts. Learn more emotion words. The more emotions you are familiar with the more emotional granularity you have. People who can express "50 shades of feeling crappy" are better at regulating their

emotions, are less likely to drink excessively or retaliate violently. The reason is that you'll be able to predict and categorize sensations more efficiently and better tailor your actions to your environment. You can learn another language, especially their emotion concepts. You can even make up new emotions and teach them to your friends! ("you know that funny feeling you get when such and such... let's call it ...")

She stresses the importance of avoiding ruminating on negative events and suggests as avoidance techniques to indulge in a good novel or to have a good cry watching a movie (emotional release).

This advice seems counter to that of some meditation masters, we caution that we can't hide nor run away from the mind, and that the best we can do is to just face it, and accept it as it is. Meditation though requires practice, and probably judiciously mixing both advices would produce better results.

One more pro skill that she recommends is to learn how to recategorize. To deconstruct emotions into their physical components and give them a different meaning. For example anticipation when we are preparing for something important, like a performance, rather than anxiety.

Ethics and morals: martyrdom or results?

One underlying theme of this book series is to create a collective for building a better world. It's crucial that we can defend the actions that we do as a collective with clear, objective, results that show that we are having a positive impact on society and the environment. Without the ability to demonstrate such positive results we risk creating yet one more ideologically blind collective, which sadly, like most collectives, would be likely to just enrich it's members at great cost to others and nature.

Since we are setting out to do good, we might expect to be able to defend our actions using mainstream ethics and moral concepts as well, without needing to refer to the results.

Let's be blunt: we live in a world where ethics and morals are wrong. Plain wrong. Doing "the right thing" often involves causing harm instead of helping others.

For instance, it has been a long tradition in the USA that employers put a checkbox in job applications asking the candidates if they have a criminal record. This practice is clearly morally aberrant since it's obviously discriminatory. It stigmatizes people who have made a mistake and reinforces the scientifically incorrect, and socially harmful, belief that there are such a thing as "criminals". I.e. the incorrect belief that once somebody commits a crime they'll continue on a life-long path of criminality. It undermines the idea that people can learn from their mistakes and become better humans, that they can move from causing a toll to society to actively contributing to it. It unfairly puts the blame on

individuals, often young black men, for not having easy access to legal ways of making money, instead of blaming society for not offering them easy access to training for marketable skills.

Since this practice is so obviously, unequivocally, morally wrong on so many levels, it is logical that some people get organized to make it illegal. The “Ban the box” movement got started in the 90s, precisely to illegalize the practice of the criminal record checkbox in job applications. There have been some successes and laws banning the practice have been passed in some regions.

What might not seem so obvious are the results that economists found in 2020 when they analyzed the impact of the bans. Rose (Does Banning the Box Help Ex-Offenders Get Jobs? Evaluating the Effects of a Prominent Example) found negligible effects on ex-offenders’ labor market outcomes. Even more concerning findings come from Doleac and Hansen (The Unintended Consequences of “Ban the Box”: Statistical Discrimination and Employment Outcomes When Criminal Histories Are Hidden). They find that **banning actually increased discrimination** against young, low-skilled black men.

In retrospect, the consequences seem logical. In absence of explicit information about the applicant’s criminal record, employees resort to statistical inference. They assume (sadly, correctly) that young black men are more likely to be criminals. Therefore they favor hiring older people, not males and not blacks.

The conclusion of this story is not that the criminal record checkbox is a good practice that should be moral and ethical. The conclusion is that the solution for the immoral dilemma is not banning it. A real solution would be to eliminate the conditions that incentivize young people to participate in crime, which impacts particular demographics more than others. Then, the box would not be necessary, and eliminating it wouldn’t have negative side-effects. Such changes might take a long time to take effect. Meanwhile other options can be considered, for example a program that trains people in marketable skills while in prison and then places them in skilled jobs.

This options would have to coexist with the immoral practice of the criminal record checkbox in order to avoid discrimination towards young black men. **Sometimes, in order to achieve morally sound results, it’s necessary to engage in immoral practices.**

A more profound conclusion is that we’ve done a very poor job in designing our society. Ideally **we’d want to live in a society where doing the right thing translates to doing good to others.** This is a key reflection when designing an alternative society, since it narrows down the space of desirable societies we would consider.

Ethically shooting ourselves in the foot

It is also useful to note that ethics, moral guidelines and concepts of good and bad people are social constructions. They are tools that allow us to make quick

decisions about the appropriateness of certain actions or relationships. It is also useful to note that such tools have been evolutionarily refined in order to enable, precisely, the society that we have nowadays: A global culture that is increasingly destroying ecosystems and inflicting pain on fellow humans. Therefore by following such guidelines we'll most likely be contributing to more of the same effects that we are aiming to change. Even if we start with the express goal of achieving the opposite, just by following the same moral guidelines that govern most people's behaviors, we will end up doing more of the same, even though that might not be obvious at first. Or, at the very least, these guidelines will hamper us enough to miserably fail in our goals.

Dan Pallota in a Ted Talk called "The way we think about charity is dead wrong" explains this phenomenon very eloquently. "We have two different rulebooks," he says, one for enabling business to succeed and one for making nonprofits fail. He focuses on the issue of advertisement. It is perfectly fine for a for-profit enterprise to spend all their money in advertising, betting that they will gain even more money from such investment. However when a nonprofit does the same they get crucified by the media (and activists) as being "inefficient". He's own experience is very telling. He was able to repeatedly raise millions in fundraising against cancer, investing small quantities of money in advertisements. But eventually some people "exposed" his organization as "wasting" donors money in advertisement rather than spending it for the explicit purpose of the donation, and that killed the organization.

This leads us to the conundrum that, if we create an organization to do anything meaningful, it will be very hard to crowdfund it, because most people who could support it would expect us to use their money in ways that undermine the success of the project. We'll discuss alternative and ethical ways to crowdfunding in the third book of this series.

Ethically managing resource scarcity

This conundrum goes beyond potential donors and often manifests itself in organization members as well. It's very easy to have a well-meaning colleague to suggest things like using recycled technology, old phones and computers, to minimize our environmental impact instead of using current technology. It can become quite difficult to question such a nice proposal but the fact is that using older technology would make the organization much less productive.

Another hypothetical example. We might be organizing an event to promote the organization and we are offering some snacks. Imagine we have little time and budget for the event. The easiest and cheapest option would be to order online from a supermarket chain and have it delivered to us. Instead, some well-meaning colleague suggests making several trips to a few specialized, far-away, more expensive, organic fair trade shops. Another colleague suggests instead to visit nearby restaurants and ask for leftovers instead. The result is that instead of having a team focused on the core mission of the organization we

have a team using their time discussing what is the most ethical way to provide snacks in the event. To the detriment of actually preparing and promoting the event, which will lower its impact. If we actually believe in the importance of the organization's mission, and it's chances to make a significant impact in society in the long term, the small negative consequences of sourcing snacks for a promotional event should be a non-issue for all the members of the organization.

Once cause underlying this ethical conundrum is resource scarcity. If we had an infinity of resources we'd be able to take actions that are both ethical in the short term and effective in the long term. We could have a team devoted to sourcing recycled food while another team prepares and promotes the event. We could have factories of cell phones and computers, as well as mining operations for their materials, run in environmentally safe and socially respectful ways.

The problem though, is that, by definition, we have, or at least start with, very limited resources. We are discussing changing the course of History, changing the inertia of society, in which virtually everybody and every institution participates. In comparison, the people who can join and the resources that we can have access to, are negligible.

Let's put one last, more extreme, example. Imagine we are building an organization to end homelessness in a particular city. We are all volunteers and we use 100% of our budget to rent an office in the city, so that we can coordinate with the team and interact with other actors. Renting an office might be seen as immoral since it's taking up potentially living space and contributing to the scarcity of available homes. We could instead give that space to homeless people and reduce the problem. We'd have an organization with 100% "efficiency", all the money would go to help people in need! However, since there are many more homeless people in the city than those that can live comfortably in our offices, that would be a very poor use of our resources. It would be many times better to use our resources for actions that eventually lead to having housing for everybody in need.

Martyrdom confabulation

Is worth noting that if similar discussions and approaches would happen in a for-profit business it would be considered very odd behavior. Entrepreneurship and business manuals teach us to "prioritize ruthlessly" and to focus as much as possible in our core mission. Core mission is what we are doing because we believe we are doing it better than everybody else. Providing food, furniture, functioning equipment, etc, are better seen as distractions and therefore better externalized as much as possible. Here we see Pellota's "two rulebooks" at play again. Ruthless prioritization for profit, aimless dispersion for non-profits. Recipe for success and recipe for disaster.

When we find ourselves in such situations we can ask ourselves: what would I rather prefer? To act in a way that each single one of my actions is aligned with my values and fail in the collective mission, or to succeed in the mission as a

whole, even though individual actions, taken out of context, could be perceived as contrary to the mission?

If we are working on a grand mission, like stopping all fossil fuel usage, or ending famine, and you still prefer to fail, then you would probably benefit with some more introspection. Are you sure that you are truly acting for the greater good? Could it be that you are being selfish and trying to appease some personal pain? Maybe some sense of guilt or responsibility? This is one of the reasons why the topic of personal growth was covered in previous sections.

With the result of such introspection you might want to revisit your ethics and moral guidelines to make them as much as possible in a way that supports the collective mission rather than hampering it.

This is not just a theoretical concern. If you frequent activist and non-profit circles you are likely to find this pattern both in individuals and organizations. People spend all their disposable time and money to help as many different causes as possible, without any prioritization or strategizing about the results. The driving force seems to be “we must do something about it”. The result is often that they stretch themselves too thin, they don’t have the resources to have any meaningful impact on any front, and are always at the brink of financial collapse, which adds a lot of stress, often to the point of burnout. The limit on how much to give seems to be set from a perspective of hailing martyrdom rather than a perspective of efficacy. Often it seems like people tend to give as much as needed to feel enough distress to appease their own sense of guilt. There are vague explanations to justify the behavior like giving to the people who are in more need, but very few follow the logic of such explanations and give away all their possessions. Most often people instead put themselves in just enough distress to allow their autobiographical confabulator to explain their actions in a favorable light, in spite of lack of evidence for results.

Prevalent morals and ethics in alternative circles don’t encourage us to carefully budget our resources to invest as much as needed in our own wellbeing so that we multiply our resources (happiness, energy, money,...) to empower us to give away as much as possible to the desired causes. Instead, they encourage us to neglect our own wellbeing which causes stress. In turn this makes us less resourceful, more likely to fall into patterns of anger and distrust, more likely to break down our collective into smaller ones rather than unite diverse perspectives. It might even lead to more dramatic outcomes such as burnout, depression, and even suicide.

Against secrecy and machiavellism

Of course this reflection doesn’t mean that we should incentivise recklessness or be closed to better options. If other organizations can provide the goods and services that we need to perform our core mission, and we can use them without diverting extra time and money from the core mission, it would be appropriate to team up with such organizations. One could even set a budget for collaborating

with organizations that share the same values that we have. In a similar fashion that for-profit corporations have a budget for corporate responsibility programs. One non-profit could decide to devote, say, up to 5% of their time and budget, to spend extra time and money to source goods and services from less harmful organizations. And make a periodic report of what has been achieved with such investment.

That would provide a tool for transparency and consciousness. And a benchmark against which new proposals could be measured against: when somebody in the organization suggests to swap to a more ethical but expensive provider, if we already reached our budget for non-core-mission expenses, that person would have to make the case of removing one of the current ethical suppliers and replace it for the other. For example, if having both electricity and internet from ethical suppliers goes beyond our budget, the proponent of switching would have to make the case that one has more positive impact than the other.

This brings us back to the topic of personal growth: we want to have the emotional tools to make moral decisions when, no matter what the decision, it will have undesirable, negative, ethical consequences, in the short term, but be compensated by much bigger positive outcomes in the long term.

Furthermore, this way of thinking doesn't mean that we should resort to secrecy, lying or manipulation. It is very normal that organizations feel pressure to keep their inner operations secret. Most famously political parties have a tradition of being secretive about their funding. It's easy to see why. They fear that if they disclose the funding sources potential voters would balk at the thought that they are sold out to special interests. I don't know of any political party that discusses in the open the pros and cons of taking funding from different sources. I haven't seen any party saying something like "we'll take funding from big telcos, and in exchange we'll support their unethical monopoly, but we won't take money from fossil fuels, and we'll use the money from telcos to promote a transition to green energy, which is a more pressing issue". Instead all major political parties seem to take funding from all special interests and protect all of them from the voters instead of the other way around. Then there are some parties that vow to not take any money from any special interest, which makes it very hard for them to get anywhere.

And then, there are the machiavellian masters of lying and deception who say they won't take any money from any special interest but they do it anyway. For instance, when Obama was running for the office of USA Emperor for the first time he pledged to not take any money from any special interest group. Here the term Emperor is used instead of President to avoid the connotation that the office has a predominantly democratic mandate for the USA citizens. It doesn't. The office confers a great deal of power over a great deal of people who live outside the USA and don't vote for it. Despite the pledge, Obama's winning campaign ended up taking more money from special interests than any campaign before him.

Being machiavellian is very different from taking a data-driven approach and favoring actions with a long term social and environmental benefit that greatly exceeds the possible short term negative costs. To be machiavellian, to use any means to achieve results, means to embrace lying and deception as tactical tools. It's true that machiavellism is a time-tested strategy to achieve almost anything, particularly to gain power. It is also true that we want to gain power, as a collective, to use it for the benefit of the less fortunate. However, there is a peculiarity in the strategy that is being laid out during this book series that makes it incompatible with deceit. A key goal for this strategy is to build trust. Only by building trust can we hope to replace the prevailing dynamics of individualism, selfishness and greed. Using machiavellism would undermine our goal beyond hope. Using machiavellism to gain power to help others makes sense only from vanguardist strategies, where the leadership sees society as "others". This is not the strategy defended here. In this strategy the aim is to promote equality. And to achieve that use collective egalitarian power to dismantle the hierarchical structures of power.

Conclusions

If we want to design a society that is conducive to people being happy and fulfilled it has to have big doses of altruism, gratitude and autonomy.

This is not a crackpot idea coming from hippy new age spirituality or some fundamentalist religious sect. It's the long standing scientific consensus based on a pretty solid and convincing experimental and theoretical body of work.

Since it so happens that our current society emphasizes exactly the opposite traits, competition, selfishness and hierarchy, we must wonder how feasible it is, to achieve anything that remotely resembles a good social design, by tweaking and adjusting parameters of the current system. And conser instead, if perhaps it would be a more feasible solution, to start a new design from scratch.

This, of course, leaves many important questions unanswered, like how would that society look like, or how would we transition to it. We will look at those later, even though we can already see some hints of a possible path. It involves getting together those of us who want to walk that path and helping each other pioneer the skills, values, ideas and designs for the society we want to achieve.

For now though, if we are able to envision such a possibility, we have already made a great leap forward. We have escaped from the self-referencing totalitarian mental prison that is our society. A mental framework that makes it almost impossible to consider that any alternative might exist. We have escaped from Francis Fukuyama's fatalistic "end of history" prophecy.