

## Bonus Bundle

**Julian Baggini - *The Ego Trick***

**Henry Bergson - *Creative Evolution***

**Jonathan Haidt - *The Happiness Hypothesis***

**Sam Harris - *Free Will***

**Heraclitus - *Fragments***

**Daniel Kahneman - *Thinking Fast and Slow***

**Kathryn Schulz - *Being Wrong***

**Slavoj Žižek - *Living in the End Times***

## **The Ego Trick**

(2011)

Julian Baggini

“The idea of the self as a construction is one that many want to resist, because it seems to imply that it is not real. But of course constructions can be perfectly real.”

“You, the person, is not separate from these thoughts, the thing having them. Rather you are just the collection of these thoughts...This is the heart of the Ego Trick. The trick is to create something which has a strong sense of unity and singleness from what is actually a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories, in a brain which has no control centre. The point is, that *the trick works*... There is no single thing which comprises the self, but we need to function as though there were.”

### **In a nutshell**

The brain and body provide us with a strong and continuous sense of self, which gives us freedom to create who we are.

### **In a similar vein**

Sam Harris *Free Will*

David Hume *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

**Are you the same person today as you were as a child?** Of course – however different you are now as an adult, your DNA is still the same; you are still ‘you’. But what about someone suffering from dementia, or who has had a brain injury; if their memories are no longer accessible to them, or they no longer have a firm sense of time, space and other people, can it be said that the same self still exists? Where does this sense of ‘me-ness’ come from? Is it real, or just an illusion created by the brain and body?

Baggini begins with a quote from David Hume (*Treatise of Human Nature*):

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, colour or sound, etc. I never catch *myself*, distinct from some such perception.”

Hume famously suggested that there is no unitary, solid self or soul; instead we are just a bundle of perceptions which change constantly, and the way we perceives over time seems to bear this out.

The area of ‘self’ and ‘personhood’ is a significant area of contemporary philosophy and psychology, and Baggini, founder of *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, makes accessible some of the most fascinating questions, exploring two conflicting views of the self: the ‘pearl’ theory; and Hume’s ‘bundle’ idea.

Along the way he speaks to non-scholarly people who have some special angle or insight, such as Buddhist lamas, people who have changed gender, and those who have had a loved one with dementia. The broad question he tries to answer is: “What are we and on what does our continued existence over time depend?”

### **The sense of self**

The ‘pearl’ view of the self says that, despite how much we change over a lifetime, there is some essence of ‘me-ness’ which does not change. This self is free-willed and may even transcend the body after death. Despite much searching though, neuroscience has not found any such pearl - the essential ‘I’ does not exist in any particular part of the brain. Rather, several brain systems work together to give us a sense of being singular and in control. Other organisms, such as lizards, do not have a sense of self to the extent that humans do. They may have a sense of themselves in any given moment, but it is this sense of a self *over time* that makes us different. We have *autobiographical selves* that can create a richly detailed and complex story from our experiences.

We are embarrassed by things we did when younger, and yet is hard to even imagine what it was like to be our five, ten or thirteen year old selves again. “The older we get”, British philosopher Julian Baggini says, “the less able we are to identify truly, with confidence, with our past selves... Our thoughts and actions are as inscrutable as those of strangers, or more so... At the same time, each of us has a sense of ‘me-ness’ which appears to be remarkably enduring.”

We may not be the same person we were 30 years ago, but we do sustain a sense of self through our life. In a way, searching for ‘what’ we are, or our ‘true identity’ is not the point. For Baggini, the real marvel is that we retain and maintain selfhood over a long period.

Baggini mentions clinical neuropsychologist Paul Broks who has worked with patients after they had brain injuries in car accidents. While on one hand observing how fragile the sense of self is, built as it is on a proper functioning of the brain, he also noted that even if one hemisphere of the brain is damaged, affecting memory or other functions, most people nevertheless continue to feel a unified sense of self. This movement towards self-feeling is incredibly strong, and for good reason - we can't function as social animals without seeing ourselves and others as separate 'I's.

Indeed, if 'the self' was found in only one part of the brain (the pearl idea), any slight damage to that part would destroy the sense of 'me'. But if the sense of self is a composite of things, or an interaction between parts, then it is more likely to survive any trauma to or destruction of any of those parts. Even if there is major damage to the brain, we are set up to be constantly creating a narrative sense of self.

Echoing John Locke, contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit characterises personhood as meaning the possession of "psychological connectedness and continuity". The 'ego trick', Baggini explains, is the brain & body's creation of "a strong sense of unity and singleness from what is actually a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories". Precisely because there is no single control centre in the brain, the trick works.

### **What are we?**

If the self has no real centre, could it still be said that a person has a 'character'?

Baggini cites a number of psychology experiments which suggest that our confidence in character is misplaced; our environment can have a much bigger effect on what we do. One example is Stanley Milgram's famous 'obedience to authority' experiments in which people willingly gave electric shocks they knew would be harming people, just to please those conducting the experiment. The subjects were otherwise normal, considerate people, but it turned out that the seeking of approval was more important than compassion for others. In the equally well-known Stanford Prison Experiment, Philip Zimbardo simulated a prison environment over the course of five days. After only a day or so usually nice college students were willing to act terribly to those under their control Zimbardo believes that human dignity and character are myths. "The human mind gives us templates or potentials to be anything at any time", he told Baggini.

John Doris's book *Lack of Character* noted that "situational factors are often better predictors of behaviour than personal factors". Baggini suggests that plenty of Germans living under the Third Reich would otherwise have led "blameless lives" if they had not been put in an environment which brought out their worst selves. By the same token, "many people are able to live good, moral lives only because circumstances have not tested them."

At a less extreme level, William James pointed out that who we are is very much shaped by our social environment. Indeed, how others see us shapes our view of ourselves; our family and friends make us who we are. By living with others we take on their view of the world, and they ours. James noted that clothes become part of our identity, and the same could be said for houses, cars and other things. A philosopher friend of Baggini's wondered, if our smart phone contains so much

information about us, isn't it in a sense a part of us? Where do 'you' stop and the objects around you begin?

"It is our place in the world that defines who we are", Baggini argues. "The relations that constitute our identity are the relations we have with others, not those we hold between thoughts and memories in our minds." As Shakespeare's Jacques said in *As You Like It*, we are 'merely players', and 'all the world's a stage'. We are our collection of roles.

And yet, Baggini observes, we are not *just* a collection of roles – we have a psychological sense of self that remains whatever role we are playing in life. James saw selfhood as the "continuum of feelings found in the 'stream' of subjective consciousness". No matter what our experiences or environment, if we have this flow of feelings and thoughts then we will continue to 'have' a self.

Baggini notes that Buddhist philosophy is remarkably in line with contemporary research into the self. Buddha believed that we have no fixed, unchanging essence, but rather we are the sum of our bodily experiences, thoughts and feelings. This is much like Hume's bundle idea, except that Buddhism is focused on the great potential that having no fixed self entailed. Over a lifetime, through refinement of perceptions, thoughts and actions, we can in a very conscious way *create* a self. As it is said in the *Dhammapada*:

"Well-makers lead the water; fletchers bend the arrow; carpenters bend a log of wood; wise people fashion themselves."

Baggini admits that seeing the self as a construction is confronting, because it suggests there is no 'true' sense of self at the centre. And yet, plenty of things we take to be real are constructions; a tree is collection of billions of atoms working together as a system, and the internet is not a single thing but a network. Just because something is a composite of parts does not make it any less real or powerful. He gives short shrift to any philosopher who argues that souls exist, such as Oxford University's Richard Swinburne. Baggini admits that we are more than just our bodies, as Swinburne says, but this isn't an argument for the existence of immaterial souls. In this world, you need a brain and body to have consciousness, something which even the current Pope (Ratzinger) agrees with.

### **Final comments**

The postmodernist idea is that human beings are essentially constructs shaped by language, socialisation, and power relations, but Baggini concludes that we are more than just constructions; we have unity and continuity, even if we have no fixed essence or eternal soul. "The self clearly exists", he says, "it is just not a thing independent of its constituent parts". The 'self' is best seen as an activity which arises from its parts, just as a 'chariot' is a real thing which nevertheless is nothing more than its parts working together.

One of his examples is Brooke Magnanti, a woman who managed to combine the roles of academic researcher, blogger, prostitute, famously revealed in her 'Belle de Jour' blog. Yet no matter how apparently different each of these roles, Magnanti simply saw them as different facets of herself, and never experienced any psychological division. As Baggini puts it, "We are indeed less

unified, coherent, consistent and enduring than we usually suppose, but we are still real and individual.” Walt Whitman put it more elegantly:

*I am large/I contain multitudes*

Paradoxically, by fully experiencing all aspects and facets of our selves we are not lost, but can live a meaningful life. That we can do so, while at the same time rejecting the idea that we have an eternal essence or immaterial soul, is surely an indication of maturity.

### **Julian Baggini**

Born in 1968, Baggini received a PhD in philosophy from University College, London. His doctorate subject was personal identity. In 1997 he founded and still edits *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, a quarterly journal, and he contributes to a variety of newspapers and magazines.

Other books include *How The World Thinks* (2019), *The Shrink and the Sage: A Guide to Living* (with Antonia Macaro, 2012), *The Pig That Wants To Be Eaten: And 99 Other Thought Experiments* (2008), *The Ethics Toolkit* (with Peter Fosl, 2007), *What’s It All about? Philosophy and the meaning of life* (2004), and *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003).

## **Creative Evolution**

(1907)

Henry Bergson

“That adaptation to environment is the necessary condition of evolution we do not question for a moment. It is quite evident that a species would disappear, should it fail to bend to the conditions of existence which are imposed on it. But it is one thing to recognize that outer circumstances are forces evolution must reckon with, another to claim that they are the directing causes of evolution. This latter theory is that of mechanism. It excludes absolutely the hypothesis of an original impetus, I mean an internal push that has carried life, by more and more complex forms, to higher and higher destinies.”

### **In a nutshell**

We want to see the universe in mechanistic and determined terms, but reality, because it involves life and time, is in fact fluid and constantly open to possibility.

### **In a similar vein**

Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition*

William James *Pragmatism*

Immanuel Kant *A Critique of Pure Reason*

Mary Midgley *Myths We Live By*

**Bergson was something of an intellectual star in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because, in contrast to the pessimism and determinist outlook of most philosophers, he emphasised creativity, free will and joy in existence.** His writing style also made a refreshing contrast to the overly academic, dry prose of the likes of Kant and Heidegger, and *Creative Evolution* in particular was widely read. It had been lavishly praised by William James, who urged his friend to publish it in English, and the book delivered Bergson (rare for a philosopher) a Nobel Prize for literature.

While not disrespecting scientific logic at all, *Creative Evolution* addresses what Bergson sees as the failings of Darwinism and evolutionary theory. In his mind it is a mechanistic theory par excellence, but should not be mistaken for being the whole story of reality. For while evolution focuses on the manifestations of life, Bergson is concerned with the 'life force' that generates it. For many this is a slippery, almost mystical concept, and his long list of detractors have included Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein. Certainly, Bergson lies outside the philosophical mainstream, and his emphasis on creativity and living an authentic life were more of an influence on existentialist artists and writers (his preoccupation with time or 'duration', for instance, was a significant influence on Proust, who was best man at his wedding).

Though in the 1940s his books dropped off academic reading lists, there has been a revival of interest in Bergson's work, helped by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his idea of 'becomings'. Though some of the details of Bergson's discussions have been overtaken by science, *Creative Evolution* still presents some basic and important questions for our time, and forms an interesting alternative to the standard materialist texts of evolutionary biology.

### **A reminder of what we can be**

At the start of the book Bergson gives much attention to the human being as something existing in time and space. At first glance, our intellect is perfectly suited to dealing with our physical environment: "...our logic is, pre-eminently, the logic of solids", he notes. We naturally see the universe in terms of mechanics and matter, but does this view actually provide us with the truth? We are wont to put everything into categories, to pour life into moulds, but "all the moulds crack". Bergson's problem with biology is that it sees life as matter to be *studied*, but should life be seen this way? Life itself courses through everything, and our notions of individuality and separate organisms are just convenience; all living things are ultimately part of a whole.



Our intelligence equips us not just to explain the physical universe, but the unseen forces which shape it. If we stick to a purely mechanistic view, our explanations will remain “necessarily artificial and symbolical”, he says. What we should be trying to get a sense of is the ‘creative impulse’ or *elan vital* that brings forth and animates life. Moreover, if evolution is seen in terms of a continual thrust of creation, then it makes sense that it enables “...as it goes on, not only the forms of life, but the ideas that will enable the intellect to understand it, the terms which will serve to express it.” We have evolved to such a high level that we can not only understand ourselves, but the very forces that power life.

### **The constant, unstoppable creation of the new**

Bergson notes that we can submit all kinds of inorganic matter to calculation according to the laws of physics and chemistry. We can get an accurate picture of a rock, for instance, by examining it. But life forms are different in that they are changing from one second to the next. We can examine them well according to their past and their long history of evolution to this point, but we can’t with absolute certainty know what the organism will do next, even for something as simple as an insect, with its dead-simple neurological structure. Why?

The difference with life forms (as opposed to the inanimate), is that they have ‘duration’. They do not simply exist in space, but are of time, and time is a much more challenging concept for analysis than spatial form. While in Descartes’ estimation the world is created anew each moment, Bergson’s concept takes account of the force of evolution, which is “a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link”. The past is all wrapped up in the present, and yet that past does not determine the next moment. To really know a living thing you must see it as part of a sort of energetic flux whose nature is constant creation.

“The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new.”

Applied to the life of a person, duration means:

“...our personality shoots, grows and ripens without ceasing. Each of its moments is something new added to what was before. We may go further: it is not only something new, but something unforeseeable.”

In contrast, artificial or mathematical systems, or facts relating to astronomy, chemistry or physics, can be analysed outside of time, because you are just dealing with objects. A life form, on the other hand, can never be fully pinned down. Of course, once you study a person or a flower or worm, you can work backwards to 'explain' the organism, but the limits of such analysis should be fully admitted, Bergson felt. A mechanist view of the universe said that events are determined by their causes, yet for Bergson a 'cause' was something quite fluid. He reversed the usual understanding of causality by saying that events or products are what matter; it is they that furnish a cause, rather than causes explaining their existence.

This led Bergson to a theory of unforeseeability and absolute originality in nature, but particularly in man. This idea is hard to stomach for the human mind, he admitted, since we believe in 'like producing like' and predictability. Yet nature itself surely bore out Bergson's idea: when a child comes into the world, we can expect it to have many of the physical and mental traits of its parents, yet intuitively we accept that a child is someone *entirely* new - and they are.

Science "is concerned only with the aspect of repetition", Bergson notes. It is driven to make rules based on what has happened before, and to see patterns in nature. In doing this, it examines things in smaller and smaller parts, arriving at 'knowledge' of the thing. Yet something can be known, Bergson suggests, only by knowing it as a whole. This perceiving by the whole goes against the way science works, and is in fact the function of philosophy. Yet it is a function no less valuable, perhaps more so. Bergson admits that life can be seen as a kind of mechanism, but if that is so one can also see each organism as part of a larger system, which is itself part of a whole, an "indivisible continuity". He uses the analogy of a curved line on a page. When you zoom in enough, the line is composed of thousands of dots of ink, and when you consider a tiny part of the line, it is not curved at all, but for all intents and purposes straight. It is only by zooming out do we see the real nature or purpose of ink as it is aligned: a curve. By the same token, Bergson says, "...life is no more made of physico-chemical elements than a curve is composed of straight lines."

Scientists believe they are taking a snapshot of the universe, and that from this snapshot of the present moment can make assumptions about the future. With superhuman intelligence and enough data, by putting everything there is to be known about the universe now into a computer, we could predict with accuracy when a new species might take form and what it would be like, or the direction of vapour from a person's mouth on a cold winter's day, or any number of things. But such a view assumes that time can indeed be frozen for a moment, a delusion on which so much of science is built.

That time *doesn't* stop and that the nature of duration is the ever-creating power of living things, means the future will never be calculable. Rather, as Bergson suggests, life in time, or duration, is appreciated rightly by us as “a stream against which we cannot go. It is the foundation of our being, and, as we feel, the very substance of the world in which we live.” The “dazzling prospect of a universal mathematic” is a folly which goes against experience and the very nature of life.

Having said this, Bergson does not believe there is any final goal or end point that life moves towards (finalism); its thrust is simply to create, and its impulse is towards individuality:

“Nature is more and better than a plan in course of realization. A plan is a term assigned to a labor: it closes the future whose form it indicates. Before the evolution of life, on the contrary, the portals of the future remain wide open.”

Both ‘mechanism’ (or science) and finalism, in their belief that “all is given”, must reject the idea that something can come from nothing, yet this truth is the most important in the universe. The mechanistic and finalist views can only be meaningful if they do away with time itself, by which “everything changes inwardly, and the same concrete reality never recurs”. The intellect “dislikes what is fluid, and solidifies everything it touches.”

Bergson’s conclusion is that the mechanistic and finalistic outlooks are only “external views of our conduct. They extract its intellectuality. But our conduct slips between them and extends much further...A conduct that is truly our own...is that of a will which does not try to counterfeit intellect, and which, remaining itself - that is to say, evolving - ripens gradually into acts...”

By embracing life directly, instead of through some intellectual construct, “reality appears as a ceaseless upspringing of something new”

### **Final comments**

Bergson asks: in the rational, modern world we live in, what is the place of intuition, or instinct? He notes that the lives of animals are simple because they don’t have to think about their actions; they just act according to their nature. Man’s intelligence has given us the ability to plan, ponder and make choices (furnishing us with civilization), yet it has not been without cost. In taking on analytic intelligence, man has ceased to live through instinct, and so loses touch with the essence of life. Luckily, each person retains the power of intuition, or being and acting before analysis is brought into play.

The main thing preventing this is that we are preoccupied with our immediate needs; species are not concerned with the force of life itself, of which they are only an expression, but seek the expedient, the comfortable life. This focus on meeting needs (which have no end) means we are focused on the material world in all its diversity and multiplicity, in contrast to the oneness and simplicity of spiritual reality or the essence of life. Philosophy is one way of reconciling the two, allowing us to live in the body in the 'real' world, yet always be drawing ourselves back to life itself. Thus for Bergson the true philosopher is no dry analyst of concepts, but cultivates instinct and intuition in order to be rejoined to the basic fact of our existence: as one among billions of pieces of an absolute Whole, whose nature is continuous creation and evolution.

## Henri Bergson

Bergson was born to Jewish parents in 1859. He was a gifted student and an able mathematician and in his teenage years won the prestigious 'Concours Général' prize. He went on to study humanities, prompting his mathematics teacher to lament that Bergson "could have been a mathematician" but would "be a mere philosopher".

He was accepted to the elite *École Normale Supérieure* and had Jean Léon Jaurès (later the eminent French statesman) and David Émile Durkheim (the sociologist) as his contemporaries. He placed second in one of the highest philosophy exams in France, the *Agrégation de Philosophie*. After University, Bergson taught in a high school in central France. He was accepted into the *Collège de France* and also went on to teach in his alma mater, the *École Normale Supérieure*.

*Creative Evolution* brought Bergson fame and many admirers including the poet T.S. Eliot. His first visit to the United States resulted in the first ever traffic snarl on Broadway. He became one of the planners and executors of the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, and as president of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation had an active hand in the formation of UNESCO.

His work includes *Matter and Memory* (1896), *Mind Energy* (1919), and *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). However, much of his work is lost, being burned in accordance with his will after his death in 1941.

## **The Happiness Hypothesis**

(2009)

Jonathan Haidt

“The image I came up with for myself, as I marvelled at my own weakness, was that I was a rider on the back of an elephant. I’m holding the reins in my hands, and by pulling one way or the other I can tell the elephant to turn, to stop, or to go. I can direct things, but only when the elephant doesn’t have desires of his own. When the elephant really wants to do something, I’m no match for him.”

### **In a nutshell**

Happiness can be achieved only if we first admit the extent to which we are subject to subconscious intentions and emotional reactions.

### **In a similar vein**

Sam Harris *Free Will*

Bertrand Russell *The Conquest of Happiness*

**The question of what makes people happy has traditionally been the domain of religion and philosophy, but increasingly we turn to psychology for answers.** Where once we tried to live by the ‘golden rule’ of doing unto others what we would have done unto us, today we are presented with concepts such as ‘reciprocity’ which give scientific basis for moral action. Instead of living by scriptural commandments, we are told that if we want to live a moral and happy life we need to avoid being hijacked by our own neurological tendencies.

American psychology professor Jonathan Haidt provides the image of an elephant and its rider as a metaphor of the control (or lack of it), that the self is able to exert on its eventual actions. In this idea he finds that Buddha, Plato, Ovid and Freud all used animal metaphors to illustrate the conflict of control within us. Ovid said:

“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.”

We assume we are in control of our actions, but if we are not, how does that change the way we see ourselves, and our prospects for happiness?

### **The divided mind**

Haidt sees us in terms of several dichotomies or divisions: Mind vs. Body - the division between the physical self and mental self is highlighted by the seeming autonomy of the sex drive, and the overriding power of the ‘gut brain’ that ensures we eat to live; Left vs. Right – in terms of brain wiring, the function of the two brain hemispheres, and split-brain conditions (such as ‘alien hand syndrome’, where our hand does not cooperate with the rest of our body) indicate how easy it is for the mind to be divided within itself; New vs. Old – the neocortex, which as its names suggests developed later, plays an important role in dividing the rational brain from the emotional brain; and finally Controlled vs. Automated – we think our emotional reactions are free willed, but to a surprising degree they are automatic, particularly “the gut feelings, visceral reactions, emotions, and intuitions”.

### **Sources of happiness**

For Buddha, the world is a projection of our mental states, while for the Stoics, our happiness does not depend on events, but on our reactions to it. Boethius noted that the control of our

interpretations of reality profoundly affect us more than reality itself. Haidt argues that they are only partially right, because research shows that external things *do* also govern our happiness; the material does matter.

Some of his other points:

- A **cortical lottery** seems to dictate our natural level of happiness, irrespective of circumstances. One basis for this level is the “everyday balance of power between your approach system and your withdrawal system”. These systems relate to our natural tendency to either approach or withdraw from a situation.
- The **negativity bias**: the human response to negative stimulus is far stronger than the response to pleasures. In evolutionary terms, this developed in order to help us avoid and survive threats. But the result is that we are often blinded to the positive opportunities and good things in our lives.
- **Affective style** is the varying ability people have to regulate their emotions. Haidt identifies three known-to-be-effective things for changing affective style: meditation, cognitive therapy, and Prozac.

### **The self-serving bias**

Haidt tells of experiments by Epley and Dunning which demonstrate that we perceive ourselves as if looking at a rose-colored mirror. People are far more accurate about how other people will behave than about their own behavior, but such illusions of self-judgment can boost our self-esteem. People routinely frame a question “so that the trait in question is related to a self-perceived strength, then go out and look for evidence that you have the strength.”

A lot of the time this self-serving bias does not matter greatly, but on the occasions when a person needs to change in a big way, it is difficult to bridge the gap between what we thought we were, and what we are. This can lead to denial, and clinging to false ideologies. Other people or groups are painted as the devil incarnate, and ourselves as unimpeachable. This misplaced moral idealism powers many groups, and in individuals narcissistic self-esteem can lead to violent acts. The cure is elimination of judgmentalism, which can be achieved through empathy and responsibility for one’s own behavior.

### **Making sense out of adversity**

Nietzsche is famous for his statement, ‘What does not kill you will make you stronger’. Haidt introduces us to the “adversity hypothesis”, the idea that “people need adversity, setbacks, and

perhaps even trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment and personal development". Adversity reveals inner talents, strengthens relationships and alters priorities, and people as diverse as St. Paul and the Dalai Lama have pointed out the benefits of suffering. But when is adversity beneficial, and when is it harmful?

Haidt notes there can be weak and strong versions of the hypothesis, the weak suggesting that adversity *can* lead to self-improvement, while the strong indicating that it is *essential* for growth. Although research shows little evidence of adversity-induced personality growth, Haidt suggests that studies measuring all the levels of a personality, from basic traits to "characteristic adaptations" to "life story", do show marked changes. When people rebuild "beautifully those parts of their lives and life stories that they could never have torn down voluntarily", they reach a level of inner coherence among their personality levels. What is important is not so much optimism, but the ability to weave a meaningful story out of adversity. One finding is that people who speak or write about a trauma suffer less than those who do not. Expression of what happened in words, giving reasons for why it might have happened and the good which may come of it, allows for growth in insight, allowing one to move on in life.

Haidt is interesting in noting that a person might gain the maximum benefit if they face and overcome adversity in the late teens to early twenties, this being the most influential period for personality development. Parents should not shelter their children too much, and allow them the full benefits of adversity.

### **Virtues and strengths**

Most ancient cultures specify a broad set of virtues, but the West was different in its worship of reason. Two radical ideas emerged through the Enlightenment: Kant's "categorical imperative", and utilitarianism (See Mill), and the result of both was morality shifting from the *character* of a person, to his or her *actions*, turning moral education into training in problem solving rather than in virtue.

Benjamin Franklin once set out to achieve moral perfection by cultivating a list of virtues, concluding that the endeavour made him happier. Haidt claims this as the basis for the "virtue hypothesis" – that cultivating virtue makes one happy, and he finds a basis for this in Buddhism and as stated by the Epicurean concept that, "It is impossible to live the pleasant life without also living sensibly, nobly and justly, and it is impossible to live sensibly, nobly and justly without living pleasantly."



Twentieth century societies value personal fulfillment more than self-restraint, but the newish field of positive psychology has emerged with a list of universal strengths and virtues that “might be valid for any human culture”, Haidt suggests. The virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence, create a base for the flowering of more specific personal strengths – and happiness.

### **The meaning in life**

Towards the end of the book Haidt laments that modern philosophy lacks a deep understating of human nature, and suggests that only by first understanding what we are can we then ask what is a meaningful life. He notes that most people find ‘flow’ in their work and this helps define who they are. Psychologist Robert White said that humans have a “basic drive to make things happen”, or the “effectiveness motive”.

Most people approach work in one of three ways: a job, career or a calling. Those who work only for the money have a job, those who have goals of advancement have a career, and a calling is for those who see their work as contributing to the greater good. With the right attitude, one’s job becomes a calling. Hence love and work are crucial to one’s happiness, drawing us “out of ourselves and into connection with people and projects beyond ourselves”. Extraordinarily successful people have crafted their lives through relationships with people and values that have deepened over time. This “vital engagement” does not reside in either the person or the environment, but in between the two.

Haidt delineates three aspects to the self: physical, psychological and socio-cultural, and says that “people gain a sense of meaning when their lives cohere across the three levels”. Happiness and meaning automatically emerge from cross-level coherence. Religions do much to create this coherence.

### **Final comments**

Haidt ends by discussing the eternally shifting balance between seemingly opposed principles, which Heraclitus pointed to and which is symbolized by the Chinese symbols of yin and yang. Today, religion and science seem in opposition, but in fact one requires the insights of both to fully understand human nature. The Western and Eastern approaches to life can also learn from each other, and the idea of a balance between opposites can also be applied to liberals and conservatives.

Societies need the ideals of both. A good place to look for wisdom, Haidt says, is in the minds of one's enemies; once the "blindness of the myth of pure evil" are removed, one might see, perhaps for the first time, the good ideas of the opponent.

The most important lesson Haidt has learned from his research is that nearly all people are morally motivated and that when groups of people come together, they can overcome selfishness and give respect to each other's pursuit of virtue. Wisdom that is balanced, whether between East and West, ancient and new, liberal and conservative, has the potential to impart happiness, satisfaction and meaning. The greatest ideas of humanity and its best science are there for everyone; by drawing on them, a person can learn about his limits and his possibilities and live a wise – and happy - existence. Paradoxically, it is in admitting fully the extent to which we are subjects of forces beyond conscious control that we can truly appreciate what freedom we do have to shape a life.

### **Jonathan Haidt**

Born in 1963, Haidt has a PhD in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. In 2001 he received the Templeton Prize in positive psychology, and is best known for his 'moral foundations theory', which attempts to identify universal moral values across cultures, and for his research into the moral outlooks and mindsets of American liberals and conservatives. He was a professor in psychology at the University of Virginia for 16 years, and is now at the NYU-Stern School of Business in New York.

His other books are *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived* (2002, with Corey Keyes); *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012); and *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018, with Greg Lukianoff).

## **Free Will**

(2012)

Sam Harris

“Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are not aware, and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have.”

“Thoughts simply arise, unauthored, and yet author our actions”.

“What I will do next and why remains at bottom a mystery, one that is fully determined by the laws of nature and the prior state of the universe.”

## **In a nutshell**

Our actions are the result of our brain states at any moment, which are in turn subject to prior causes. To blame people for what they are is a waste of time.

## **In a similar vein**

Ralph Waldo *Emerson Fate*

David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

William James *Pragmatism*

Friedrich Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*

Baruch Spinoza *Ethics*

### **Sam Harris begins this short (100-page) book with an account of a horrific crime.**

In 2007, in a quiet American town, two men entered a house before dawn, and finding an adult male asleep, bludgeoned him with a baseball bat. They went upstairs to find his wife and daughters still sleeping. They bound the daughters to the beds, and one of the men drove the mother to the bank, where she withdrew \$15,000 and handed it over. Back at the house, the men divided up the money, and the older daughter was raped. Hearing the father stir, they doused the house in gasoline and lit it. The father escaped alive, but the girls and her mother died of smoke inhalation. When the police later asked one of the men why he hadn't untied the others before starting the fire, he replied "It didn't cross my mind".

Harris' point in telling the story? Our reaction of horror at what the men did is based on the assumption that that they had a choice not to, but went ahead anyway. It is this callous intentionality that matters to us (we don't really care that one of the men was raped repeatedly as a child, or that the other recently attempted suicide from remorse). Though Harris finds their behaviour sickening, he also admits that if he was forced to trade places with one of them, he would *be* that man. "There would be no part of me that could see the world differently". With the same genes, life history, brain and even 'soul', we would have done what that man did, in that moment. "These men can not know why they are as they are", Harris writes, "nor can we account for why we are not like them."

### **If we are what we are, we can't be otherwise**

Free will is simply an illusion, Harris says. Our wills are subject to causes which we are not aware of; there are so many processes in our brain that we have no control over, any more than we control our heartbeat or our breathing. We believe we could have behaved differently than we did in the past, and that it is *we* who gave rise to our thoughts and actions. Yet we don't "decide the next thought we think" – thinking just happens. Why do we feel like having coffee one day, and tea the next? Decisions don't arise from consciousness, they *appear* in consciousness.

Harris cites the tests which have shown that the decision to do something (lift the arm, move a chair) is made in the brain some time before 'we' consciously become aware of it. Therefore, our neurology is almost set up to make us believe the illusion that we are acting freely. Science tells us that our actions and thoughts are the direct result of our neurological wiring and brain states, but even assuming that our minds are a non-physical 'soul', "nothing about my argument would change", Harris says, because the operations of a soul work unconsciously on us too, just like the brain.

But if so much of our conscious thinking and action is the result of our physical and emotional heritage, how can we ever hold people truly responsible for their actions? Harris says his thinking does not absolve people of crimes – you obviously have to treat a man who murders a child differently than one who kills one by accident in his car. But to say that a rapist or murderer could have behaved differently, is also to say that they were free to resist their impulses – but given their brain states which are the subject of prior causes of which they were subjectively unaware, how could they have acted differently? And if this is so, how can we 'blame' them?

However, if we are just instruments of our own biology, how can we have moral responsibility, and what does it do to our criminal justice system? Even if free will is illusory, it is still clear that our actions have beneficial or harmful effects. In terms of criminal justice, the emphasis therefore must shift from punishment to risk assessment. Some people do need to be locked up if they are a threat to others, Harris says, yet the traditional moral finger pointing associated with crime becomes no longer valid. Instead of hating or fearing them or calling them 'evil', our attitude becomes, "They are unlucky to be who they are". But this shouldn't stop us protecting the rest of society from such people.

### **Where do our choices come from?**

Harris argues that we do not determine our wants, they are "given by the cosmos" in ways we can't fathom. Perhaps you feel thirsty, and you drink a glass of water, but not a glass of juice. Why not juice? It didn't occur to you, any more than it occurred to the man to untie his victims from the bed before the fire started. Harris asks: "Are we free to do that which it does not occur to us to do?" Obviously not. If we were, then we would not be in the universe we are in."

Harris is keen to point out that there *is* a difference between volitional and non-volitional states of mind, which are indeed governed by different systems of the brain. Therefore, consciousness is real enough. And yet...we didn't originate the causes of our back pain, or the thought that we should do something about it. Both just appear. The fact that we have the state of conscious deliberation does not mean that we are free willed, because "We do not know what we intend to do until the intention arises".

The traditional libertarian view imagines that "human agency must magically rise above the plain of physical causation", and that our conscious intentions show that we have free will. True, says Harris, intentions do tell us a lot about a person, but our possession of intentions does not prove that we are free-willed. The origin of intentions is totally mysterious.

Harris uses an example from his own life: in his teens and twenties he was very into martial arts, training all the time. Then he stopped, and only recently, after 20 years, started again. Why did he stop? Other things became more important to him. And why did he resume training after all this time? Because he read a book related to martial arts, which inspired him – but why did it inspire him, and why now? For such questions he has no answer. He could tell a story explaining his sudden return to martial arts, making sense of it, but in fact, he says, "the actual explanation for my behaviour is hidden from me".

Just because we *feel* we have free will, doesn't mean it actually exists. Harris' controversial point is that our "attribution of agency" (the reason we give for having done something) is always in error. We make up reasons after the fact to give order to our minds, but the truth is, we do not know why we are how we are. "We do whatever it is we do, and it is meaningless to assert that we could have done otherwise." Or put a different way: "You can do what you decide to do, but you cannot decide what you will decide to do".

### **Final comments**

That free will is an illusion has had plenty of support in philosophy. Schopenhauer dismissed it out of hand, and Plotinus said, centuries before:

“All our ideas will be determined by a chain of previous causes; our doings will be determined by those ideas; personal action becomes a mere word. That we are the agents does not save our freedom when our action is prescribed by those causes.”

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote, “I shall never tire of emphasising a small, terse fact, namely, that a thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish...” The idea of a self-willing ego is a myth, and it is more accurate to speak of things that ‘one’ does, meaning a complex of sensation, emotion and thinking. In *Pragmatism*, William James also took the sceptical view, noting:

“Free-will is thus a general cosmological theory of PROMISE, just like the Absolute, God, Spirit or Design...If the past and present were purely good, who could wish that the future might possibly not resemble them? Who could desire free-will? ...Free-will thus has no meaning unless it be a doctrine of RELIEF. As such, it takes its place with other religious doctrines.”

Harris also sees the free will idea as the outgrowth of religion, providing psychological relief. But he does ask, late in the book: Won’t awareness of the illusion of free will diminish the quality of our lives? This is a subjective question, and he can only speak from his own experience, saying that it has only increased his compassion for others, and lessened his sense of entitlement or pride, since his achievements cannot really be called ‘his’, but rather are the result of his lucky, upbringing, genes and the time and place in which he lives. Awareness of the free will illusion has not made him more fatalistic but rather increased his sense of freedom, because his hopes, fears et cetera are not seen in such a personal, indelible way.

Harris spent years studying Buddhist meditation, the very purpose of which is to lose this sense of self, so the influence of this practice is clear in his work. The other essential feature of Buddhism, of course, is its emphasis on causality. Our lives are shaped by our actions in other lives, of which we will never be aware. Karma plays itself out whether we believe in free will or not.

## **Sam Harris**

Born in 1967, Harris grew up in Los Angeles with a Jewish mother and a Quaker father. He did not have a religious upbringing, but religion as a subject had always interested him. He enrolled at Stanford University in English, but left during his sophomore year to travel to Asia, where he studied meditation with Hindu and Buddhist teachers. In 1997 he returned to Stanford University to complete a BA degree in philosophy. In 2009 he completed his Ph.D. in neuroscience at University of California, Los Angeles.

Harris’ bestsellers include *The End of Faith* (2004), *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), *The Moral Landscape* (2010), and *Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality Without Religion* (2015). He is also the cofounder and the CEO of Project Reason, a non-profit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society.

## **Fragments**

(6<sup>th</sup> century)

Heraclitus

“It is one and the same thing to be living or dead, awake or asleep, young or old. The former aspect in each case becomes the latter, and the latter the former...”

“Human nature has no set purpose, but the divine has.”

“A man is found foolish by a god, as a child by a man.”

“...wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all.”

## **In a nutshell**

Everything changes all the time, and yet there is a hidden harmony to the universe.

## **In a similar vein**

Plato *The Republic*

Plotinus *Enneads*

**One of the great pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus was the eldest son of the leading family of Ephesus, one of the main cities of the ancient Greek world and famous for its temple to Artemis.**

We don't know a huge amount about him, except that he avoided involvement in politics, was a bit of a loner, and at a time when it was normal for philosophers to play a part in politics, and to have their ideas communicated by word, he focused on the written word. As a result, Heraclitus' thoughts survived him, and his book of sayings became famous in the ancient world. Plato and others discussed him, but his influence was greatest among the Stoics.

The *Fragments* are a collection of sayings and statements covering the nature of the physical universe, ethics and politics, but it is Heraclitus' metaphysical ideas have retained their power. It is these we focus on here.

### **The Logos**

The book begins with this statement:

“Although this Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it – not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time...though all things come to pass in accordance with this Logos, men seem to be quite without any experience of it...My own method is to distinguish each thing according to its nature, and to specify how it behaves; other men, on the contrary, are as forgetful and heedless in their waking moments of what is going on around and within them as they are during sleep.”

What does Heraclitus mean by 'Logos'? The literal Greek translation is 'Word', and it is sometimes translated as 'account'. He is saying that what follows in the book is an account of something timeless and truthful: an unseen force (not that different from the biblical 'Word' or the 'Tao' in Taoism) that regulates and runs the universe according to its own principles.

Humans can only act in a right way if their actions are in attunement with the Logos. Most people, however, do not understand it, even if it is the force that regulates their lives:

“We should let ourselves be guided by what is common to all. Yet, although the Logos is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence of his own.”

Whoever thinks that they are a separate mind, and manage themselves as if they are an isolated kingdom, is fooling themselves. They believe their own opinions instead of seeing things in their true light. “Thinking”, Heraclitus says, “is shared by all”. Ultimately, we are all of the same mind. However, we stay blind to this fact: “Although intimately connected with the Logos, men keep setting themselves against it”. And this is the cause of our suffering.

### **Constant change**

Much of Heraclitus' renown comes from this concept. At a time when natural science was in its infancy, and men were trying to pinpoint what was certain and stable in our universe, Heraclitus said:

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“Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed.”

The world seems so stable and ‘there’, but when we thinking about it, nothing that we experience lasts. Everything is in flux. The most famous line in the *Fragments* is:

“You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on.”

In a world that identifies with matter, this is an almost heretical thought, and put Heraclitus in contrast with another ancient thinker, Parmenides, who argued that motion and change were not real, and that reality was fixed and stable. Indeed, Heraclitus’ idea of the stability of the universe being largely an illusion is one we more associate with Eastern philosophy. The following line, for instance, could easily have been taken from a Buddhist text:

“Cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist.”

This view of the universe as essentially energy (Heraclitus saw the element of fire as its basic physical component) that is perpetually taking on different forms has major implications for the human condition. Heraclitus was known as the ‘weeping philosopher’, because he despaired at the lot of humankind; we are conscious beings with the full range of feelings, yet we exist in a world whose very nature is conflict.

Indeed, a first reader to the *Fragments* can at first wonder why it gives considerable attention to war. But as Heraclitus sees it, in a universe made of matter (and competing conceptions of truth among intelligent animals), conflict is inevitable. War is the thing that sorts out human fates, making some people slaves and others free. Heraclitus notes Homer’s wish that “strife may perish from amongst gods and men”, and says that, in fact, “all things come to pass through the *compulsion* of strife” (my italics). Conflict, or in more abstract terms, the dynamic tension between opposites is the very nature of the universe.

“Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the fairest harmony.”

Only through this tension of opposites can there emerge any order.

### **The hidden harmony**

At a time when natural science was emerging, Heraclitus did not see his wisdom as going against science. Even if it seemed less obvious or even mystical to the wrong ears, he was simply trying to show the universe *as it is*, even if it seemed paradoxical to linear, atomising minds. Rather than make what he felt were false distinctions, he wrote:

“The way up and the way down are one and the same”, and “In the circle the beginning and the end are common.”

It is our nature to separate things into parts, to make distinctions, but if there were a Supreme Being, is this the way it would see the universe? No, says Heraclitus: “Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to acknowledge that all things are one.” And he is not simply talking about the physical universe, but what we call ethics too:

“To God all things are beautiful, good and right; men, on the other hand, deem some things right and others wrong.”

This does not mean we should act however we like, rather that good and bad, right and wrong are part of a larger whole, and everything about it is right.

Heraclitus seems to contradict himself on whether there is a God. The Logos is not God as such, and in some statements he sees the universe as a kind of self-perpetuating mechanism which “...has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be – and ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.” Yet elsewhere, he clearly says that there is a divine mind with an intelligent purpose, in contrast to the blindness of man:

“Man is not rational; only what encompasses him is intelligent.”

However, it is possible to know, or at least be aware of, “the intelligence by which all things are steered through all things”. There is a ‘hidden harmony’ in the universe, hidden because all our names which might approximate it: God, Zeus, etc, are our *conceptions*, when the essential unity is beyond words and concepts. Of the average person, Heraclitus writes, “They pray to images, much as if they should talk to houses; for they do not know the nature of gods...” The only thing stopping us from awareness of this hidden harmony is our incredulity. Our minds are so fixed on the material, that we take this *relative* level of reality to be everything; yet there is an absolute reality that awaits our appreciation.

### **Final comments**

Heraclitus’ statement that “all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife” can be read to mean that the world is simply chaos, or that chance determines everything. This is certainly how most humans may experience it. Indeed, Heraclitus seems to offer only a dark view of humankind in which people are largely blind, and perpetuate this blindness by reproducing.

Is there a way out? There *is* something that is beyond the cycle of birth, suffering and death, and it is this hidden harmony (call it Logos, God, Mind, Tao). Only in sensing it and appreciating it can we put human life into some perspective. The greatest suffering comes from believing something ephemeral to be solid and permanent. Only in accepting the flux for what it is do we give ourselves the space to see what never changes.

## **Thinking, Fast and Slow**

(2011)

Daniel Kahneman

“Extreme predictions and a willingness to predict rare events from weak evidence are both manifestations of System 1...And it is natural for System 1 to generate overconfident judgements, because confidence...is determined by the coherence of the best story you can tell from the evidence at hand. Be warned: your intuitions will deliver predictions that are too extreme and you will be inclined to put far too much faith in them.”

“My personal hindsight-avoiding policy is to be either very thorough or completely casual when making a decision with long-term consequences.”

### **In a nutshell**

Because the way we think determines what we know, psychological research plays an important part in the search for truth.

### **In a similar vein**

David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Kathryn Schulz *Being Wrong*

Nassim Nicholas Taleb *The Black Swan*

**Daniel Kahneman is a psychologist who also happened to win a Nobel Prize in Economics for his work in ‘prospect theory’ (or making decisions under uncertainty).** He has also made major contributions to the psychology of perception and attention, behavioural economics, and hedonic psychology (or what makes people happy, and when they are happiest). That he has been honoured at the highest level in two disciplines is a tip that Kahneman is a modern-day Renaissance man, and his work (as he has admitted) has big implications for philosophy.

In a 2012 lecture, ‘Thinking That We Know’, Kahneman noted that “the shared search for agreed and objective truth is the central mission of science. But the sense of truth is a subjective experience, which falls in the domain of psychology.” In other words, we are desperate to know things, but – as Hume noted - we perceive the world through our senses, so our interpretation of what we see and hear is different for each of us. We have a different experience of ‘truth’ because of these different perceptions. Even within our minds there is no universality or standard way of perceiving.

*Thinking, Fast and Slow* is the culmination of Kahneman’s stellar career as a research psychologist, summarising the well-known experiments with colleague Amos Tversky on judgement and decision making, specifically the systematic errors (or ‘biases’) which are reasonably predictable in certain circumstances. Our intuition is often right, but there are plenty of other times when it is wrong. Moreover, we are often way too confident about our judgements than we have a right to be (we are “a machine for jumping to conclusions”, he says); objective observers often have a more accurate picture of a situation than we do. We are ‘strangers to ourselves’, Kahneman argues, not really always in control of our thoughts as we would like to be. And worryingly, not only can we be blind to the obvious, “we can be blind to our blindness”. Kahneman’s work has also revealed the two quite different ways that we think: “fast” (system 1) and “slow” (system 2). We look at both below.

### **How thinking actually happens: two systems**

We believe our thinking is one conscious thought leading to another, but Kahneman says that a lot of the time this is not the way thinking happens. Thoughts come without us knowing how they got there.

*“You cannot trace how you came to the belief that there is a lamp on the desk in front of you, or how you detected a hint of irritation in your spouse’s voice on the telephone, or how you managed to avoid a threat on the road before you became consciously aware of it. The mental work that produces impressions, intuitions, and many decisions goes on in silence in your mind.”*

These immediate impressions Kahneman describes as ‘fast’ or ‘System 1’ thinking. We use it much more often than slow, deliberative ‘System 2’ thinking, which can include anything from filling out a tax form, to parking in a narrow space, to trying out an argument. System 2 thought involves attention and effort, or to use a philosophical word, reason.

The systems can operate in tandem. When System 1 cannot solve a problem immediately, it calls on System 2, with its detailed and deliberate processing, to chew it over and come up with an answer. System 1 allows us to drive along a highway without thinking about driving; System 2 kicks

in when we need to suddenly think where we are going. System 1 allows us to read a story to our daughter without actually taking it in; System 2 comes to life when she asks a question.

System 1's quick assessments are usually good, and if you are an expert in your field you probably make System 1 assessments all the time based on your wealth of knowledge. They save us a lot of time and effort. However, System 1 thinking is far from perfect; it has systemic biases, and it can't be turned off. To make accurate judgements, therefore, we have to be aware of it. System 2 is usually in charge, because it can slow down thinking and make more reasoned assessments. But it is also an apologist for the more intuitive judgements of System 1.

System 1 thinking is not concerned at lack of information; it simply takes what it does 'know' and jumps to a conclusion e.g. when we hear the phrase 'Will Mindik be a good leader? She is intelligent and strong', we automatically assume that yes, she will be a good leader. But what if the remainder of the sentence was, '...corrupt and cruel'. Why did we not ask for more information about Mindik's attributes, to make a proper assessment? Our brains don't work that way, Kahneman says. We create biases based on initial, incomplete knowledge, or weave a story out of limited facts. This is the WYSIATI – 'what you see is all there is' rule of human judgement. We tend to believe whatever statements or facts are present to us, even if we know there is or may be another side to the story.

## Thinking errors

*Thinking, Fast and Slow* goes through an array of biases and errors in intuitive thinking, many of which Kahneman and Tversky discovered. We look at a few in brief.

Kahneman had always had a private theory that politicians were more likely adulterers than people in other fields, because of the aphrodisiac of power and spending a lot of time from home. In fact, he later realised, it was just that politicians' affairs were more likely to be reported. This he calls the '**availability heuristic**'. 'Heuristic' means something which allows us to discover something or solve a problem; in this context, if things are in recent memory, we are more likely to identify them as relevant. The media obviously plays a role in this.

We are wired more for the struggle for survival on the savannah than we are for urban life. The result is that "Situations are constantly evaluated as good or bad, requiring escape or permitting approach". In everyday life, it means that **our aversion to losses is naturally greater than our attraction to gain** (by a factor of 2). We have an in-built mechanism to give priority to bad news. Our brains are set up to detect a predator in a fraction of a second, much quicker than the part of brain set up to even acknowledge one has been seen. That is why we can act before we even 'know' we are acting. "Threats are privileged above opportunities", Kahneman says. This natural tendency means we 'overweight' unlikely events, such as being caught in a terrorist attack. It also means we overestimate our chances of winning the lottery

The advice to "act calm and kind regardless of how you feel", Kahneman says, is good advice; **our movements and expressions condition how we actually feel**. He notes an experiment which found that subjects holding a pencil in their mouth such that their mouth was spread wide (like a smile) made them find cartoons funnier than if they were holding a pencil in their mouth in a way that resembled a frown.

An image of wide open staring eyes above an honesty box in a university cafeteria makes people more likely to be honest about putting the appropriate money into the box. When the image is of flowers, they are less likely to be honest. This is the '**priming**' effect. In another experiment, subjects primed with images of dollar bills were less likely to be cooperative or engage in group activity, and more likely to want to do something on their own. Other studies have demonstrated that reminding people of old age makes them walk more slowly; having polling booths in schools makes people more likely to vote for school funding measures (if they are undecided in the first place).

Similar to priming is the '**anchoring**' effect, best illustrated by the fact that a number suggested or stated before a question is asked will affect the answer. For instance, people told that 'Gandhi died when he was 144' nearly always give an estimate of his actual age of death that is much higher than they would normally. Another example is shoppers being told there is a limit of '12 items per buyer' – this nearly always makes them buy more than they otherwise would.

Kahneman discusses the '**halo effect**'. For instance, if we like a politician's policies, we are likely to think he is good looking too. If we flirt with someone at a party, we are more likely to promote them as 'generous' if asked to give an assessment of their likelihood to give to a charity, even if we know nothing about them. The halo effect sometimes dramatically increases the weight of first impressions, and often subsequent impressions don't matter at all. When grading exam papers, Kahneman admits that his rating of the first essay in a student's exam booklet had a big influence on how he saw the other essays. He shifted to reading the classes essays by order of topic, not by student, and his ratings became much more accurate.

The '**availability bias**' tells us that our estimates of the likelihood of things occurring is very much affected by what has happened to us in recent memory, or what's been in the news. For example, people think deaths caused by lightning are more common than deaths by botulism, but the latter is 52 times more frequent.

Kahneman discusses '**miswanting**' – making decisions based on what we *think* will make us happy (e.g. a new car or house, or living in another city), but which does not in fact over the long term. It was Kahneman and his colleague David Schkade who demonstrated that climate has zero effect on happiness. Californians like their climate, and Midwesterners don't like theirs, but these views don't affect their overall sense of well-being. Someone who moves from a cold area to California will seem happier for their first few years, as they remind themselves of the contrast between the weather here and what it was like before – but such things don't affect happiness over the long term.

The actual moment we are living in leaves much less of an impression on the brain than beginnings, endings and big events. This is why, when we decide where to go or what to do on our next vacation, we pay more for the memories than the actual experience. **The remembering self is more powerful than the experiencing self**, shaping our decisions. Yet we are still left with 'the time between', the rest of life that we must live through. "The mind is good with stories", Kahneman says, "but it does not appear to be well designed for processing time."

Each age has its own thinking biases. In the 1970s, most social scientists made an assumption that the people are generally rational and their thinking sound, but that sometimes emotion hijacks this rationality. In fact, things work more the other way around. We draw on the

rational mind only when we really need it. **Our thought is not 'corrupted' by emotion, rather much of our thinking *is* emotional.**

### **Reading causes into everything**

System 1 is biased to believe and confirm, not to question. It is always looking for links between events and for causality, even when there is none. We like to weave causality into events that are actually random, and this activity is supported by the fact that random processes can seem or look very unrandom. "The tendency to see patterns in randomness is overwhelming", Kahneman says.

We see a basketball player sink a few baskets in a row, or have a stretch of good games, and we think he has a 'hot hand'. We see an investment adviser have three good years in a row, and assume she has a touch of genius. Both individuals, though, may just be having the kind of good performance that true randomness would predict.

To get a real understanding of whether anything is statistically significant, you need a very large sample to rule out randomness. Kahneman argues that we create "a view of the world around us that is simpler and more coherent than the data justify". "Causal explanations of chance events", he writes, "are inevitably wrong." To avoid reading too much into anything, we must have an appreciation of the nature of true randomness, which can often look *not* random.

The demand for illusory certainty is never more apparent than in the business world, Kahneman notes, where CEOs are presumed to have a huge effect on company performance. This effect is usually exaggerated (both on the plus and minus sides), because we all want to believe that a single person has some magic formula for success, or that one rotten apple destroyed the company. In fact, "The comparison of firms that have been more or less successful is to a significant extent a comparison between firms that have been more or less lucky." For instance, there is now little or no difference between the 'great' examples of businesses profiled by Tom Peters in his book *In Search of Excellence* and Jim Collins' *Built to Last* - and those considered bad or mediocre at the time. Books like this preserve an illusion of understanding, based on our love for stories of triumph or failure.

### **The illusion of 'expert' judgment**

When Kahneman worked as a psychologist for the Israeli army, one of his tasks was to judge the calibre of potential officers. Based on their observations, Kahneman and his colleague were quite confident of their assessments, yet when the soldiers actually went to officer school all their judgements proved to be quite wrong. The lesson? "[Declarations] of high confidence mainly tell you that an individual has constructed a coherent story in his mind, not necessarily that the story is true."

Kahneman enjoys dispelling the myth of the 'expert fund manager'. Their role of selecting stocks, he says, is little more than rolling dice. Study after study has shown that, bizarrely for an industry built on the image of 'skill', stock pickers in fact perform no better than chance, and there is zero correlation between performance year to year. He also discusses Philip Tetlock's *Expert Political Judgement: How good is it? How can we know?* (2005) which showed how political pundits perform no better in making predictions than 'dart-throwing monkeys' - and in fact worse than if they had left their predictions up to pure chance. Not only is their ability to read situations no better than the

average newspaper reader, the more famous the expert, generally the worse their predictions, because they are overconfident.

Kahneman believes that in most situations, simple formulas trump human intuitions. In many areas, such as evaluation of credit risk, chance of sudden infant death, prospects of success for new businesses, or suitability of foster parents, algorithms make more accurate predictions than 'expert' practitioners. Humans are horribly inconsistent in their valuations, algorithms are not. Experts want to take account of a whole range of complex information, but usually only two or three parameters are enough to make a good judgement. For instance, there is an algorithm for predicting the future value of Bordeaux wines using only three variables of weather, and it is much more accurate than professional wine tasters. Intuition or global judgements can be useful, but only after getting the facts – it is not a replacement. Expert intuition can be trusted only when the environment is stable and regular (e.g. chess), not open ended and complex.

## Final comments

One of Kahneman's fascinating conclusions is that, in terms of changing the way we personally think and act, studying psychology has no effect at all. We can learn about experiments which show, for instance, that people are very reluctant to help others in distress when we think others could step in instead, but our knowledge of the darkness of human nature doesn't mean it will change our behaviour in the future. Instead we think, 'Oh, we are not like that'. His insight is that awareness of statistical likelihood in experiments doesn't change us, only individual cases do – because from these cases we can weave a meaningful story out of it, and we are story-making creatures.

Yet Kahneman also says that the book's focus on error "does not denigrate human intelligence, any more than the attention to diseases in medical texts denies good health. Most of us are healthy most of the time, and most of our judgements and actions are appropriate most of the time." Indeed, *Thinking: Fast and Slow's* focus on the great array of biases and failures in human thinking does not mean it has a negative tone. Rather, it offers hope, because many of these thinking black spots were once hidden or unconscious - and so we were at the mercy of them. Now, we can factor them in to any rational decision we need to make, or theory we wish to develop. Philosophy too, is as vulnerable to these cognitive mistakes as any field, and to think it is above them is hubris.

I

## Daniel Kahneman

Kahneman was born in 1934 in Tel Aviv while his mother was visiting Israel. His parents were from Lithuania and his early years were spent in France, where the family managed to avoid Nazi persecution. They moved to British Palestine in 1948, and Kahneman went on to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he took a degree in psychology.

After graduating he worked as a psychologist in the Israeli army, developing tests for evaluating officers. In his mid-20s went to the United States to do a PhD in psychology at the



University of California, Berkeley, and in 1961 returned to Israel to take up a lecturing position, staying for several years. Later research and teaching posts include the University of Michigan, Harvard and Stanford University. He is currently a senior scholar and professor emeritus in the psychology department and Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs at Princeton. He is married to the psychology professor Ann Treisman.

Other books include *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* (2022), with Cass Sunstein and Oliver Sibony.

**Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error**  
(2010)

Kathryn Schulz

“All of us have held ideas about ourselves that have either collapsed abruptly or fallen by the wayside over time. We thought we didn’t want kids, we thought we’d grow up to be a doctor, we thought we couldn’t be happy living in L.A., we thought we’d never succumb to depression or develop an addiction or begin an affair. For all of us, our own private history – like the history of science, like the history of humankind – is littered with discarded theories.”

**In a nutshell**

Humans seem to be built to make lots of mistakes, and it is only in accepting this that we are likely to be wrong less often.

**In a similar vein**

Daniel Kahneman *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

Karl Popper *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*

Nassim Nicholas Taleb *The Black Swan*

**Twelve hundred years before Descartes said “I think, therefore I am”, St Augustine wrote *fallor ergo sum: I err, therefore I am*.** To be human is to be wrong, Kathryn Schulz notes, and wrongness is a sort of proof, like Descartes’ proof, that we are alive. And if that is so, she says, surely “it’s time we got to know it.”

Mistakes may seem like a strange subject to write a book about, but *Being Wrong* brilliantly shows why they matter: they can destroy our self-confidence, alienate us from others, land us in prison or kill us. A mistake made by a whole discipline, culture or religion can have much worse effects. Belief in the ‘science’ of phrenology (measuring the size and shape of the skull), for instance, led to awful discrimination against people and groups who did not have the ‘right’ shape. Schulz’s larger question is; what does it do to our sense of self when something we deeply believed turns out to be wrong?

### **To be human is to be wrong**

Though mistakes are very much part of the fabric of who we are, it is our nature to downplay, cover over, deny, or to blame them on others. To compensate for this failing, religions have developed proper ways of admitting wrongness, from Catholicism’s sacrament of confession to Judaism’s Yom Kippur. More recently, twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous serve this purpose. And of course the criminal justice system has elements of penitence along with the punishment. But in Western culture, Schulz asks, what mechanism is there for admitting you are wrong half way through an argument, or bigger (but non-criminal) things like, half way through life, admitting that you have been wrong about your faith, your career or your choice of spouse? We find it easier to admit error on small things, but unwilling to admit wrongness on the big matters. Yet surely, Schulz asks, if the big things are so important to our happiness and sense of worth, shouldn’t we do absolutely everything we can to eliminate error in making such decisions?

The difficulty in admitting we are wrong is matched by the ease which we can see error in others, captured by that delicious phrase, ‘I told you so’. It feels good to be right. In relationships, she recalls the therapist’s adage that you can either be right, or be in a relationship. In politics, she notes that “Of all the strife in the world...a staggering amount of it arises from the clash of mutually incompatible, entirely unshakeable feelings of rightness.” Apart from this rightness of belief, there are endless policy and strategic decisions based on wrong information, such as Saddam Hussein’s fabled weapons of mass destruction that triggered the second Iraq war.

Given our limited intellects, poor memories, raging emotions, and our five senses that give us a very distorted picture of the world, humans are particularly susceptible to getting things wrong. Many domains now have a sub-field of 'error mitigation' which involves paying people to find errors. Though it is not that hard to spot mistakes in a manufacturing process, identifying the sources and range of human error is more complex, because humans have so many potential ways of messing up.

### **Why and how we err**

The surprise is less that we are very often wrong, than that we never know where and *how* we will be wrong. This is the salient point about error, Schulz observes: when you are amidst it, you are totally unaware of it. At the time, of course, it always seems we are on the right path:

“This is the problem of error blindness. Whatever falsehoods each of us currently believes are necessarily invisible to us...the sentence ‘I am wrong’ describes a logical impossibility. As soon as we know that we are wrong, we aren’t wrong anymore, since to recognize a belief as false is to stop believing in it. Thus we can only say ‘I *was* wrong’. Call it the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of Error: we can be wrong, or we can know it, but we can’t do both at the same time...error-blindness helps explain why we accept fallibility as a universal phenomenon yet are constantly startled by our own mistakes.”

All this can be summed up in the desperate and bewildered phrase, *What was I thinking?*

Part of the reason for error blindness is that, although we believe we learn from past errors, we have a ‘database design flaw’ in our brains, such that we are not good at remembering, categorising or making prominent occasions when we have been wrong. As a result, we lay ourselves open to commit the same errors, and are surprised when we do.

Schulz describes the phenomenon of ‘superior’ or ‘arctic’ mirages, caused by the curvature of the earth, which commonly occur near the poles, and which seem to show sailors large land masses, even mountain ranges, on the horizon. If sailors relied on what they could actually see, they would make grave errors, and it is only by trusting their navigational tools that they can dismiss the supposed evidence of their eyes. The point is that our senses are quite unreliable as a source of truth, and yet it seems natural for us to trust them. This is one reason why we are always surprised when we are wrong.

The history of science amounts to a history of errors, which each generation corrects, only to be corrected in the next. Indeed, the theory of ‘pessimistic meta-induction’ says that *every* theory will eventually be proved wrong. If this is so, Schulz asks, why should we assume that what we believe today is correct? And if we know that we err all the time, how can we safely say that we have knowledge of anything? All our knowledge comes back to what we believe, so we have to look at belief itself. She mentions a psychological study by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, who set up a table in a department store displaying four pairs of pantyhose. They asked shoppers to give an opinion on the pantyhose, and each shopper then went ahead choosing which one they thought was best, giving reasons for their choice. The only thing was, all four pairs were identical. We are not only easily fooled, but we love to give *reasons* for our foolish choices. In the absence of knowledge, we confabulate. This is our nature. In short, Schulz observes, “...we love to know things, but ultimately we can’t know for sure that we know them; we are bad at recognizing when we *don’t* know something; and we are very, very good at making stuff up.”

In another illustration of how beliefs fail us, Schulz mentions Alan Greenspan, chairman of the US Federal Reserve, whose ‘absolutist’ belief in free markets was confounded with the global economic meltdown of 2008. Yet Greenspan was open enough to admit that his model of the financial world, which had seemed a good description of reality for decades, had been wrong. The problem is in the fact that we think our model of the world *is* the world itself, and this leads us to make three assumptions:

1. Ignorance assumption: Since we are convinced that our belief is based on fact, people who disagree do so because they don’t have the necessary information; if they knew what we knew, they would think like us.
2. Idiocy assumption: Those who disagree with us know the facts but don’t have the brains to understand them.
3. Evil assumption: Other people have the facts and are able to understand them but have deliberately decided to ignore them.

What children say – their errors in thinking - seems funny to us because their beliefs are based on much smaller database of information than ours. But how different are we to them? Our beliefs are based on what we know, and yet what we know can only be a tiny fraction of what there is to be known. Schulz points out that “like toddlers and tyrants, we are quick to take our own stories for the infallible truth, and to dismiss as wrongheaded or wicked anyone who disagrees”.

Is there anything we can do to lessen the frequency by which we are wrong? Schulz says that to build strong foundations for our beliefs, we must continually “seek out evidence that challenges [those] beliefs and to take seriously such evidence when we come across it”. To avoid big and costly errors we must go against our natural assumption that we right, and in the way of Karl Popper assume that we are wrong.

### **Benefits of self-deception**

Schulz notes the countless studies showing that people who suffer from depression have a more accurate picture of reality than the non-depressed. But this is the kind of accuracy we *don't* want, because it erodes optimism and well-being.

This reminds us of William James' pragmatic notion that it doesn't matter what you believe so much as that it has a positive effect for you. Think of children - who know little - yet with their many delusions they are generally much happier than grownups.

Schulz mentions studies suggesting that most of us see ourselves as a slightly better looking than we are, believe that our homes are grander than the reality would suggest, and see our loved ones in an overly rosy light. “These beliefs might skew the truth, but they stave off depression, give meaning to our lives, and make us and those we love happy.” Moreover, we wouldn't attempt half the things we do if we have a more accurate picture of what we can achieve in a certain timeframe.

One of the book's warming conclusions is that wrongness is optimism; if we know we have been wrong, then we feel we will be gloriously right in the future. A better world can be made from what we've learned. Seen this way, error is not a defect of the human condition, but part of its glory.

### **Final comments**

Thomas Aquinas believed that we err because in our banishment from Eden, we lost access to divine truth and were instead thrown into a world of foggy delusion. Separated from God, it was our nature to be wrong all the time, and only returning ourselves to the divine would we begin to see things clearly again. Plato believed something similar: that our souls were once part of universal truth, but when we took on form we naturally forgot these eternal truths. In our time, Heidegger said that because we are beings that exist in time and space, we are obstructed from seeing reality as a whole, which is not limited by these dimensions. Despite mentioning such ideas in passing, Schulz does not go further with the interesting possibility that there be some non-material source of truth

which, if it were accessible, might allow us to transcend our fallibility and human shortcomings, if only temporarily.

We are fallible because we are a body with five senses, and rely on these too much to interpret our world...but the point of every religion, and the argument of many philosophers, is that we arrive at truth only by putting our physicality in context, by *reducing* sensory input. The world is like a giant arctic mirage that seems to tell us what is, but it is only when we consult our internal instruments that we really know our position. Augustine came to the view that self-knowledge *by* the self was impossible. It was only in the context of a larger metaphysical reality that we could really get some understanding of the reason for our existence. According to this view, we get things wrong when we see ourselves as an island of consciousness, existing for ourselves and seeing things only from our perspective. In contrast, is it not true that many of the right decisions in our lives come from putting others first, or seeing ourselves as just one among many? Though Schulz does not say it herself, this is one implication we can draw from her work: that it is hard to go wrong when we loosen the ego's grip, with all its potential for error.

### **Kathryn Schulz**

Schulz is a graduate of Brown University and a freelance journalist and author. She has contributed to *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Rolling Stone*, *Slate*, *The Nation* and *Foreign Policy*, and blogs for *Slate*. From 2001 to 2006 she edited the online environmental magazine *Grist*. She has written about current affairs, politics, environmental issues, and labour and human rights, and has reported from Japan, the Middle East and the Americas. In 2004 she received a Pew Fellowship in International Journalism. Schulz is also the author of *Lost and Found: A Memoir* (2022).

## Living in the End Times

(2010)

Slavoj Žižek

“[Compare] the reaction to the financial meltdown of September 2008 with the Copenhagen conference of 2009: save the planet from global warming (alternatively: save the AIDS patients, save those dying for lack of funds for expensive treatments and operations, save the starving children, and so on) – all this can wait a little bit, but the call ‘Save the banks!’ is an unconditional imperative which demands and receives immediate action. The panic was here absolute, a trans-national, non-partisan unity was immediately established, all grudges between world leaders momentarily forgotten in order to avert *the* catastrophe. We may worry as much as we want about the global realities, but it is Capital which is the Real of our lives.”

“...what looms on the horizon today is the unheard-of possibility that human intervention will catastrophically disturb the run of things by triggering an ecological disaster, a fateful biogenic mutation, a nuclear or similar military-social calamity, and so on. No longer can we rely on the limited scope of our acts: it no longer holds that, whatever we do, history will go on regardless.”

### In a nutshell

Capitalism has become an ideology that doesn't allow alternatives, yet it is ill-equipped to face major environmental, scientific and social problems.

### In a similar vein

Jean Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation*

Noam Chomsky *Understanding Power*

GWF Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*

Friedrich Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*



**A “sort of communist” who loves the writings of arch-capitalist Ayn Rand, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek is full of contradictions.** Heavily influenced by Lacan, Hegel, Freud, Kant and Heidegger, his writings offer no overarching theory, and instead try to challenge assumptions about how the contemporary world works. A “bad conscience” of the world in the Nietzschean mould, his questioning of liberal holy cows such as tolerance and democracy led *National Review* to describe him as “the most dangerous philosopher in the West”.

A 500-page bestseller, *Living In The End Times* makes the dramatic suggestion that global liberal capitalism is reaching a crisis point, and he counts four ‘riders of the apocalypse’ that signal its end: the ecological crisis (which is, if anything, underestimated); the consequences of the biogenetic revolution (markets and governments won’t be able to control or regulate it, and it will lead to new divisions in society - those who can afford genetic and other manipulation for mental and physical improvement, and those who can’t); struggles over raw materials, food and water; and “the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions.”

Žižek begins by discussing Freud’s idea of *Unbehagen in der Kultur* – the discontent or unease in culture. Two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he notes that liberal capitalism has not brought the utopia people hoped for, and indeed, in many former communist countries, communist candidates have done well in elections. Socialism in the form it was expressed was obviously a failure, but like the man who dreams of running away with his mistress and, once he gets the opportunity, is shocked that it does not make him happy, the transition to capitalism as only served to highlight its own flaws, Žižek says. There is a “great disorder under heaven”, but we don’t want to admit it is happening.

### **End-time angst**

The structure of the book follows Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s famous ‘five stages of grief’: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. There is plenty of ideological whitewashing going on to deny that anything is changing. Anger is expressed in protests against the global capitalist order, on one hand, and religious fundamentalism on the other. Bargaining is taking the form of a new level of discussion about political economy and the revival of Marxist thinking. Depression is the outcome of events which seem random and have no cosmological meaning.

Out of it all is an emerging acceptance of the need for new forms of participation and emancipation, made possible by capitalism’s crises and the failure of democracy to allow the real popular voice to be heard. Part of the problem of capitalism is that it has shifted from its Protestant ethic roots to being merely a culture of envy and consumerism. This means that all kinds of social problems and contradictions are expected to be solved through the capitalist ethic of exchange. Examples: campaigns to give to starving third world children (which carry the message: “Give money - and you don’t have to think about the real causes of their conditions!”), and companies like Tom’s shoes which give a free pair of shoes to very poor people, for every pair you buy (there is no need to take any social action, money and the market will absolve you of all guilt).

Žižek sees capitalism as a deep ideology with millions of 'religious' believers, so when it is challenged you know something is wrong:

"...not only is religious faith part of capitalism, capitalism is itself also a religion, and it too relies on faith (in the institution of money, amongst other things). This point is crucial to understanding the cynical functioning of ideology: in contrast to the period when religious-ideological sentimentality covered up the brutal economic reality, today, it is ideological cynicism which obscures the religious core of capitalist beliefs".

He notes Walter Benn Michaels' remark that American liberals focus on racism and sexism so they don't have to address the much bigger issue of capitalism itself. As an example of contemporary ideology Žižek mentions Michael Palin's BBC travel programs. They have an ironic look at the world "while filtering out the really traumatic data" – they are non-political, but this is impossible given the world we live in is saturated with, and totally shaped by, capitalist beliefs.

The caricature of greedy capitalists should be replaced by an appreciation of the relentless effort of Capital as an impersonal force that reproduces itself, and which cares nothing about ecology. As his quote above (regarding the contrast between the Copenhagen summit and the frantic efforts in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis) suggests, saving the planet and saving people is nothing next to saving banks and the capitalist order. Capitalism is an ideology which threatens our long-term survival.

### **Keeping up appearances**

Writing on Wikileaks, Žižek argues that the real target was not individual states or politicians, but the structure of power itself, including the 'accepted' challengers to power (the press, NGOs etc). The 'success' of Wikileaks is a sign that the existing order can no longer contain or control itself. It is not so much that secrets have been exposed, but that the 'show' of power can no longer continue as it is:

"The only truly surprising thing about the revelations is that there was no surprise in them: didn't we learn *exactly* what we had expected to learn? All that was disturbed was the capacity to 'keep up appearances...This is the paradox of public space: even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, stating it publicly changes everything."

He mentions an Italian priest who was suspended by the Vatican for admitting in an interview that he was homosexual, while hundreds of paedophile priests went unpunished. His remark that "what matters is appearance, not reality" might be his judgment of the whole modern age. He also notes that "One of the most elementary cultural skills is to know when (and how) to pretend *not* to know (or notice), how to go on and act as if something which has happened did not in fact happen." This need to keep up appearances at all costs is the mark of ideology.

Žižek discusses the failed state Congo, which is basically run by children-drugging warlords who are paid off by foreign companies extracting mining wealth. The minerals sold are used in components for laptops and cell phones. We are led to believe that Congo has descended into anarchy because of the savageness of the locals, but in fact it is the foreign companies that are the

source of most of the problems. “There certainly is a great deal of darkness in the dense Congolese jungle – but its causes lie elsewhere, in the bright executive offices of our banks and high-tech companies”. Behind ethnic warfare “we discern the workings of global capitalism”.

Despite his view of capitalism, Žižek is not anti-American, and sees a grand hypocrisy in the “European attitude of sticking to high moral principles while silently counting on the US to do the dirty work for the sake of its own stability”. While Europe sees itself as the civilised end point of human progress, free of war, in fact it can only enjoy this existence because America is willing to be still part of ‘history’ in all its violent Hobbesian messiness. Many Europeans view the US as the outlaw or rogue, driven by ideology, while the Americans view Europe as too pragmatic, and blind to very real threats.

### **The failure of tolerance**

A key reason why Žižek is not accepted by the traditional socialist left is some decidedly ‘incorrect’ views. One of these concerns tolerance. He is not against it in principle, rather:

“...what I oppose is the (contemporary and automatic) perception of racism as a problem of intolerance. Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation, or injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, or even armed struggle?”

We so bend over backwards to be seen as good multiculturalists that we are blind to the possibility that a person may be intolerant because they have been relegated to the economic margins, and see others as responsible for their plight. If they felt they were equal, had rights and had money, their intolerance would melt away.

Western liberals also don’t wish to criticise Islam because it would be ‘disrespectful’ to the religion’s claims of truth. But adherence to the ideology of multiculturalism and tolerance works only the extent that one is personally not affected. When people *are* affected (for instance, when Netherland’s gays began to be attacked by the country’s Muslims, and as a result many aligned themselves with right-wing parties pushing for an end to Arab-country immigration), we see the shallowness of such ideologies. Tolerance, Žižek has said in interviews, is just a “decaffeinated way of seeing the Other” in society. Reminding us of Nietzsche, he sees it as a weakness which should give way to a more strident, even military spirit.

One of his fascinating insights is that true religious fundamentalists do not need to try to impose their beliefs on the world. What marks out the Muslim and Christian fundamentalists is their desperate attempts to change the world to their way of thinking – which suggests a deep lack of conviction. They externalise it by attacking others who even hint at blasphemy or criticism. “How fragile the faith of a Muslim must be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a minor Danish newspaper?” Our politically correct tolerance of fundamentalist belief only stokes their resentment, because at heart they feel themselves to be inferior – “Paradoxically, what the fundamentalists really lack is a dose of that true ‘racist’ conviction of one’s own superiority.” The fact that mere toleration enrages them should tell us that it does not work as a social principle.

## The future of labour

As a half-way solution between capitalism and communism, Žižek discusses the idea of ‘basic citizen’s income’, distributed to all so that people have real choices and are not simply beholden to the capitalist order. How do we justify such redistribution of wealth? The welfare state was partly a way to compensate those who had been made unemployed, but the nature of the current global capitalist order is *structural* unemployment for many. We need to re-examine the Marxist idea of exploitation of the proletariat through labour, since ‘labour’ itself has changed. It is not ‘labour time’ that is the basis of value now, but rather intellectual and creative work – and many will never have the chance to be providers in this way.

The more realistic option is to include the freedom not to work at all, funded by a tax on profit-seeking and those lucky enough to have well-paid jobs. In this way, the exploitation of workers by capital is reversed: “those who receive the rent are not the parasites at the top of the social scale...but those at the bottom.” And because they have a little money to spend, the economy keeps humming while social justice has been served. This “attempt to make capitalism work for social welfare” could allow a ‘culture of pride’ to flourish, instead of a culture of haves and have-nots, yet it can also give due credit to achievers. Ultimately though, Žižek sees the basic income project as just another way of preserving and justifying capitalism.

## Final comments

In its current form (taken over by vested corporate interests, etc), Žižek believes, democracy simply reflects the hegemonic ideology of the day, and cannot bring about what Alain Badiou calls a ‘Truth-Event’, something that really changes the existing order. The more an individual or group has invested in the current order, the more willing are they to uphold lies. It is only the dispossessed that can tell things exactly as they are, since they have nothing to lose.

“The task today”, he says, “is thus to invent a new mode of this distance towards the state, that is, a new mode of dictatorship of the proletariat”. But what form would this actually take? He doesn’t offer a blueprint, instead attempting to outline what a more communistic ethos could achieve. He sees it as being a protector of the ‘commons’ “that universal space of humanity from which no one should be excluded”. It includes: the environment that we all live in, and which no-one ultimately can own; the biogenetic commons, which should not be open to exploitation; and the cultural commons, which should not be able to be commandeered by any particular group or ideology.

For Žižek, we should no longer see the economic sphere in terms of who gets to master nature and win its fruits, but to discard the idea of mastership altogether. The lust for ownership and power create endless miseries, when the time has come to admit that we all share the planet. Culturally and socially, we need to move beyond mere tolerance to a world in which common humanity is highlighted. Yet as Žižek readily admits, all previous attempts at communist organisation were sabotaged by human nature itself (our wish to own or dominate), and resulted in horrifying regimes or ones that stultified creativity and freedom. If his vision is ever to be realised, therefore, it will have to be based on how humans actually are, not how we would like them to be.

## Slavoj Žižek

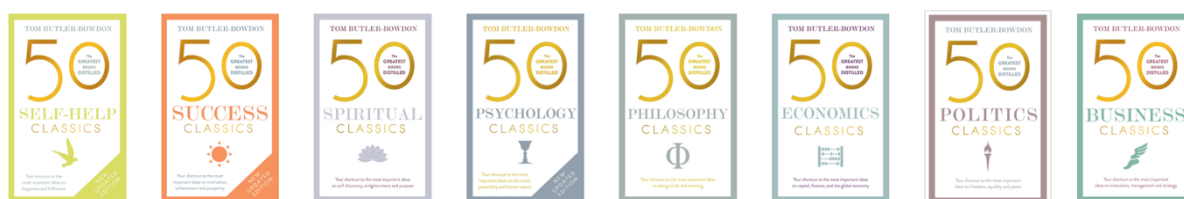
Born in 1949 in Ljubljana, Slovenia (then part of communist Yugoslavia), Žižek's father was a civil servant economist, and his mother an accountant in a state-owned firm. He received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Ljubljana, before going to Paris to study psychoanalysis.

Back in Slovenia, Žižek was unable to get a university position, and spent several years in national service and was then unemployed. In the late 1970s he was part of a group of Slovenian intellectuals focused on the work of psychoanalytical philosopher Jacques Lacan, and in the 1980s translated Freud, Lacan and Althusser into Slovene. In the late 1980s he published a book on film theory, wrote for the alternative magazine *Mladina*, and was an activist pushing for democracy in Yugoslavia. When Slovenia became independent in 1990 he became an (unsuccessful) presidential candidate. He was married to the Slovenian philosopher Renata Salecl, and his second wife was Analia Hounie, an Argentinian model.

*The Sublime Object* (1989) was his first book written in English, and made his name in international social theory circles. Other books include *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), *How To Read Lacan* (2006), *In Defence of Lost Causes* (2008), *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (2009), *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012), and *Hegel in a Wired Brain* (2021).

The film *Žižek: The Reality of The Virtual* (Astra Taylor, 2007) looks at his life and work; he was also the presenter of a television series, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006). He is a professor of philosophy and psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School in Switzerland, and also teaches at New York University.

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