

Goodness: an Introduction

My starting point is that ideas can be built to be useful. My intent is to take an engineering approach to the creation of stable thought structures. Such structure will need resilience in the face of change, the capacity to adapt as needed, and the ability to retain essential elements through all possible permutations.

In effect, I believe that our philosophical difficulties with respect to meaning, language, and the ubiquity of difference—problems that preoccupy all serious students of most disciplines in the Humanities—can be managed better than today, and that that management can become progressively better over sustained periods of time. Progress is both possible and necessary.

For me, the logical starting point is to ask what the goal is. In my view, the goal ought properly to be human happiness that is sustainable, and as widely dispersed as possible. This is on the surface a utilitarian approach, but I believe the utilitarians missed some important distinctions which I will discuss.

Morality, to me, is a means to an end. Even if one posits that endless misery in this world is necessary for endless bliss in another world, the goal remains the same. All that changes is the time and perceptual domain (we can't see the next world). If we can engineer a thought system that leads to widespread social harmony, and personal felicity in this world—while not violating the tenets of those focusing their attention on the next world—this is an optimal solution.

In assessing the situation, a fundamental premise organizing my thought, and which I will explicate further shortly, is that all human activity is best understood systemically. Specifically, I believe that there is not necessarily a linear relationship between one's intention, and the eventual outcome. For this reason, one must look at what ideas actually work to generate the benefit, and not treat any of them as hermetically sealed in an "ontological" way. Movement must be built into any system which is to prove sustainable.

In this, I echo the distinction the Austrian philosopher and economist Friedrich Hayek made between "Action to", and "Action for". "Action to" is the effect a given system is actually generating. "Action for" is what it is *intended* to generate. One can with the best of intentions work to help someone, and actually make things worse. One can work to achieve personal happiness, and instead achieve misery.

Formally, I view all forms of human cultural and emotional life—from the intrapsychic life of an individual up to the entirety of global cultural interactions—as chaotic systems. Within Chaos Theory (the home of the so-called Butterfly Effect), apparently random systems can actually be largely understood as existing within definable parameters governed by certain dominant principles.

The task is to determine what principles will act consistently on all levels of human social life to foster sustainable, generalized happiness. A key part of Hayek's thinking was that general principles, executed locally through what he called "distributed knowledge", work in general to achieve discernable patterns, or what he called the Extended Order.

Hayek himself argued, for example, that the precise value of tomatoes--which is a function of the local need of one vendor to sell them, and of another consumer to buy them—will never be set more accurately than when the decision making process is distributed as widely as possible.

Likewise, no moral system will ever better fit a given population than when meaning is distributed according to local knowledge, and sculpted to fit local needs and local personalities. This would likewise make any given "religion" a constantly changing Extended Order, based around foundational practices, texts, or beliefs. This thought process creates a means for both making general heuristic observations--formatted symbolically--and retaining the understanding that limitless local permutations are not only possible, but inevitable.

Generalizing to the project of improving human cultural life, properly chosen principles ought to work to foster an order which facilitates our aim of sustainable felicity, embedded within existing social structures.

To describe such an order, I have coined the term "Telearchy", by which I intend to connote an order based upon self organizing social systems oriented around common principles, and the common aim of happiness. It allows for wide variations in specific local practices and ideas, and is thus fully compatible with a true multicultural ethos.

This is the goal. The process is to develop skill in progressively more accurate cultural deconstruction. I differentiate between benign deconstruction, and malignant deconstruction. The former I define as "the supplementation of a narrative with a clarifying and generalizable narrative", and the latter as "the consumption of one narrative by another narrative".

In order to balance the manifest need for simplicity—in effect, the ability to represent complex realities symbolically--while avoiding the methodological pitfall of "essentializing" narratives, I have developed the term "tubaforms" to describe overtly and explicitly contingent narratives.

In physics, wave forms can be deconstructed mathematically in any way the physicist might desire. I based the term on an example Nick Herbert used in his book Quantum Reality, that the noise of automobiles on a crowded street could be represented mathematically as a symphony of tubas. You can make any narrative do anything you want, provided you are willing to ignore sufficient contextual information.

Freudians, economists, atheists, orthodox Jews, and Marxists are all able to develop means by which "reality" meets their expectations. This basic epistemological problem

is well represented in Korszybski's axiom that the "map is not the territory". The sum of events is always more complex than any given narrative—any set of words--can ever incorporate.

At the same time, maps are useful. Even if they are sometimes wrong, they create patterns for movement, and represent templates that can be amended as needed on an on-going basis. The use, then, of tubaforms is essential for progress. "Progress", itself, is a tubaform.

In this process, my intent is to recover to the extent possible our Enlightenment heritage of benign liberalism based on rational thinking. It becomes possible--once we both recognize the contingency of our stories, and submit them to the systemic perspective, which examines effects, and not intents—to form chains of logic once again.

In my own thinking, I was greatly impressed by the audacity of Spinoza's Ethics. My aim is to recreate something like what he created, but with the difference that the postulates admit variation and change which can course through the whole system without affecting its underlying structure. I envision a sort of ideational funnel, or system of rivers and tributaries that admit varying degrees of water, and varying types of water, but which in the process of channeling that water retain its shape, and which in turn shape the waters of human life.

My foundational tubaform is that all form is created through motion. All sense of self, all communal identity, all ideas are generated through motion. A man who never reads, never speaks, never moves, and never does anything, will never develop a sense of self, and of course his physical body will deteriorate. It is the ceaseless interactions of life which create—in the process of bumping into external (and internal) objects of all sorts—a reactive covering, which is our emotional and intellectual form.

Both pain and joy create motion, but of the two, pain is initially the most important. Pain compels motion. Hunger, thirst, loneliness, confusion: all of these compel motion, and by acting as negative constraints on what you can and can't do, they act negentropically to organize the self on all levels. Sometimes the result is desirable, sometimes less so, but decisions must be made. (Note that Darwinism might be summarized as change plus pain).

There are qualities both of joy and pain. With respect to pain, it invariably must be understood as existing within a social and ideational field/context. Hunger physically hurts. Hunger when one is surrounded by well fed people hurts twice, at least potentially. One feels both the physical aspect of it, and the resentment towards others if it is felt to be unnecessary.

On the flip side, the physical pain of hunger can be mitigated by satisfaction, if one is involved in a meaning system in which what I would term qualitative joy is associated with a practice such as fasting.

For my own analytical purposes, I differentiate four different systems as acting within the human cultural field: meaning systems, truth systems, political systems, and economic systems. Logically, the physical problem of hunger is best dealt with through science (our currently preeminent truth system), our political system, and most especially our economic systems.

How one explains the fact of hunger is a function of the truth system, which is to say what one believes. “It is the Will of Allah”, or “I must have sinned”, or “Greedy capitalists took my food”, or “incompetent socialists wrecked our economy”.

How one deals emotionally, though, with the fact of hunger happens within the Meaning system. For my purposes, I consider the meaning system as consisting in what one holds sacred. The sacred, in turn, I view as a means for the transmutation of the pain of resentment to the possibility of contentment and joy. At a minimum, it is the real reason one undergoes pain willingly. Work is sacred for some, vanity for others.

The sine qua non for such a transmutation (which in my view is well symbolized by the Philosopher’s Stone) is the rejection of self pity. Seen phenomenologically, within the current of experience and life as it is lived, there are no benefits to self pity. It is a useless emotion, if one takes as one’s aim the facilitation of happiness.

Therefore, this is my foundational principle. One could easily understand, pragmatically, all religious and cultural systems which survive as existing in part to provide means for this emotional transmutation. This is, to return to my contrasted modes of deconstruction, a supplementary narrative that would be apropos in any cultural system.

When I was at the University of Chicago Divinity School, I would deconstruct myths in terms of Freud, or Durkheim, or Rene Girard, or other such theorists. In my own terms, I would take, say, the tubaform of Freudian psychosocial development to perform a wave transformation on a narrative of a culture far distanced from my own. As I see now, this was a reductive process, which lessened both my own culture, and that which I was studying.

Taking from the perspective of benign, supplementary deconstruction, however, what is interesting about this concept is that one can analyze how other cultures perform the necessary function of the rejection of self pity, without taking anything from them, and in the process augment one’s own capacity for this necessary function.

Self pity (or sadness, or depression, or anguish) happens in moments. A deep sadness feels like it will last forever, and it is precisely this sense that leads some to take their own lives. For this reason, it stops movement, and acts therefore as a de facto rejection of form--literally, in the case of suicide.

Rejecting it, on the other hand, renews the possibility of movement. Pragmatically, it is not always possible to rid oneself of this burden, but the fact of movement can sometimes

cause it to fall away on its own. For this reason, my second foundational principle is the necessity of persistence.

Meister Eckhart commented once “There is nothing sweeter than to have suffered”. If we postulate that movement creates form, and pain compels movement, then we can posit that emotional movement accompanied by pain which is not rejected works to create increasingly intricate forms.

One can in fact view most forms of asceticism—which of course are nearly universal in humanity’s religious and cultural life, at a minimum in rites of passage—as precisely intended to free their practitioners from the much deeper pain of self pity and resentment, both of which lead ultimately to social alienation. On the surface, the coexistence of significant voluntary privation with a desire for freedom appears contradictory, but this omits the reality of emotional and mental pain.

In my own usage, quality can be defined as the presence of information, latent or overt. Form is a type of information. As one’s form—one’s self, to be clear—becomes increasingly refined, the capacity for joy increases correspondingly. This is the point of asceticism, and self restraint in all its forms more generally. It is not just the sine qua non of shared cultural life, but of happiness in general.

To continue, perseverance—if untempered by perception—need lead nowhere, and certainly not in an optimal direction. For this reason, my third and last core principle is that of the necessity of constant perceptual movement. If we orient ourselves around a foundational Telos (note that I am grounding this empirically, and not ontologically, by making it a chosen aspect of human volition, and focusing on results, not intentions), then logically one must pay careful attention to the consequences of ones actions.

For this reason, I developed a perceptual heuristic I call the Telearchic Cross. It is a cross with three axes, which I term the Continuum Axis (the x coordinate plane in Cartesian Geometry), the Qualitative Axis (the y coordinate), and the Systemic Axis (the z coordinate). The intent is explicitly to avoid perceptual paralysis, which is nearly unavoidable without some formal method of shaking loose of the limitations of mentation.

The Continuum Axis is intended to correct the tendency of human thinking to create either/or distinctions. Something is right or wrong. This person is good or evil. You are either a liberal or a conservative. In pondering this, I researched the classic white/black distinction, and came to learn that white doesn’t actually exist. I wanted to place white on one part, and black on another, and extend both ends into the realms of invisible cosmic radiation, which go to an undetermined extent in both the direction of decreasing wavelength, and increasing wavelength. This basic intention should be clear enough.

I learned that white is an emergent property, as Chaos theorists might term it, of the interaction of all the visible colors of light *on the human eye*. Black, on the other hand, is a property primarily of the body from which the light ought to be radiating. Surfaces

which are black simply absorb all the colors hitting them, so “black” per se cannot be said to exist, and most bodies which appear black to us do in fact reflect some types of radiation we simply can’t see.

Discoveries of this sort, minor as they may be in an absolute sense, become possible through the use of a formal template for thinking.

I consider an aspect of what might be termed “agile” thinking to be the quality of what Moshe Feldenkrais termed “reversibility”. In physical movement, it amounts to a sufficiently well organized neuromuscular system that rapid changes in directions or muscular tonus can be made at will. One can be walking forward, stop instantly, and walk backwards without an unseemly “bumps”. One can reverse.

Perceptually, this fits on the Continuum axis, in that one can take a given idea—say Capitalism—and change it in small ways. You anchor each end of the Continuum any way you want, say with Jeffersonian agrarianism on one end, and Statist capitalism such as the Chinese currently practice on the other, then move in one direction, then the other. How you manipulate it will depend on what you are looking for, but one thing that emerged from this for me is that this represents a formal method for creativity, with creativity, of course, being a part of perception more generally. It is seeing the unmanifest, but possible..

More generally, the Continuum axis represents form, and thus Space. If you place a human male, and a human female on the axis, what would you place beyond them on each side? You would have to turn to other animals, such as chimpanzees on one end, and perhaps aquatic mammals on the other. Again, how you set up the line depends on what you are trying to discover. One thing that becomes abundantly clear, though, is that men and women are 99.99% identical in most iterations of this exercise, and that it takes effort to create a formal dichotomy.

The Systemic dimension—the z axis—I imagine as having an infinitely sharp point in the front, and a somewhat indistinct but expanding shape on the other side of the x,y axis. This is the dimension of the Butterfly Effect, and unintended consequences. The front point is infinitely sharp because we can never really know what small things might lead to large effects. Further, as this is the Time axis, we see clearly that we cannot always assume that we understand cause and effect, merely that we can observe effects, and have to infer causes.

This is intended to serve as a reminder that no matter how good you may think your ideas are, you have to be attentive to what the actual “action to” is. It also provides a formal reason, within the scientific realm particularly, to try things without having a reason. I don’t want to stray too far on that score, but will simply comment that in my view we could be doing much better in understanding how our world actually works if this dimension were better understood by mainstream scientists.

Empirically, this is the Black Box dimension. It is where you try something, then see what happens. You may not know why Cause A leads to Effect B (it's in the "Black Box"), but if you can observe it consistently, then it exists. If it exists, it is possible, and should therefore be investigated. This seems obvious, but even a casual observer of our scientific, political, and economic worlds can plainly see that it isn't.

Finally, the y axis is the Qualitative axis. It is open ended on the top and the bottom, and expands from relatively narrow width at the top, to a quite wide bottom. If this Cross were manufactured physically, this would be the base upon which it could rest and not tip over.

This is the dimension in which abstraction and observation are reconciled. A good abstraction, such as $E=MC^2$, contains a great deal of latent information. Therefore, in my terms, it possesses quality. An equation like that enfolds a potential infinity of discrete observations of details. The top of the axis represents abstraction and increasing qualitative richness, and the bottom concrete, measurable details.

In evaluating any abstraction, this is the place where you can ask simply: "does it work?". You will note that the details, which exist at the bottom of the y axis, can be plotted on the z axis, as they evolve over time. The three dimensional nature of this construction is not accidental.

You will note, as well, that there are literally varying "levels" (y coordinates) of abstraction and detail. In what I view as the most unhelpful, overly intellectualized narratives, abstractions are actually used as details, which omits references to the external world entirely. Thus a corrective for many ideological systems is to evaluate what level of observation they are actually operating on, and see if they can go "deeper".

Both sides are open—cut off, in my envisioning of the physical structure—because there are apparently an infinity of possible details (on the bottom)—which end in direct experience (which expanded sufficiently is the essence of the mystical experience); and potentially the possibility of enfolding all of those infinity of details in a single, infinitely rich point (at the invisible top). This might be termed the "God Postulate". I don't know if this could be construed as a thought, but this is where Form itself, in a deep qualitative sense, would exist. If we are speaking of something real, when we speak of "natural laws", they arise somewhere.

Everything that could be, might be accessible experientially, which creates an interesting paradox. The process of observing details is a process of differentiation. I create me in the process of observing things separate from me. To the extent I am fully absorbed in something, both time and my unique being diminish, subjectively. Abstraction creates the possibility of understanding things in general, but it is really, functionally, a means of interacting with time. If I take the abstraction of $F=MA$, then I can predict—interact with—discrete objects over the distance of time. This is the point of Science.

But there are really two things going on here. There are two means of enfolding details into qualitatively richer structures. Math does it, but so does awareness. When one is meditating, for example, the whole point according to many traditions is to erase contingent, conditional awareness in favor of more generalized, less differentiated awareness.

Thus the crowning point of the whole structure is a point I posit that it is useful to believe exists (although my thinking does not depend on it) in which the time/movement dimension is eradicated, and the space/form dimension is eradicated in a place of infinite quality/information. I can't decide if it should be on the top or bottom. Does direct awareness lead to a direct apprehension of the nature of Form? This is an open question, and of course many mystics have rendered opinions on the topic. This question need not be answered to use this structure, though. One need not even accept the validity of the question. Even materialists can use it.

Formally, the Qualitative dimension is the confluence of Space/Time with Information. For my own purposes, I actually rewrote (with no qualifications other than temerity) Einstein's equation as $E+I=MC^2+I$, where I is information. You can drop the I from both sides, but that makes it a formally materialistic narrative, and that is not working, empirically, for cosmologists or particle physicists, as even a casual student of the field can plainly see.

Interestingly, the Chinese (in my understanding) thought of the universe as consisting in two forces: chi—which was both matter and energy; and li, which was the part of the universe that created form. You have the stuff that is formed, and you have the form itself.

(I will note that in my studied opinion in this regard that the work of the Germans, Russians and others on biophotons will eventually lead to the reconciliation of Darwinism--which I define as “morphogenesis through random change coupled with random benefit--and so-called Intelligent Design, which I would call li, not God.)

The process of moving from observation to abstraction and back again I term Perceptual Breathing. It is as essential for perception as physical breathing is for life. It is not enough to build beautiful, aesthetically pleasing abstractions. One must constantly reconcile one's ideas with concrete, observable realities, with particular care given to systemic interactions. This takes work and humility. For this reason, the Cross cannot be operated properly without perseverance and the rejection of self pity.

These ideas offer interesting and I think useful possibilities in fields such as theology. I can and have “built” various religious traditions from my basic conceptual blocks. For now, let me finish by introducing basic concepts that do no violence I can see to any religious or philosophical traditions with which I am familiar, except the most recent ones.

For me, there are two types of power: qualitative, and quantitative. Qualitative power is the capacity to be happy with nothing. To move well emotionally, in other words, without regard to external circumstances. Specifically it is the capacity to transmute pain—and potential self pity and resentment—into joy. Every religious tradition with which I am familiar is replete with examples of this. An extension of the capacity to be happy on your own, is the capacity to enjoy the happiness of others. When you are able to develop positive feedback loops of love, this is the essence of community, and what we all crave most deeply. This basic idea is compatible both with Individualism, and the countless cultural forms which preceded it, based—mostly--on social hierarchies and/or clearly defined social roles.

Quantitative power is the capacity to do what one wants to, physically, without external impediments. It could be physical strength. Certainly it is wealth, and a lack of checks on one's behavior. Rather than transmute pain, it seeks to surmount it physically. Systemically, it will always work to suppress and hurt others, and in the process in effect “outsource” the need for pain.. The purest expression of this ethos, in my view, is found in the work of the Marquis de Sade. He was not a happy man. He was, in the end, horrifically alone, of his own choice.

The Will to Qualitative Power I term Goodness. The Will to Quantitative Power I term Evil. Obviously, most people have both, and an important aspect of the pragmatic approach I am taking is to never ask more from anyone—including oneself—than they are capable of delivering. This takes into consideration awareness, and the need for gradualism.

I have much more to say. If this makes some sense to you, please click on other essays. I discuss the nature of identity, of love, of benevolent political structure, useful economic systems, and much more.