the conversation

Orchestrating Evolutionary Change

Dr Robert Styles

The Conversation

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6th Edition

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With
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Foreword

It is a particular honour to be asked to write a foreword for Robert's book "The Conversation". Robert and I have moved together through this work for more than a decade now, continuously learning from one another and spurring one another to try out new ideas and approaches in facilitation of groups and networks towards greater harmony, collaboration, and productivity.

I see the journey we have taken as something akin to the braided rivers of Robert's youth in Australia and New Zealand. We came together with a shared interest in human behaviour, human development and governance and leadership processes that might help us to improve the human condition. We encountered David Sloan Wilson and the core design principles of Lin Ostrom together, and then we wove those ideas together with our explorations of the expression of identity in everyday speech. In Robert, I found a man who combined a tremendous intellect with a genuine desire to improve the human condition and the deep humility of personal contact with great challenges. In moments we could move from contemplating some arcane behavioural theory, to sharing and contemplating the deep emotional work of being a father to developing teenage girls. During this time, we co-developed an approach to measuring psychological flexibility in the process of human communication, expressed in our publications and Robert's earlier book arising from his PhD thesis "The Functional Self-Discrimination Measure and Interview: A Measure of Verbal Behaviour that Predicts Wellbeing".

And then, like a braided river, our paths took different directions. I worked in the direction of co-creating, with David Sloan Wilson and others, the Prosocial ARC process, a model now embodied in the not-for-profit Prosocial World. Robert started to apply the work in all the ways described in this book – from working intensively with individuals through to working with whole nations trying to find a way forward into uncertain futures. And Robert's stream of the braided river became its own deeply original and alive thing.

This book describes and summarises Robert's perspective. In turns, the book moves through some of the most profound reflections on the human condition, interleaved with practical and evidence-backed suggestions for working with individuals and groups to create greater thriving. One of the things I love about this work is that Robert has dived deeply into the research and evidence, but everything he writes about grows from his own experiences in the trenches of working with people and individuals to help

them move toward greater thriving and meaning. You can trust his words because his approach works. I have seen it in action.

If we consider Robert's work through the lens of Ostrom's Nobel prize-winning core design principles, you can see that what he has built through trial and error is an approach to fleshing out both the first and the last principle in highly complex situations involving groups of groups. This is no small feat. It is one thing to create a sense of shared identity and purpose in a team, but quite another to create it in a complex, evolving network of groups of groups. For one thing, there are more levels of interests. Yes, each person in the system might have their own fears and values but what might be more salient and important to them is the values and fears of the organisation or group they represent. So suddenly we don't have just individual and collective interests to reconcile, but multiple levels of interests as people represent their teams, organisations, regions and even countries for example. How can we take all of this complexity and weave it together into a process that leaves everyone feeling as though they have been heard? Read on to find out.

Watching Robert facilitate a group is breathtaking. Imagine a typical situation. Someone in the group might be starting to contact their deepest challenges about working with the group. They start to get emotional. Their voice rises, their face reddens, and their jaw tightens. And then they let rip with all the things that are wrong with others, all the ways that the world is unsatisfactory and ought to be different. You can see everyone else in the group shift in their seat... "This isn't ok", "Who is she to blame us" as others in the group begin to work out what they are going to do to fight back. Robert, by contrast, calmly smiles and reflects back the heart of what has been said, noticing how the world is 'occurring' to the aggrieved person and the love and care that is at the heart of her statement. Somehow, in a moment, Robert has conjured the possibility of shared humanity from the very jaws of incipient violence to one another.

At other times, Robert will pause the action to go deeper. He will see something, or feel something, in the moment. Some possibility that there is a pathway toward discovering greater meaning individually or collectively and he will follow his intuition toward uncovering the heart essence of the valuing in the room. This is finding what matters not just in words but in the felt sense in the room, and the group takes a collective sigh as some authentic truth is named and felt. Robert is masterful at weaving together the inner work that makes life sing with vitality, with the outer work of creating greater collaboration through language which makes us distinctly human.

In this book you will see that weaving process in full flight. I hope you enjoy Robert's thought and heart as much as I have.

Dr Paul Atkins

Part 1: How Do We Evolve?

What Evolutionary Shifts?

When I contemplate what evolutionary shifts the human species is being called to make, my heart and mind goes to our seeming incapacity to cooperate and look after each other and the beautiful planet we live on. I weep for those suffering. And when I reflect on what adaptation entails, particularly for the human species, I am in awe of the importance of our capacity for symbolic behaviour. It is evident that we evolve genetically and epigenetically, as do all species. This is a very slow and blind process that unfolds over generations guided by natural selection as anomalies are introduced into the system. Like other sentient beings, we learn most effectively and quickly by consequence – there is a big difference between being told the fire is hot and sticking your hand in the fire and getting burnt! *But isn't it an extraordinary thing that we can tell a story about the fire in the first place?* This capacity for narration and storytelling is an attribute unique to us as humans. We construct symbolic representations of our past and possible futures, and the tapestry of civilisation as we know it is born – all that tradition, science and art has to offer. But it's a double-edged sword, isn't it? We can imagine a fire when there isn't one and still behave as though there is. How do we step outside the stories we tell ourselves about what is and what isn't and question the coherence of them? For our purposes, this is at the heart of this conversation!

But to what extent are we self-determined, or are we blind? This interests me. It is clear that our capacity for symbolic behaviour is a dominant theme in our evolution, coupled with learning socially and by consequence. The designs and narratives of lived experiences that we compose to tell 'our story' to others literally becomes the world we experience inside and outside our skin. Stories of fear, intimidation, courage, resilience, struggle, failure, and success. This is the way most people make sense of the world over a lifetime from childhood and through our adulthood. Time and again, our stories are ones of adaptation e.g., rising to a challenge, overcoming adversity, developing resilience, learning to forgive, thirsting for revenge etc etc.

Then, there are the stories we tell after the event. Usually heroic with the benefit of hindsight because we like to make sense for others by providing others with a verbal coherence and context of our past, that in turn, becomes our reality. As it happens, rendering another design of ourselves in the world helps us resolve the past and possible future in some way. Our mind works the way it works.

I ask myself however, "What would happen if we *selected for stability while evolving* instead of selecting for adaptation in the pursuit of a higher order

of verbal coherence?" If the coherence of our symbolic world is challenged, particularly when, as custodians of this design, we treat it as being literally true, then any threat to our carefully constructed symbolic world is experienced as though it is 'me' that is being torn apart. As happens when the notion of 'authority' is challenged, and a scrambling for coherence comes into the room, new resources and responses are born out of the struggle, something gets lost, and a new behaviour emerges. It's a risky business responding in a situation of discomfort and fear! I have seen people resort to the most unreasonable means in order to deal with the possibility of being perceived as incompetent while trying to hide the experience of it.

I do wonder, though, *what if we did select for stability?* I place my hand on my chest and the other on my forehead, and there I am – me – residing in there, innocently peering out at the world. I have come to know that as the 'real me'. It is not one thing but this vast arena of consciousness through which all of my awareness in spacetime arises. On the few occasions when I have 'been' with someone else who is the same way, like fully aware, pulsating living presences rather than amateur theatre performers, we have both transcended the verbal traps that keep us the same or apart. It is the most stable and safe place I know and is the best vantage point for viewing and questioning the coherence of the world of words that we construct and the topography of experience that words attempt to describe. At such times, a different order of transformation and adaptation occurs, that is beyond just a reaction. Often, for the first time with integrity, people are able to genuinely answer the question, *"What is important right now and in the long run?"*

Evolution and development

So, how do we figure out what is important now and in the long run from moment to moment? I think, if we are to effectively orchestrate evolutionary change, there are a few fundamental questions we need to ask, *"Essentially, Who am I? What shapes the real me and my behavioural responses to my outer world?"* and *"What are the contingencies that have individuals, groups, business and government selecting their practices?"* In the following chapters, we will unpack answers to these questions from both a scientific and practical perspective.

The propositions underpinning our exploration include: an appreciation that, in principle, we evolve and develop along four dimensions – biological, behavioural, social & symbolic – each at a different level; and, in order to effectively direct evolutionary change, we need to, in practice, develop four behavioural streams – *observing, describing, tracking & valuing*.

While we can distinguish evolution and development along the biological, behavioural, social & symbolic dimensions at different levels, none are

mutually exclusive; they are in every instance, intimately interconnected. The fact that we can tell the difference between them and understand, to some extent, how they interrelate and mutually influence each other in different contexts provides a great insight into how we can develop and evolve in a healthy manner. For me, the idea of apprenticeship fits perfectly. As apprentices, we evolve biologically (genetically and epigenetically), and we learn by trial and error (operant and respondent conditioning), socially (behavioural modelling and imprinting) and symbolically (relational responding and symbolic inheritance).

I studied yoga in my youth and martial arts for years, and I continue to practice these today. I remember loving the eastern notion of the master-disciple relationship. This seems to reflect a healthy form of apprenticeship. When apprenticed, as human beings we evolve, learn, and develop continuously along all four dimensions. This idea is applied when working with communities, groups, and organisations. The whole process involves having them observe and describe what is important at different levels, experiment with new behaviours and model those that work best so that a new generation of behaviours propagate throughout the system.

It is interesting to observe that space and time are fundamentally different in the symbolic dimension. The environmental contingencies that select and control biological, behavioural, and social evolution and development are impinging upon us directly here and now. Yet, in the symbolic dimension, verbal time and space bring the past and future into the present in an entirely different way. Uniquely as humans, we alone, using language, cognition and imagination, can construct a symbolic representation of a future that may never be directly contactable for us in the same way as the other dimensions. With symbolic behaviour, we can construct and reinforce with the power of our mind, verbally rendered contingencies of behaviour that can be far-reaching and profound in terms of anticipating and moulding a future we want or desire. The distant future can have a powerful selection force on our current behaviours.

Responding effectively, here and now, with respect to the distant future requires us to prioritise the behavioural streams accessible to us – such as observing, describing, tracking and valuing – and put these to the service of desirable outcomes. Unless someone, or a group, can see and discriminate something, they cannot describe nor act in relation to it. For individuals, it is important we learn to observe at multiple levels. We need to observe and distinguish our internal and external experiences individually and collectively as merely the content of our experience – our sensations, emotions and cognition – and that we as sentient and conscious beings are much bigger and more complex than that. We are human, and

our psychological arena is as vast as the known universe and as deep as the limits of the quantum world.

This aspect of my humanity was driven home one morning when I had breakfast with Professor Brian Schmidt after he had won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Physics. He and his team provided evidence that the expansion of the universe is accelerating, which was at complete odds with predictions of the Big-Bang theory. Over one and a half hours, Brian guided me symbolically to the furthest reaches of the universe, to the edge of known spacetime as he described what he and his team had discovered. It was a mind-bending conversation. I remember walking away palpably experiencing my vastness as a psychological 'being'. It was my observational behaviour that had been shaped as Brian symbolically rendered a vision of an accelerating universe, that at its farthest reaches, was creating spacetime as we experience it directly.

So, when doing evolutionary work with groups and organisations, we have to help them see well into the future, and when doing so, orient their attention toward what is valued here and now. Then we try and help them describe what they have taken perspective on and track their current behaviours in service of realising that future. This will endow them with a defining purpose.

The most successful evolutionary work I have done with groups has involved helping them (re)conceive purpose, which has typically involved an analysis of environmental contingencies, or trends and drivers, that will shape their behaviour over extended periods. Following this exercise, we then identify an integrated set of opportunities that can be ranked 'Fit with Vision' against the valued outcomes intrinsic to their long-term, preferred, and probable futures. Finally, we benchmark the systems 'Fit with Capability (both hard & soft)' against the available world-class capabilities required for the work of positively changing their world. This process breathes vitality and dynamism into the rest of the discourse that would not have been available otherwise.

If we don't get this process right, what is needed for the evolution of healthy personal and prosocial practices will be deficient. To help groups and organisations develop a sense of purpose and identity involves teaching them to select rigorous and steadfast longitudinal behaviours by consequence and helping them retain those essential behaviours that are vital and healthy in service of that purpose. Hence, a group's currently held sense of 'purpose' or 'intention' will represent a history of reinforcing consequences (both retrospective and prospective). Identity is determined by who embodies the purpose.

So, the approach to orchestrating the evolutionary change we are about to explore distils these ideas into a suite of processes that allows a group, or clusters of groups, to answer the following key questions:

1. How do we cultivate a healthy and values-consistent future orientation which often requires a change in our observational behaviours? *How do we learn to see things differently?*
2. How do we enhance our capacity to predict the success or failure of our behavioural efforts? How do we construct the symbolic niches, the strategies and norms required for the successful regulation of our longitudinal behaviours and realisation of the shorter and longer-term valued outcomes? *How do we engage and own a big plan to get there?*
3. How do we maintain the self-awareness and self-control to regulate our ongoing behaviours while tracking the journey? How do we moderate and select from amongst a variety of longitudinal behaviours by consequence and retain and consolidate longer-term, those essential behaviours that are vital and healthy for the realisation of purpose? *How do we become flexible enough to continue selecting for what is most important now and in the long run?*

Using Evolution Science

Before we get into the *conversation proper*, a little more on evolution. Earlier, I touched on the idea that orchestrating evolutionary change requires an appreciation that, in principle, we evolve and develop along four interconnected dimensions – biological, behavioural, social & symbolic – each at a different level. Because these evolutionary principles are fundamental, in this chapter, we will take a deeper dive into how we can discriminate these streams and understand how they interrelate and mutually influence each other.

For most people, evolution is understood as a biological process – the process of change in the heritable characteristics of biological populations over successive generations. Characteristics that are the expression of genes passed on from parent to offspring during reproduction. But this 'gene-centric' perspective fails to embrace the full spectrum of what underscores and drives evolution, particularly for humans [21, 106]. A fuller appreciation is ultimately more helpful and has significant implications for the future of us as a species as well as our planet as a whole.

Evolutionary processes are now understood to be much more than just biological. As mentioned, we are learning and evolving along four interacting vectors – biologically (genetically and epigenetically), by trial and error (operant and respondent conditioning), socially (behavioural modelling and imprinting), and symbolically (relational responding and symbolic inheritance). Further, these interacting streams are operating simultaneously at multiple levels of complexity – within and between individuals, between individuals within groups, and between groups within multi-group populations. Grasping this dynamic provides a profound insight into the nature of some of humanity's unique characteristics and, in particular, our capacity for extraordinarily high levels of cooperation and altruism. This nuanced understanding paves the way for us to build a more prosocial and sustainable world.

The traditional view

Post the Renaissance and the emergence of the 'new method of modern science', philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries sought to explain natural history in terms of physical laws suggesting that life on earth was not merely the product of divine cosmic order or the existence of fixed categories. Rather, species could be defined by the features that perpetuated themselves generation after generation. The question these scholars asked was, how? Their enquiry saw the emergence of the scientific theory of evolution by natural selection, originally conceived independently

by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace in the mid-19th century, but set out in detail in Darwin's book [32].

In making their case for evolution by natural selection, Darwin and his contemporaries pointed out, for example, that more offspring are often produced than can possibly survive, and that these surviving offspring tend to look distinctly like their parents. This led to three fundamental assumptions about living organisms. Traits vary among individuals with respect to their morphology, physiology and behaviour (variation); different traits confer different levels of fitness, rates of survival and reproduction (selection); and, that traits can be passed from one generation to the next (replication). These scholars observed that over successive generations, the members of any given population are more likely to be succeeded by those offspring whose traits have enabled them to survive and reproduce in their respective environment. In this way, favoured traits accrue across generations and over time lead to diversification and ultimately, speciation. For Darwin, evolution was a "struggle for existence" between individuals, and only the traits of the winners made it to the next generation.

This perspective on heredity was widely accepted at the time of Darwin's writing. But it was not clear how this process worked until Gregor Mendel, a scientist and Augustinian friar, did some experiments showing that some invisible "factors" were at play fashioning the heritable features of peas. Though farmers had known for millennia that the crossbreeding of animals and plants could favour certain desirable traits, Mendel's pea plant experiments conducted between 1856 and 1863 established many of the rules of heredity, now referred to as the laws of Mendelian inheritance.

Mendel worked with seven characteristics of pea plants: plant height, pod shape and colour, seed shape and colour, and flower position and colour. Taking seed colour as an example, Mendel showed that when a true-breeding yellow pea and a true-breeding green pea were cross-bred, their offspring always produced yellow seeds. However, in the next generation, the green peas reappeared at a ratio of 1 green to 3 yellow. To explain this phenomenon, Mendel coined the terms "recessive" and "dominant" in reference to certain traits. In this example, the green trait, which seems to have vanished in the first filial generation, is recessive, and the yellow is dominant. He published his work in 1866, demonstrating the actions of these invisible "factors", now called genes, in predictably determining the traits of an organism.

The profound significance of Mendel's work was not recognised until the turn of the 20th century, more than three decades later, with the rediscovery of his laws. By the 1930s, Darwinian theory and Mendelian genetics had combined into what came to be called the Modern Synthesis [54]. From that point on, genetics took centre stage and, for most people, became

synonymous with the concept of evolution. But while genetic inheritance is an integral part of evolution, it's now believed there are four distinct evolutionary inheritance streams [56].

Four streams of inheritance

Biological evolution

Following the pioneering work of Darwin, Mendel and their contemporaries, the first and best-known inheritance stream is indeed the biological – a stream of genetic and epigenetic processes that shape the heritable biological characteristics of populations transmitted over successive generations. This is the process by which those mutations and changes in DNA (variation) that support survival and reproduction (selection) are passed from parent to offspring during reproduction (replication).

Individual organisms live and die, and species evolve biologically as their members adapt to their local environments. How does this happen? Every cell in our body, skin, liver, blood etc., contains precisely the same DNA sequence, yet each cell grows and evolves to have a different structure and function. This is because different cells use, or express, different elements of our genetic makeup, i.e., different DNA, depending on which are turned on and off due to epigenetic modification.

In a sense, DNA is like an instruction manual detailing how to build a body, and epigenetics is the process of highlighting which instructions, or bits of the DNA (genes) are activated or deactivated at various times and in response to different circumstances. For example, one particular epigenetic process called methylation occurs when molecules called methyls attach themselves to a DNA sequence, thereby deactivating it. Methylation happens in response to an organism's experience, such as starvation or trauma, which can lead to changes in cell structure and function. From an evolutionary perspective, such epigenetic modifications can be heritable. Epigenetics suggests that our childhood diets or those of our grandparents might still be affecting us epigenetically today.

In this way, evolution along the biological dimension occurs when evolutionary processes such as natural selection, including sexual selection, and genetic drift bring about variations, resulting in certain characteristics becoming more common or rare within a population. This process has given rise to biodiversity at every level of biological organisation, including the levels of species, individual organisms and molecules. Thus, genetic evolution and epigenetic modifications constitute a distinct biological hereditary system.

Behavioural evolution

The second stream is behavioural – learning by trial & error, formally operant and respondent conditioning or contingency learning. The psychologist B.F. Skinner was one of the first to observe that natural selection occurred along different inheritance streams, which he identified as genetic, behavioural and social.

Most of Skinner's work centred on the second stream – behavioural traits learned by organisms as they operated on their environment and experienced what did and didn't work, a process he called "selection by consequences" or "operant learning" [93]. Operant learning, he argued, involves behavioural variants being selected, or reinforced by the consequences they produce and hence becoming more or less likely to occur again in the future, i.e., the heredity of learning. Just as individual organisms live or die and the species evolves biologically, individual behaviours are selected or deselected, and the operant evolves. Operant learning enables an organism to adapt to its local environment more quickly than genetic or epigenetic evolution, clearly conferring survival advantages that result in the behaviour being selected as a heritable trait.

Operant learning also puts organisms into regular contact with specific aspects of the environment to which they may then become more adapted. For example, the reinforcing effectiveness of crustaceans ensures that flamingos regularly hunt for food in river mud and that regular contact, in turn, allows the beaks of flamingos to evolve based on the natural selection of beak variations that make hunting crustaceans more successful. Because of such processes, contingency learning has been proposed as the single most important factor contributing to the 'Cambrian Explosion', the proliferation of species seen 540 million years ago, when contingency learning first appeared [41]. These facts point to the key role that behaviour and learning plays in the evolution of all species.

Social evolution

Social evolution, a close cousin to behavioural evolution, is the third inheritance stream and can be defined as 'behaviour based on socially transmitted information' [56]. This describes another aspect of the transmission of behaviours between parents or other members of the species within and across generations that includes behavioural modelling and imprinting. As an inheritance system it includes the transmission of information through substances, such as food preferences passed through molecules of food, and various forms of social learning and animal traditions seen in nature [41, 56].

Behavioural modelling involves the direct imitation and replication of the behaviour of another, and when this includes offspring, the behaviour becomes transgenerational. When these socially reinforced behaviour

patterns in animals are transmitted from one generation to the next it affects a myriad of aspects from habitat choice, food preferences and food handling, choice of pathways for migration, predation and defence, and all aspects of mating, parenting, and social interactions with other animals within the group. As such, socially mediated learning is an important vector of transmission within any group and is a key ingredient of cultural evolution.

In this way, behaviour regulated by social and contingency-based learning has long been argued by behaviour analysts to be an evolutionary process within the individual's lifetime. But it is clear now that behaviour and learning continue to a degree across lifetimes due to cultural practices, social learning processes, niche selection, niche construction and the impact of learning on epigenetic processes. Indeed, recent evidence [41] suggests that some forms of behavioural modelling and imprinting, along with operant and respondent conditioning, directly impact the biology of progeny due to interactions between these evolutionary dimensions.

Symbolic evolution

Symbolic evolution, a combination of relational responding and symbolic inheritance, is the fourth stream and pertains particularly to human evolution. Human language, the use of symbols to represent events and to alter the function of those events, arguably constitutes an inheritance system in its own right. For example, with different languages, current processes of selection in the forms of retelling and retweeting, and replication in the forms of books and data storage represents a stream of continuous symbolic inheritance.

It is understood that human cultural evolution really took off approximately 70 thousand years ago with the emergence of symbolic systems and generative language, i.e., language without a direct learning history [42, 55]. From an evolutionary perspective, symbolic behaviour was likely initially selected by its ability to extend human cooperation due to the mutual entailment of symbols, i.e. symbol=object relations learned through social perspective-taking. As our ability to derive relations among events increased, we became sensitive to the internal coherence of networks of symbols and their relations with external events. In this way, our capacity for relational responding was established via our use of language, consequently providing a tool for human problem solving, planning and design. Over time these symbolic systems allowed for the accumulation and rapid transmission of ever more complex knowledge that in turn opened up new opportunities, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Multi-level selection and cooperation

As well as taking place within and across four inheritance streams, evolutionary processes also occur at different levels of biological organisation, from cells to individual organisms to groups of organisms to multi-group populations where heritable units vary and are selectively retained [45, 106, 108]. This is known as Multi-level Selection (MLS) and refers to the fact that selection can operate simultaneously at the level of individual units such as cells, individual organisms and specific actions, as well as collections of such units such as multicellular organisms, groups and behavioural repertoires.

Cancer may be viewed as the unregulated behaviour of individual cells that undermine the integrity of an organ (the group) and ultimately the survival of the whole organism (the system). Similarly, the behaviours of individuals such as selfishness, free-riding, secretiveness, disloyalty, disrespect, laziness, addiction, law-breaking and profiteering can strongly undermine civility and social cohesion within groups and the broader societal context.

For our purposes, we are interested in exploring the implications of MLS when it promotes success at the level of the whole and restrains excessive time and attention being given to sub-repertoires at the cost of the whole. Given a particular environmental context, the interests of an individual may be best served by means of cooperation in a group, which can be successfully selected subject to individual selfishness being suppressed. Major evolutionary transitions tend to consist of precisely such sets of conditions. Examples are provided in the literature by the development of eukaryotic cells, multicellular organisms, and eusocial species.

For each of us and the groups we belong to, this means recognising those behaviours that benefit the individual but don't benefit the group and engaging in processes that promote cooperative and prosocial behaviours above self-interest – in effect, improving how we function as groups in relation to our external environments and matters of concern.

Applying evolutionary principles

While occurring independently, the four evolutionary inheritance streams also interact with each other creating an extraordinarily complex process that enable humans to adapt swiftly to extremely diverse ecological niches [80, 107]. Our use of symbols, in particular, can readily impact cultural practices, social learning, niche selection, niche construction, and consequently epigenetics. As we individually and collectively take perspective on, discriminate, and describe our environment, we begin acting in relation to it.

Importantly, for our purposes, knowing an organism's behaviour can change in response to its context, new possibilities abound. For humans, this is a matter of evolving our verbal context, i.e., creating cultural inheritance systems that evolve prosociality through shared value systems, selection, socialisation, and reward systems – all designed to make it difficult to benefit oneself selfishly at the expense of others. This is the principle of intentional evolution being applied, as we seek to re-author ourselves through these conversations. Our guiding principle is that the environments within which we cultivate and adopt these prosocial norms must be sustainably advantageous for the generations to come.

Group norms and morality

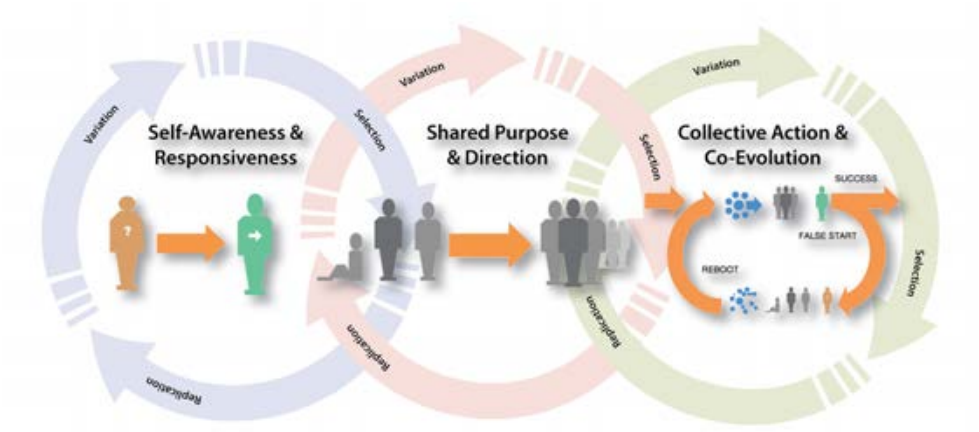
Prosociality refers to a constellation of behaviours, values, and attitudes that involves people cooperating and striving together for the wellbeing of others, sacrificing for others, and fostering self-development [12, 107]. At the cultural level, prosocial communities tend to internalise the higher-order and universal virtues of justice, social responsibility, and modes of moral reasoning aimed at realising greater public and social good. These behaviours are regulated by the complex relational matrix of our verbal discourse with others and shaped by our ontological and ethical worldviews that reflect agreements on what is and what ought to be. These are the behaviours that have shaped and evolved us as a cognitive, highly social species.

Importantly, it is social, not sacrificial altruism, that makes group-level adaptation possible, giving rise to culturally transmitted group-oriented norms and systems that ensure that such norms are obeyed. This is to a large extent the creation, selection and replication of prosocial behaviours that increase fitness at the level of the group. For this to occur, two criteria need to be fulfilled for multi-level selection to occur. First, the various organisational subunits, or groups, need to share a common fate. Second, the groups must, in some sense, achieve advantages superior to what can be accomplished by individuals left to pursue their own interests in isolation.

In this way, the general rules or group norms we adopt at each level will establish and reinforce the relational networks required for novel and appropriate behaviours to be maintained in a wide variety of situations. This is a moral and ethical consideration as it is our normative context, the constellation of contextual verbal contingencies, that will regulate our behaviour, and civilisation as we know it will either flourish or be destroyed. The question is, how do we facilitate this conversation? This hermeneutic dialogical or dialectical deliberation? A topic to which we now turn our attention.

The Conversation

How do we orchestrate a conversation that effectively shapes, moulds and sustains the normative environments and practices that will lead civilisation to flourish? For our purposes, this will involve facilitating three broad processes. The first focused on developing self-awareness and responsiveness, the second on deepening shared purpose and vision at multiple levels within polycentric systems, and the third on enhancing the group's capacity for collective action and co-evolution within relevant spheres of influence. Overall, the whole ongoing process looks like this.



Process vesus procedure

Before considering how we might go about facilitating these processes, there are a few important distinctions I would like to draw. We need to recognise the difference between a) a process, b) a procedure or intervention designed to shape the process, and c) the consequent outcome of the decreased or increased strength of that process.

So what exactly are processes? These are the dynamic processes of living the life we have got. The aim is for you, with your people, to increasingly live a rich and vital life. As individuals and groups we are striving to do things that matter now and in the long run. This is the process of being human. The ongoing process of *sensing and responding* to all that life dishes up to us each moment of each day. We sense what is happening now, has happened and might happen, describe or make sense of it all, and respond. Then, after the fact, the consequences of our strivings are rendered as stories about the love, redemption and villainy of it all. History is made.

We are 'sentient human beings'. In this way, a 'process' is understood to be the ongoing act of 'being sentient' within a given context. These are the

processes we are interested in, and they are distinct from the procedures or interventions we might employ to shape and evolve them. Procedures and interventions are designed to enhance our sensitivity and responsiveness at different levels - from the individual to the collective. In this way, throughout our conversation we will strive to employ a variety of best practice procedures to improve a particular process.

This approach is evolutionary. It reflects the overarching evolutionary process of multi-level selection – the conscious variation-selection-replication of behavioural repertoires that enhance well-being at each level in complex adaptive systems. The aim is to increase and strengthen our capacity to achieve results that will have us evolve in a healthier direction.

Cultivating self-awareness and responsiveness

The first cycle is focused on evolving personal awareness and responsiveness. This is a very personal and transformative reflection designed to have you take perspective on your efforts to live in line with what is intrinsically important and actively move towards what is valued. Because this is central and fundamental to all processes this will be the topic of our next conversation in, *Part 2: Re-Authoring Yourself*. Here you will learn how to exercise psychological flexibility – defined as "contacting the present moment as a conscious human being, fully and without needless defence – as it is and not as what it 'says' it is – and, depending on what the situation affords, persisting with or changing a behaviour in the service of chosen values" [51, p.96]. You will be invited to reflect on your efforts to live the values and virtues that are intrinsically important to you within the various domains of your daily life. As a consequence of these reflections and related activities, you will significantly enhance your capacity for self-determined intentional and positive change within your life, relationships and work with others.

What is being selected for here are the behaviours (inner & outer) that will move you more towards a life of thriving. The desired outcome is for you, with your people, to be taking a broader perspective on your experience such that you can respond consciously rather than reactively to your environment.

Developing a sense of shared purpose and direction

The second cycle is at the level of the whole group and aims to build a flexible, context sensitive, deeply held sense of shared purpose and direction based on values and needs. This is about constructing a symbolic niche and catalysing streams of co-evolutionary sense-making. We will set the scene for this conversation in *Part 3: Re-claiming Our Common Ground of Being*

Human and get into it proper in *Part 4: Orchestrating the Broader Conversation*. This will be an active enquiry into and consideration of what a preferred and probable future could look like within your family, community, organisation, and society, considering the disciplines and practices you are engaged in. Through this conversation, you will access the wisdom of those who journey with you as you take the perspective of the individuals and groups involved in creating that preferred and probable future. You will contemplate the factors that will likely determine what a healthy, harmonious and prosperous world would look like should it materialise in time within your collective sphere of influence. The output of this enquiry will be a much clearer understanding of the systemic trends and drivers shaping the behaviour of the people around you and the consequences of organised and coordinated effort in the service of your cause. This will enable you to identify and benchmark opportunities and innovations that could become the seeds of positive, system-wide, trans-generational transformational change.

What is being selected for here are robust descriptions of a healthy future world, of shared value and vision that reflects the head and the heart of everyone in the group. The desired outcome of this cycle is a deeply held sense of shared vision, values and purpose, i.e. alignment between everyone in the group.

Engaging in collective action and co-evolution

The third and final cycle is at the level of the group embedded in a broad system. This is about creating ecological niches and catalysing streams of co-evolutionary action. In this part of our conversation, you will be introduced to a set of principles for good civic behaviour based on the prize-winning work of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom. These principles have been shown to underpin the formal and cultural normative practices that sustain effective inter-related teamwork over extended periods and distances required for a successful enterprise. You will reflect on how to best guide and support your group or organisation to employ these principles and cultivate more effective, trusting, and collaborative working relationships. Furthermore, you will consider how your community or organisation could more successfully interface and interact with the broader society it is an integral part of. Equipped with this framework, you will co-design and prototype collective best practices at every level of the system. The specific approaches to facilitating this process will be introduced in *Part 3: Re-claiming Our Common Ground of Being Human*, and elaborated upon in the *Chapters: Polycentric Governance & Action Learning*. At its heart, this cycle calls for innovation as it invites the richness of our

cultural and disciplinary heritages to be woven together prosocially in a variety of ways as we respond to the existential challenges of our time.

What is being selected for here are well-coordinated normative practices and learning through action. The desired outcome of this cycle is a genuinely co-developed and implemented plan for action that is tracked, evaluated and evolved over time. In this way, emergent best practices can be selected and replicated in the service of valued long-term outcomes.

Overall

Overall, these three processes comprise a series of structured and facilitated dialogues designed to guide change agents to reflect, with their people, on what is important personally and professionally to them and how they can effectively shift behaviourally towards what is valued in the long run. As a change agent, you will cultivate the ability to exercise psychological flexibility and take choices for action toward things that fundamentally matter at each level in the system. You will learn to think strategically about changing future contexts and contribute professionally and influentially to establishing the collaborative and productive cultures capable of bringing about desired change. Importantly, these facilitated discussions and reflections will be complemented by fieldwork in order to reinforce and embed desired change within your life and the institutions you are a part of operationally — a practice that you will be invited to engage in throughout our conversation. As far as possible, my aim in this book is to have these three conversations with you. I hope that as a consequence of these deliberations, journaling (yes, please get a journal), and your subsequent action, you will be further equipped to successfully respond to the natural rhythm of life while pursuing what is possible.

So, are you ready? Let's begin…

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