OPINION PIECES

The Fourth Cognitive R/Evolution

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Humans are at a turning point in their evolution. Many individuals and groups realise that there is need for change. This paper illustrates the difficulties evolution has created in human thinking, consequently producing many of the hurdles we face today.

Linear problem-solving thinking is no longer adequate when creating a sustainable ecology, economy or society. Humans must look beyond the problem, and be creative about what kind of a world is wanted. Resolving problems using competition and conflict is not effective. Effective change will only take place by using cooperation, community and connection to develop a sustainable world. The paradigm shift in thinking is from problem-focused to possibility-focused approaches.

Where are we now?

In 2023 the UN Secretary-General described the state of the world as follows:

> *"We have started 2023 down the barrel of a confluence of challenges unlike any other in our lifetimes. Wars grind on. The climate crisis burns on. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty rage on. Epic geopolitical divisions are undermining global solidarity and trust. This path is a dead end. We need a course correction...."* (United Nations, 2023)

I wonder what that course correction might look like. Suppose that instead of thinking about problems and threats, as evolution has taught us through the whole of species evolution on this planet, we began to think in a more possibility-based manner? What would be different? What would we notice that would tell us that, as a species, we had evolved in our thinking to a point where we considered not only the possibilities that lay in front of us, but also the consequences of our actions?

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The challenge

Right now, humanity is plunging itself and the planet into a catastrophic series of changes that are likely to subject the earth and many of its creatures — including humans — to "the life of man (being), solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Hobbes, 2008).

This is the product of human behaviour, for, as Edmund Burke famously said,

> *"History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetite"* (Burke, 1790, p. 116).

Homo Sapiens Sapiens (that is to say, *we*) have evolved to be a threat-minded species. Jerry Fodor put it well when he observed: "it is, no doubt, important to attend to the eternally beautiful and true. But it is more important not to be eaten" (Fodor, 1985). We have been fundamentally problem-focused in our thinking, and our hunter-gatherer past taught us to use, throw away and move on when the local resources for existence had been used up.

Douglas Rushkoff points out this process of destruction in his book *Survival of the Richest*. When five of the richest men on earth took their cue from Elon Musk colonizing Mars,

> *"Peter Thiel reversing the aging process, or Sam Altman and Ray Kurzweil uploading their minds into supercomputers, they were preparing for a digital future that had a whole lot less to do with making the world a better place than it did with transcending the human condition altogether and insulating themselves from a very real and present danger of climate change, rising sea levels, mass migrations, global pandemics, nativist panic, and resource depletion. For them, the future of technology is really about just one thing: escape."* (Rushkov, 2018)

Our evolutionary systems, and one in particular — the survival mechanism — have created cognitive conflict as the brain has enlarged and evolved. I have written and spoken about this elsewhere (Flatt, 2018, 2021, https://youtu.be/TWZh7fEy1Hwand; and explored how this makes us anxious (Flatt 2017). Survival mechanisms have stood us in good stead for millions of years, but despite their flexibility and epigenetic qualities, they have not been able to adapt to what is probably the time of fastest change in human social and economic activity since humans became self-aware. The last two or three hundred years, possibly even just the last 30 or 40, have produced more change and demand for human flexibility than in the whole of the rest of the

time *homo sapiens* has been on the planet. Yet what we see across the world is a closing of minds, a hunkering down, and a magnified threat response to the 'other'. As Dyke and McKay (2023) point out:

> *"There is also the potential for negative tipping in human societies, causing further financial instability, displacement, conflict or polarisation. (It) could even bring about a shift to a social system characterised by greater authoritarianism, hostility and alienation that could entirely derail sustainability transitions."*

Getting beyond threat: The Fourth Cognitive R/Evolution

There are many people, not least many Solution Focused practitioners in their various roles across the planet, who think differently, and want to see a more planned and thought-through approach to the future, both in the immediate sense and in the larger perspective for future generations. McKergow (2023) develops the very descriptive phrase "zooming in and zooming out" in his blog and illustrates the benefits of this multi-perspective approach.

I call this the Fourth Cognitive R/Evolution. The first cognitive revolution was a "cultural explosion between 60,000 and 30,000 years ago, when the first art, complex technologies and religion appeared. The second was the rise of farming 10,000 years ago, when people for the first time began to plant crops and domesticate animals" (Mithen, 1996). The third was relatively recent, the Enlightenment of the 17-18th centuries which gave rise to modern secular theories of psychology and ethics as proposed by thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, and radical political theories (Duignan, 2024).

There needs to be a way to go beyond the threat-minded approach described by Rushkov above (2018), a way employed by those who have power and influence across political, economic and industrial sectors throughout the world. This powerful group of people use hunter-gatherer thinking to maintain their own positions, power or wealth, often at the expense of those over whom they have power and influence — and this group tend to be threat-minded and self-protecting. They are prepared to sacrifice populations to attempt to guarantee their own futures by focusing upon the threats to themselves instead of possibilities for others.

The necessary paradigm shift in thinking needs to occur not just in the helping professions, but across all disciplines — especially politics and economics. The current economic system is based upon hunter-gatherer thinking, and seeks permanent growth in order to survive. As the planet's resources are used up, growth becomes more and more difficult to achieve, and this model begins to fail. Raworth (2017) quotes Todd Johnson, a US lawyer:

> *"It's about broadening economic power from the few to the many and about changing the mindset from social indifference to social benefit."* (Raworth, 2017, p. 191)

In her book *Doughnut Economics*, Raworth provides much clear evidence of how economies both local and global must change to encompass sustainability for the planet and humans. She also provides a clear direction of travel about how economics needs to change to a sustainable model. Some manufacturing companies are making changes to their processes to help develop more sustainable ways of using materials (Black, 2024). Green Dreamer provides many excellent examples of the type of companies that are doing such work (Green Dreamer, 2023). And Cormac Russell provides many examples of communities that are looking at new, more sustainable ways of being based on communities (Russell, 2020).

However, any progress currently being made (and there is much) is consistently undermined by the divisive trend of populism in its various forms, exploiting the sense of threat embedded deep in the human psyche to become tribal and to alienate the "other". There are many views on the nature and negative impact of populism on the population and the planet (though there are those who think that populism may be a positive thing, for example Murray (2020), who writes about culture war issues, and a range of views from the London School of Economics Blog (2017).

To make progress requires a shift not only in economic thinking but also in political thinking. No longer can politicians be in competition personally, nationally and internationally; they will have to begin to cooperate with in a meaningful way, one that requires a mindset change to possibility thinking, mediation and negotiation, based upon a view of the wider outcomes for all then fitting these outcomes to the narrower aims of a local population. As Cormac Russell (2020) illustrates, borrowing a phrase from Alfie Kohn (1986):

> *"The rule of consumerism, which promotes competition over cooperation, is this: 'For me to win, you must lose.'"* (loc 804)

Furthermore, current democratic systems are based upon the short-term issue of re-election. See Ben Ansell (2023) and his Reith Lecture *The Future of Democracy* for observations on the focus of politicians, which all too often is their personal re-election in two years' time.

Climate change is a good example of where radical political thinking is required; most scientists continue to think about limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C, and the political answer is limiting carbon emissions. But is that the end goal? Surely a more sensible view would be to look at what kind of a planet we want, then consider what we need to do to achieve it – for example, more renewable energies, re-growth of forests, circular economies etc. However, all this flies in the face of the short-term thinking used in politics and economics, which is based on the economic model first developed

in the 1850s, sometimes called Econ 101, and still taught across the world today (Raworth, 2017, p. 8). This model relies on growth and supports an economy that requires more and more resources to sustain it – back to the hunter-gatherer economy.

Solution Focused Practice and building better futures

The essence of the R/Evolution I propose is what we all know as Solution Focused practice (SFP) and thinking, a hard-won skill for most of us, in whatever form we practice it. The idea of asking questions to achieve an outcome is still alien to most people. The go-to position for most people is to solve the problem in front of them, rather than think beyond to the wider view of what success would look like. The radical difference is that good SFers take a stance and consider multiple perspectives *for possibility*. Mark McKergow's cautionary 'forest analogy' helps to describe this (McKergow, 2021, p. 82). He talks about the differing perspectives of three people (an artist, a survivalist and a botanist) walking through a forest and having very different experiences. It is an excellent way of thinking about both perspectives and affordances for interaction.

I must, however, provide here a very powerful caveat that goes right to the root of SFP. Whatever situation we find ourselves in as practitioners, we accept that we know practically nothing of the background, foundation, reasons for behaviour or indeed motivations we are working with, regardless of whether we zoom in or zoom out. Socrates ably observed that "the only knowledge of which I am certain is the knowledge that I know nothing" (Fine, 2008). This is what forces Solution Focused practitioners to stick with the questions that the model is based upon, rather than attempting to be the expert and divining and interpreting actions, words and motivations as part of some underlying psychological model developed by in a post-hoc reflective academic environment.

To illustrate this, Stephen Mithen (1996) has written about hundreds of thousands of years of development of the human brain in his book, *The Prehistory of the Mind*. Here, he writes under the heading, "a new role for consciousness":

> *"A critical feature of the change to a cognitive fluid mind was a change in the nature of consciousness. I have followed Nicholas Humphrey's arguments that (reflexive) consciousness evolved as a critical feature of social intelligence: it enabled our ancestors to predict the behaviours of other individuals. But just like any other micro-domain of social intelligence, consciousness was not accessible to thought in other cognitive domains – there is no reason to expect early humans to have had an awareness about their own knowledge and thought processes concerning the non-social world."* (Mithen, 1996, p. 266)

This statement has profound consequences for today's social world, and needs unpacking a little. Mithen refers to work discussing the nature of group living and the reason for the development of a capacity that we know as *'theory of mind',* which Mithen describes as a module (Mithen, 1996, p. 76) using the terminology of Cosmides and Tooby (1987). Theory of mind (ToM) is the ability to understand that other people have mental states, such as beliefs, intentions, and emotions, that may be different from one's own. It is much beloved concept of those who like to talk of empathy and being able to empathise with others.

However, that theory of mind reflects our development, in evolutionary terms, in small groups (rarely larger than 150), able to store a significant amount of information about a relatively small number of individuals around us. This is fine in small, hunter-gatherer groups, but is no longer functional in the modern world where we meet hundreds and possibly thousands of people frequently. We also communicate with people of whom we know little or nothing, and tend to use the information stored in our survival mechanism to determine our behaviours towards others. If that information were specific to the individual that we are communicating with at the time, then theory of mind would work perfectly. (See Thomas Nagel's famous 1974 paper *What is it like to be a bat?* for the philosophy behind this thought.)

The reality is that we know very few people that well, often these days have not more than 10 or 20 people in our intimate circle, but use our own experience to develop schemas and stereotypes to determine our behaviour in almost every situation. These are quick and dirty routes to not being eaten and thus staying alive.

Surviving AND thriving: a difficult transition

For most people these days, at least in Great Britain and generally across the Western world, the degree to which we are exposed to physical existential threat is, thankfully, relatively rare. As Stephen Pinker (2011) has observed,

> *"Believe it or not, violence has been in decline for long stretches of time. And today we are probably living in the most peaceful time in our species' existence."*

Despite this, the journalistic media still cling on to William Randolph Hearst's famous comment on reporting: If it bleeds, it leads (Best, 2021).

The survival mechanism in a human being is primitive, fear and avoidance based, and only loosely connected to our awareness. Our actions are often instinctual, lashing out or running away, based on fear of the other and a desire to seek safety in the here-and-now. Nature has not equipped us to be very good at thinking about the future. In much of the time spent in clinical work of any kind, particularly in psychology, the past is very much the focus of any work with individuals.

Furthermore, historians tell us that we need to learn from the past, though quite what the past can tell us about the current situation is not clear, as this is the first time in human history that we have not been able to resolve our current problems by expanding and moving on to new territory..

We can no longer maintain this backward-looking-threat minded-fear of the other type of thinking that has dominated our existence on the planet ever since we developed self-awareness.

So, what is the alternative? There are now thousands of organisations which are forward-looking and working within a future-focused paradigm, though very few of of them have significant levels of influence over governments, large corporations or nations. There are many visions of the future, some apocalyptic, some hopeful, some even achievable, but there is a fundamental ingredient missing from all of these approaches: nearly all continue to assume that we will have a similar economic/political system based upon a style of thinking and means of exchange that requires constant growth and profit. Unfortunately, constant growth is not possible in a finite system.

In order to change our political and economic systems in the necessary radical way, we need to begin to think and behave differently, to view ourselves and all the other species on the planet in a radically different way. We are still creating and evolving technologies that are applied through the hunter-gatherer lens. If we are to move into a future of security, cooperation, collaboration and connection, it is not technology that we need to change, it is ourselves. This may well be the most difficult transition that human beings have ever had to make. It will be necessary to recognise and overcome our rather paranoid and threat-minded natures, and begin to look at the world through the lens of possibility – through a lens of solution focused thinking.

As James Martin (2007) describes in *The meaning of the 21st Century,*:

> *"At the start of the 21st century, humankind finds itself on a non-sustainable course – a course that, unless it is changed, will lead to catastrophes of awesome consequences. At the same time, we are unlocking formidable new capabilities that could lead to much more exciting lives and glorious civilizations. This could be humanity's last century, or it could be the century in which civilization sets sail towards a far more spectacular future."* (p. 4)

That "spectacular future" will not be driven by problem-focused, threat-minded, hunter-gatherer thinking, or by solving the problems immediately in front of us, but will require a revolution in how we think. That revolution, the fourth cognitive R/Evolution, demands a massive change in the way that we perceive the world, perceive ourselves, and think about the future.

One very straightforward example of how technological progress is running away with us is that of Artificial Intelligence (AI). These fantastic tools do not have intrinsic purpose or motivation; the way they are used depends entirely upon the uses that human being put them to. A hammer is a perfectly benign

piece of metal useful for banging in nails, until it is turned upon another creature. AI is perfectly benign —until it is in the hands of a malign user. AI being used by hunter-gatherer thought processes makes it dangerous. Use AI in a possibility-focused and hopeful way, and it might produce miracles.

The human mind is in the same place. We can continue to use our hunter-gatherer threat-minded approach, and slowly destroy ourselves and the planet; or we can choose the alternative. My fear is that for many in positions of power across the planet, this alternative is too alien, and requires too much relinquishing of control for it to happen in this generation. Still, we must work towards a sustainable, more secure and more cooperative future, not for ourselves but for our children and their children. I consider that developing a solution-seeking and future-focused mindset diametrically opposite to the one we evolved is how we will achieve that.

Perhaps a small sign would be greater publicity of the successful work that is already being done, instead of creating fear by just publicising what bleeds! In other words, paying attention to what works, rather than to what doesn't work. There is a mountain of work to be done, helping ourselves to think more clearly about us and the world of possibility around us rather than the threat or problem immediately in front of us. Let us not waste any more time.

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